

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Why does the cookie crumble?

With the onslaught of school comes school lunches, and especially at the beginning of the school year, moms (and some dads) get roped into joining the great cookie brigade. You might get asked to make cookies for the school open house, Brownies or Boy Scouts, Indian Guides or field trips.

Unfortunately, most folks don't have a clue as to what makes a cookie crumble. Americans love to eat cookies and most love to make them, but all too often their ideas about why one cookie is crisp and another dry are pretty half baked. It's because of the dough.

Basically, cookie dough is a combination of fat, sugar, flour, leavening and moisture, such as egg. Changing the proportion of any basic ingredient always changes the cookie's character. Little variations make the difference between a great chocolate chip and a mediocre one.

All doughs begin with the addition of a fat. This might be butter, margarine, solid shortening or lard. Butter creates the finest flavor but it also has a tendency to make the cookies bleed and spread out. Margarine helps hold the cookie's shape. Therefore, the best combination is half butter, half margarine. Avoid using whipped butter or diet fats because they contain too high a concentration of water.

SUGAR NOT ONLY sweetens the dough but it also makes the cookies tender. Most cookies call for granulated sugar, but light or dark brown sugar can be substituted in most cases. Brown sugars give the cookies a richer flavor and a more moist texture. Honey and molasses can be substituted for a chewier cookie but remember to lower the dry ingredients to substitute for the added moisture. Again, the best cookies use combinations of half granulated sugar and half brown sugar.

When it comes to using eggs, the protein in eggs is what binds the dough together while the moisture in the eggs adds liquid. There are no ifs, ands or buts about this one — use only the freshest, Grade A, large eggs for the best results. Room temperature eggs are best because they blend in easier.

In most cookie recipes, baking powder or baking soda will provide fluffiness. Without this leavening, the cookies would be dry and hard instead of light and flaky. Adding leavening is another way of incorporating air into the dough. Baking powder and soda contain an alkaline and an acid that react when wet. This reaction forms carbon dioxide, a gas which will expand in a hot oven and fills the cookie with tiny air pockets. The pocket remains after the cookie is baked, creating light, tender cookies. Double-acting baking powder is the most common leavening and will give the best results.

Flour is the foundation of the cookie, but the flavor of flour should never be apparent when tasting the finished product. Cookies with too much flour are pasty and tough. Most recipes call for using an all-purpose flour, which is a mixture of hard and soft flour. Some recipes calling for whole wheat or other grain flours offer a more nutritious cookie with a nuttier taste. Even cookies calling for all-whole-wheat flour should contain some amount of all-purpose flour for best results.

Cake flour is best when cookies call for lots of handling, such as those formed by pressing or rolling the dough. Regardless of the type used, flour should be added at the last minute and mixed as little as possible for optimum results.

THE USE OF flavorings can make or break a cookie. For best results, use extracts instead of flavors which have a more intense flavor. How much is a matter of preference.

Fig tree gets new lease on life

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

COME LATE OCTOBER, Mike Soranno, 72, will participate in a ritual he has practiced annually for half a century.

Assisted by a son, a son-in-law or possibly a brother-in-law, he will loosen earth around the roots of 10 sturdy fig trees growing in the small backyard of his Dearborn Heights home, bend the trunks and bury the trees, protecting them from Michigan's harsh winter and ensuring healthy growth again next spring.

And for the first time next spring, Soranno's son Michael intends to take a cutting from one of his father's trees and plant it in the neat yard of his Livonia home, ensuring a continuation of the elder Soranno's unique method of fig harvesting in a climate totally unsuited to the fragile trees.

By his own admission, the younger Soranno is no gardener. "I don't have the love for it. My father has."

But, "He's getting up in years. It's his legacy and I want to make sure at least one of his trees survives," Michael said, explaining why he intends to nurture a second-generation orchard in his own yard.

THE ELDER SORANNO'S love affair with figs — succulent, sweet fruit fit for the gods — has its origins in Bari, Italy, a southern region, noted for lush growth and juicy produce, where he was born.

As a child, Mike partook of figs fresh from the tree and warmed by the sun, turned sugary from long storage in large crocks or roasted and delicately stuffed with crunchy almonds.

"My mother wrapped figs in a napkin. I carried them to school in my pocket for lunch," he said in recalling a simple childhood long past.

Such memories abruptly ended when, as a lad of 12 years, Mike joined his father and an older brother in the United States. It would be eight long years before he saw his mother again.

It was on a visit with his brother to the home of a sweetheart in Detroit that Mike first saw someone bury a fig tree. "Her father needed to bury his trees. I told him I'd help. It was my first experience."

In the more than 50 years since, Mike has tailored his own method through trial and error. "I know what works best."

The trees are planted some eight feet apart. After leaves drop in the fall and before the first hard freeze of winter, a wide, deep trench is dug and partially filled with dried leaves covered with cardboard.

Early in the dug from around the root base, the small, outer roots loosened and cut, and the tap root left intact. The tree is then bent earthward and covered with cardboard, a generous heaping of leaves and earth, forming a mound reflective of a new grave.

The tree is buried until spring, when the fear of frost has passed.

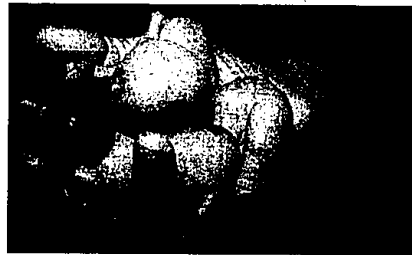
"IT REQUIRES A LOT of patience. You have to love it," said Carmela, Mike's wife of 49 years. She and daughter Jean, the couple's eldest child, adore figs. Michael and his two brothers are indifferent to them, but Michael's daughter Leslie, 13, loves them.

Special figs are set aside for her. This summer, Mike had a basket of prized fruit delivered to the girl in



Michael Soranno of Livonia climbs ladder to help harvest figs at home of his father, Mike Soranno of Dearborn Heights.

ART EMANUELE/staff photographer



Patience has yielded sweet crop of figs.

Traverse City. They had ripened while she was attending a camp for music and the arts.

"The fig is very sustaining. Very nourishing. It was the first fruit given to Adam and Eve, according to the Bible," Mike mused. "I thought it was the apple," Michael said with a laugh.

Mike's small orchard reflects his history. An Eggplant Fig, *fica melanzana* in Italian, was started from a cutting carried here by Mike years before, from Glazeria in Italy, his wife's hometown. The tree bears an elongated, deep purple fruit and is the first to ripen each spring.

The Bride Fig, *fica sponsina*, also represents the old country. Shortly after his marriage, Mike planted a cutting culled from a tree in Dearborn that had been started years ago by an old Italian woman who used to sell her fruit from the roadside.

Sky Blue and Brown Turkey varieties, each bearing brown-hued fruit, and the Magnolia Fig that bears a light purple fruit are American varieties, purchased by Mike in Florida where fig trees flourish in warm, humid temperatures.

'My mother wrapped figs in a napkin. I carried them to school in my pocket for lunch.'

— Mike Soranno, 72

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Flavor of Japan

It's in evidence at Akasaka restaurant

Even if the thought of sushi leaves you cold, that's no reason to ignore Japanese food. It doesn't take a connoisseur to appreciate the extraordinary flavor in Japanese dishes.



Japanese cooking seems to seal in the flavors of meat, chicken and seafood as they are cooked quickly over high temperatures. Consequently, a simple chicken dish becomes extraordinary as the meat itself retains its moisture and can be dipped in various sauces, from a sweet teriyaki to a spicy sauce.

So we found it at Akasaka restaurant in Livonia. This small restaurant in Laurel Commons, a strip center that also includes a Japanese grocery and a Japanese bookstore, is a delight. Just two years old, it is simply decorated with beautiful blood wood throughout, comfortable and quiet. And it must be genuine because we found ourselves among the few non-Japanese diners in a nearly full house.

The restaurant has a few tatami rooms where guests shed their shoes and sit at benches surrounding low tables. Two other small, spare rooms provide seating at tables. Women

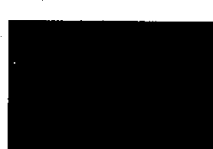
wearing traditional Japanese garb wait on tables, and they appear adept at communicating in both Japanese and English.

THE RESTAURANT'S tempura dishes are excellent, particularly the shrimp tempura in which the breading was almost spider-web fine and the shrimp were large and succulent. The tempura vegetables are equally tasty, particularly the carrots and eggplant. Both were accompanied by a sauce with a mild soy and ginger taste, and daikon, thinly sliced white radishes that added to the sauce for more flavor.

Also superb was the broiled salmon, a thick cut of fish that was cooked through but not overdone. We also were pleased with the beef teriyaki.

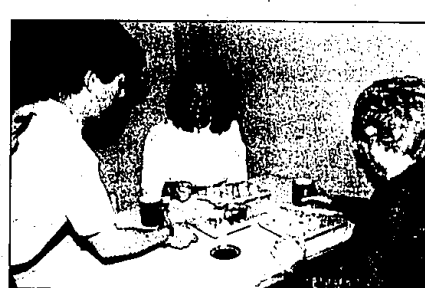
Novices can get a good introduction to Japanese dining through Akasaka's combination dinners (\$18.95). Guests may choose two entrees from shrimp tempura, salmon, chicken teriyaki or beef teriyaki. The dinner comes with miso soup, a flavorful soybean paste soup, and a fresh garden salad, featuring romaine lettuce, cucumber and tomato.

For those more familiar with Japanese dining, there are a few more, adventurous dishes, such as unaju (broiled eel) — as well as an assortment of sushi (seasoned rice with



ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

(Above) Artistry of sushi chef Deka Koshizawa is displayed. (Right) Manager Shigeru Yamada serves Kim Bartolomeo of Canton (center) and Tracy Robert of Canton.



fresh seafood) and sashimi (artistically sliced fresh, and often raw, seafood). Although sea urchin is reportedly the rage in Japan, the only entree we noticed of sea urchin was unisouji, a soup.

Because of our inexperience with Japanese dining, we could have used a little more assistance from our waitress, but she appeared preoccupied and wasn't helpful. We were confused when our salads came first, then our appetizer and then our main entree and soup.

Still, we overcame our awkward-

ness with chopsticks and enjoyed our meals thoroughly — regardless of the order in which the food came.

Details: Akasaka, 37152 Six Mile Road, east of I-75, Livonia. 462-2630.

Hours: Lunch Monday-Saturday 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Dinner Monday-Thursday 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Friday-Saturday 5:30-11 p.m.; Sunday 4-10 p.m. Reservations accepted for lunch and dinner.

Prices: Lunch \$4.75-\$7.50. Dinner \$9.50-\$19.50. AE, Visa, MC, Diner's Club, JVB (Japanese credit card). Value: Good. Rating: ***

Rating scale
★ Average (lots of places with similar quality)
★★ Good
★★★ Very good
★★★★ Excellent
★★★★★ Consistently superb, a rare honor