



YOUNGSTOWN COOKIE TABLES

Carving Celebration out of Hardship

By Mary Manning

Often held in historic churches and halls, Youngstown weddings may be splendid, but the reception's cookie table makes or breaks the occasion. Platters of cookies overflow, with multiple tiers offering all kinds of sweets. Many cookie tables include a sign that explains the tradition for out-of-town guests: "It is believed that this tradition started during the Great Depression when many families could not afford a wedding cake, so instead substituted homemade cookies baked by family and friends." Immigrants from Italy and Eastern Europe brought the practice with them when they arrived in the Mahoning Valley seeking jobs in steel mills and the other booming industries of the early twentieth century. They passed the tradition on to their neighbors, who bought into its practicality and communality as times grew harder.

Today, the method of assembling a cookie table remains much the same as it was 90 years ago. Mothers and grandmothers, aunts and cousins, each contribute a few dozen cookies of their specialty. It's meant as a culinary blessing so that the love and care invested in baking can be passed on as health and longevity for the couple's new marriage. For the mother of the bride or groom, a cookie table also makes a statement—a bountiful table

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Extravagant displays like this one are shared by the Youngstown Cookie Table Facebook group.

PHOTO BY LIMELIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY





At the November 30, 1957, wedding of Anita and John Chase in Niles, the *cookie table was arranged around the wedding cake.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF KIANTE GRAHAM

means that she demands respect from the family members, neighbors, and friends who contribute cookies. Some Mahoning Valley residents report that family members might even bribe the reception venue's staff, who often spend hours unboxing and plating the cookies, to place their contributions in the front; the first clean platter means bragging rights!

Some weddings boast as many as 50 varieties of cookies, but the favorites remain. Italian immigrants contributed pizzelles—thin-pressed flowery waffles flavored with anise or vanilla—and rainbow cookies, whose three cakey layers display the colors of the Italian flag. Eastern European families—especially those from Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia—contributed kolaches, made from sweet yeasty dough, and kiffles, made from cream cheese dough filled with poppy seeds, walnuts, apricots, or other fruits. No table is complete without clothespin cookies, also known as lady locks, where puffy pastry dough is wrapped around wooden clothespins so they can be filled with sweet cream. With new trends, new cookies are added. Now, royal iced sugar cookies cut in the shape of wedding dresses, rings, and other symbols are popular.

A flexible tradition, cookie tables have evolved and adapted as tastes have changed and the Mahoning Valley's population has declined. Natives may follow jobs elsewhere, but they



Pizzelles have been a mainstay of cookie tables for generations.

PHOTO BY LIMELIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

take their cookie tables with them. Modern technology means that those mothers, aunts, and grandmothers can now freeze and transport those many dozens of cookies hundreds of miles to be set up in a tremendous spread at a wedding in New York City or Washington, D.C. Now, Youngstown residents attest that cookie tables represent more than any one ethnicity or moment in history. They are emblematic of the culture of the Mahoning Valley and how its scrappy residents carved celebration out of hardship. ♥

BLACK WALNUT WAFERS



Fifty years prior to ratification of the 19th Amendment, the Wyoming territorial legislature granted suffrage for women in 1869. This recipe is adapted from *Cooking in Wyoming: Woman's Suffrage Centennial Edition*, published in 1969 by the Wyoming Recreation Commission. Submitted by Mrs. J.A. Reed of Kemmerer, it has been updated for contemporary bakers.

INGREDIENTS

1½ cups unsalted butter, softened
1 teaspoon salt
1 cup granulated sugar
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup light brown sugar
1 teaspoon baking soda
2 eggs, beaten
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
1 teaspoon vanilla
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
3½ cups all-purpose flour
1 cup black walnuts, chopped

DIRECTIONS

In large bowl, beat together butter and sugars until light and creamy. Add eggs and vanilla. Stir in 2 cups flour, salt, baking powder, baking soda, and spices. Blend until combined. Add remaining flour and walnuts to make a stiff dough. Divide dough and form into two round logs; wrap each log in wax paper and refrigerate overnight.

Preheat oven to 350 °F. Lightly coat cookie sheets with baking spray. Slice each log into ¼-inch thick wafers. Place wafers on cookie sheets, spacing 2 inches apart. Bake until lightly browned on the edges, about 10–12 minutes.