

LEARNING ABOUT THE AMISH

WITH A SIDE OF CHRISTMAS COOKIES

Last December, I set out on a tour sponsored by The Amish Farm and House to learn about how the Amish celebrate Christmas. Eager for the opportunity to delve into Plain culture, I was skeptical about how familiar this tour might be. After all, I've journeyed these backroads on a bicycle for most of my life. Unlike with cycling, today there would be a destination – three, to be precise – and the promise of Christmas cookies!

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY JORDAN BUSH

THE AMISH FARM AND HOUSE

Each December, The Amish Farm and House in Lancaster organizes a guided cookie tour. It's an opportunity to discover more about Amish culture and traditions directly and in a personal way. The event leads off with a guided tour of the site's historic farmhouse, where Amish culture and traditions are discussed. The two-hour bus tour visits three Amish homes, with each stop featuring two different cookies prepared for visitors to sample. To ensure a range of flavors, none are of the chocolate-chip variety. Instead, we were treated to chocolate-covered whoopie pies, walnut thumbprints, sugar cookies, snickerdoodles, pecan cups and other confections.

Enroute to each destination, twisting and turning along the way, the bus driver offers insights into Lancaster County, the local Amish community and farmland. There are two daily departures from The Amish Farm and House; the multiple routes that each bus takes provide varied experiences. I found myself as the only local "tourist" among 13 people on the tour bus that day.

Each home visit brings the opportunity to meet the host family, share a few minutes of conversation, ask questions

and perhaps see an Amish buggy up-close. There is usually the opportunity to shop a selection of Christmas gifts, namely baked goods and handcrafted items that are often curated by the children in the family. The genuine opportunity, however, is making a cultural and personal connection. Of course, all of this takes place while sampling a cookie or two!

THE AMISH COMMUNITY

On the tour, one host explained the Amish church in Lancaster County consists of approximately 240 bishop districts, each comprising 20 to 30 families. Church services are held every other Sunday and take place inside a family's home or in a workshop area as space permits. This ensures that families host at least one service per year. Those participating in the service, which can last more than three hours, sit on benches provided by the church. (Since the benches are transported by a bench wagon, time is needed to move seating from location to location after each service.) Meals served after the church service are prepared by both the host and contributing families. The "cold" meal will typically consist of items like bread, spreads, cheese, pickles, finger foods, coffee and dessert. The idea behind the menu is that such items can be prepared beforehand so that no work occurs on Sunday. Of course, variations on the menu do exist.

Mini-Whoopies dipped in chocolate were baked by the Fisher family. The second stop took us to the Esh home, where sugar cookies and ornament treats were on the menu. The third stop – the home of a different Esh family – featured pecan cups, Santa confections and hot chocolate. Recipe cards for each cookie recipe (and others) were provided to visitors.

Recipes from the Amish Cookie Tour

Mini Whoopies

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup **Vegetable Oil**
- 2 **Eggs**
- 2 cups **Sugar**
- 2 Tbsp. **Vanilla**
- 1 cup **Sour Cream**
- 3 Tbsp. **Baking Soda**
- 1/2 tsp. **Salt**
- 1 cup **Brewed Coffee**
- 1 cup **Cocoa**
- 3 cups **Occident (All-Purpose) Flour**
- Your Favorite **Icing/Filling**
- **Melted Chocolate**: Optional

DIRECTIONS

Set oven to 450 degrees.

Thoroughly mix oil, eggs, sugar and vanilla together.

Mix sour cream and baking soda together.

Combine and mix with all remaining ingredients.

Drop generous teaspoons of batter onto a parchment-lined baking sheet and bake for 6 to 8 minutes.

After cooling, take two cakes and make a sandwich, using your favorite icing in the middle.

If desired, dip in melted chocolate and allow to cool.



Pecan Cups

INGREDIENTS

Shell

- 1-1/8 cups **Flour**
- 1 pkg. (3 oz.) **Cream Cheese**
- 1/2 cup **Butter**

Filling

- 1 cup **Brown Sugar**
- 2 Tbsp. melted **Butter**
- 3/4 cup chopped **Pecans**
- 1 **Egg**
- 1/4 tsp. **Vanilla**

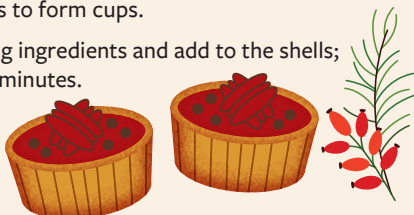
DIRECTIONS

Set oven to 350 degrees.

Mix shell ingredients and form the dough into balls.

Place the balls into mini-muffin tins and press around sides to form cups.

Mix the filling ingredients and add to the shells; bake for 20 minutes.



Walnut Thumbprints

INGREDIENTS

Dough

- 1/2 cup **Butter**
- 1 **Egg**
- 1-3/4 cups **Flour**
- 1/3 tsp. **Baking Soda**
- 1 cup **Brown Sugar**
- 1 tsp. **Vanilla**
- 1/4 tsp. **Salt**

Filling

- 1 cup minced **Walnuts**
- 1/4 cup **Sour Cream**
- 1 cup **Brown Sugar**

DIRECTIONS

Set oven to 350 degrees.

Mix the dough ingredients together well and refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Mix filling ingredients together.

Dip the dough onto a cookie sheet and use your thumb to make impressions.

Fill the impressions with filling.

Bake for 8 to 10 minutes.



Another day to celebrate Christmas would help alleviate that sense while freeing up the social calendar.

CHRISTMAS ADAM?

Apparently, celebrating Christmas among the “English” has expanded to creating a new holiday: Over the past decade, December 23 has become known as “Christmas Adam,” which refers to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, where Adam’s arrival preceded that of Eve. (Get it? Christmas Adam comes a day ahead of Christmas Eve.)

Influencers and lifestyle gurus are weighing in and acknowledging that the day is filled with all sort of possibilities, many of which could be molded into family traditions for future generations. I took some of their suggestions and tweaked them (my suggestions are enclosed in the parentheses). For example, several suggest that you could reserve December 23 for family movie or game night (with cookies and popcorn as snacks). Or, maybe it could be a night to bond with your BFFs with a marathon of Hallmark holiday movies or ease into the College Bowl schedule with the Gasparilla and Independence bowl games. (Cookies would provide the perfect and necessary sugar buzz.)

You could drive around and look at the holiday lights (don’t forget to take cookies along). Caroling is a possibility (followed by hot chocolate and cookies). Another suggestion is to invite friends and family for appetizers (or dessert – cookies, of course).

Yet another suggests that December 23 is the night to reveal what’s in those Christmas stockings (with a plate of cookies to munch on). Or, it could be the day to gift family members with the PJs they’ll be wearing for those all-important social-media pictures on Christmas morning (props could include cookies and milk!). Of course, there’s the obvious: You could make cookies on December 23!

As for the Amish Cookie Tour, which just happens to end on December 23, I’d certainly recommend taking part in it yourself. I’d even revisit it myself – only next time, I’d take a thermos of cold milk along!

The 2022 Christmas Cookie Tours run through December 23. A 30-minute guided tour of the farmhouse precedes bus departures at 11 a.m. or 2 p.m. The Amish Farm and House is located at 2395 Covered Bridge Drive in Lancaster. Visit amishfarmandhouse.com/christmas-cookie-tour for details/reservations.

For more cookie recipes, visit lanastercountymag.com.