

Make a gingerbread cottage



And when the children came near they found it was the most wonderful cottage they had ever seen. It was built entirely of gingerbread and ornamented with cookies. The windows were made of transparent candy and the steps of toffee. [From "Hansel and Gretel", The Brothers Grimm]

There is something magical about a gingerbread cottage. It might be the heady scent of the spicy walls and roof. Or maybe the lure of the snowy icing and bright sweets. Or perhaps that secret dream of being able to eat your accommodation.

The following information is a summary from a [series of posts](#) I put together on my blog Hoppo Bumpo in December 2008. I hope you find it useful!

NB. This document contains some embedded hyperlinks to websites, which you will be able to see in the original PDF file, but not in a hard copy of the printed document.

The foundations



A recipe for success

If you don't yet have a trusty recipe, a date with Mr Google will turn up trumps. There are loads of recipes out there.

[Link to Google search](#)

If you haven't made gingerbread before, its handy to know that gingerbread ranges in type from crispy cookies right through to cake. Make sure you find a cookie recipe - a house of cake could be pretty tricky to construct!

I have tried various gingerbread recipes in the past (including this one from the [The Australian Women's Weekly](#)). You might like to find a recipe that is designed specifically for gingerbread houses, as often these have a slightly higher flour content than regular cookies, which makes the dough nice and sturdy.

The ingredients for gingerbread can be many and varied: there is no right or wrong recipe to use. Typically you will find that gingerbread contains flour, a blend of spices, butter, sometimes eggs and always various sugars. These might be brown sugar, light treacle/golden syrup or dark treacle/molasses. Most recipes also use bicarbonate of soda (sodium bicarbonate) as a raising agent. If you intend on eating the fruits of your labours, make sure you measure the soda carefully. If you are too heavy-handed the taste is very distinctive and not particularly pleasant. (Don't ask how I might know this!). For an interesting variation in a standard gingerbread recipe, you can substitute a small amount of the flour with cocoa. Apart from added chocolatey taste, this will give the gingerbread a darker colour.

When considering your recipe you'll need to make sure it provide enough dough for all your house pieces (or alternately you can scale a recipe up). It will all depend on whether you are making a gingerbread mansion or um ... just an outhouse. To give you a bit of an idea, a recipe for a very small house would generally contain only about 3.5 cups flour. I'd generally expect to see 5 or more cups of flour to make a dough for a decent sized house. If you don't feel confident in estimating how much dough you will need, try and find a recipe that also comes with a house template.

Cool it

Warmth is the enemy of gingerbread dough. As dough warms it first becomes malleable, but then rapidly becomes sticky and can be exceptionally difficult to handle. Your recipe will almost certainly recommend that you refrigerate the dough for some time before rolling it out. A couple of hours is ideal if you have the time. When its time to knead the dough, if you are afflicted with hot hands you might like to try running your hands under some cool water before handling the dough. When you roll the dough, it also helps to roll it between two sheets of baking paper or cling film.

Keeping in shape

When you are creating the pieces for your house, you need to take care that the lines of the walls and roof are straight and the corners nicely squared. This will help with assembly. It can be helpful to roll out and cut the dough directly on the baking sheets themselves. This avoids any distortion that might be caused during moving an uncooked piece to the tray. After cutting out your shapes, it is also useful to refrigerate the dough again for a short time (say 15 minutes) before placing it in the oven. This will help the dough keep its shape as it bakes. After cooking is complete, the gingerbread tends to remain pliable for a couple of minutes. This is a good time to do any bits of trimming, prodding and poking to ensure that the shapes are right.

A recipe with a twist

I was sent this fabulous family-secret recipe for a "gingerbread" dough, by kind blog reader Norma. There are some unusual twists to this recipe.



Firstly, it contains an array of delicious spices but no ginger whatsoever. It does, however, include beautiful flavourings like cardamon and rosewater.

The other twist is that you cut the pieces *after* baking. This would work particularly well if you had some purpose-built cottage cutters.

Norma swears that these pieces keep very well over long periods and can be made well ahead of time. I think they would taste better than my efforts last year (which tasted of soap).

Thank you for sharing your mum's special recipe, Norma!

Knusper Haus

Norma says that this would make a very big house.

You may like to halve the quantity.

500g white sugar

1kg honey

500g Copha

2kg plain (all purpose) flour

4 teaspoons baking powder

20g cinnamon, ground

20g cardamom, ground

10g cloves, ground

100g cocoa

4 eggs, lightly beaten

4 tablespoons rosewater

(Measurement and baking conversions [here](#))

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C
2. Place the sugar, honey and copha in a saucepan. Melt and then bring to the boil.
3. Sift the dry ingredients into a bowl.



4. Add the boiled liquid and stir to combine.
5. Add the eggs and rosewater and stir in thoroughly - the dough needs to be soft, but not sticky or damp.
6. Spread and flatten in an ungreased baking tray with sides.
7. Bake for 20 - 25 minutes.
8. Remove the gingerbread from the oven and cut whilst as hot as possible, using a template. Cool totally before assembling.

House plans



The type of structure that you decide to build is really only limited by your imagination ... and perhaps a little experience.

If you want some inspiration take a look at Flickr, where you will find the most amazing, beautiful and dazzling array of photographs of gingerbread structures. See if you can locate the Seattle Space Needle inspired creation - its not necessarily festive, but really quite amazing!

[Link to gingerbread creations on Flickr](#)

In order to build a cottage you will need a template for the walls and roof. If you are making your first ever cottage, here are some options:

1. purchase a gingerbread house kit with pre-made pieces (low stress and almost guaranteed success!)
2. buy a gingerbread house cutter
3. use a pre-designed or self-drafted template

When I first started making cottages, I copied a pattern from the [Australian Women's Weekly](#) on to cardboard and used this as my template. A manila folder or some firm cardstock works very well. Its not particularly durable though - the grease in the dough tends to leech into the cardboard. I ended up re-making the pattern each year.

Later I wised up and re-cut my template in plastic. I used an old-fashioned overhead transparency, but a piece of template plastic, available from sewing, quilting or craft stores would be ideal. This can simply be wiped down and re-used.

Last year I decided to simplify the process and bought a gingerbread house cutter (pictured above). There loads of these on the market. You could try a cake decorating store or look on the Internet. The one I purchased is a very simple cookie cutter style.

The cheapest option, however, is to draft your own pattern (try and test it in cardboard first) or look for a pattern on the Internet. This gives you the flexibility of creating a different cottage (or other creation) next year. If you consult Mr Google you will find dozens, if not a hundred, patterns that you can download for free.

[Link to Google search](#)

A quick look reveals some wonderful freebies. I love this very cute version at [Cottage Living](#). Its a free PDF [pattern](#), with a little chimney and a really sweet, slightly-scalloped roof. For something with a bit of pizzazz, you could try [Gingerbread House Heaven](#). There are two good basic patterns available. Both include instructions. If you feel more adventurous, they also have some PDF patterns - including a castle and a clock tower - for sale.

Construction and decoration

On your marks, get set ...

Once you have your gingerbread recipe and cottage pattern, you can make your pieces ahead of time. It is best to make the pieces a day ahead to ensure that the gingerbread has cooked and firmed properly.

Prior to baking, make any decisions about placement of doors, windows and other cut-aways. Carefully cut your windows and doors out before baking (unless you are



using [Norma's recipe](#)). If you want to cut other small decorative shapes - such as small hearts or circles - do this before baking too. Try not to make cut-outs too large, as you might remove some of the structural stability of the piece.

If you would like "glass" in your windows, you can sprinkle a layer of crushed boiled sweets (hard candies) in the windows before the gingerbread goes into the oven. The sweets will melt during the baking, forming glass.

Finally, make sure the gingerbread pieces are nice and even. You might need to do a little trimming right after baking to square up the walls, roof and other pieces. This is best done while the gingerbread is still slightly warm and with a serrated knife. Place your template pieces back on top of the gingerbread and use these as a guide for cutting. It is also important to make sure that non-load bearing pieces, such as the roof, are not overly thick and therefore, too heavy.

Store your baked pieces in an airtight container until you are ready to assemble your cottage.

Home base

Before assembling your cottage you will need to find a suitable base. A purchased cake board is ideal, but equally you can make your own from a sturdy piece of board, such as masonite or plywood. Cardboard is also OK, but it has to be very thick and strong. Simply cover your board with heavy weight paper or aluminium foil. Alternately you could use a tray or a large plate.

Remember when considering the size of your base, that the cottage will need a little room around it. You may want to put some garden around the cottage, but a little space for gripping the board to carry it is rather handy too!

Before getting started you may like to also cover your base with a layer of rolled out white fondant icing. The icing could be left white (for a snowy effect) or coloured (say green, for grass). This step is, however, entirely optional.

Concrete



When you are ready to assemble your house, you will need to make the "glue" to cement the pieces together. The most common method is to use royal icing, but some people use melted sugar. (Note: melted sugar is exceptionally hot and can cause dreadful burns, so is unsuitable for children to use).

Royal icing is typically used in cake decorating. Its an icing sets very hard and is commonly used for cake and cookie decoration. Sugar aside, the key ingredient in this icing is raw egg white. If you are pregnant or wish to avoid raw egg due to salmonella concerns, you can use powder albumin or meringue powder. These are pasteurised, powdered versions of egg white and usually available in cake decorating stores. If you are vegan or have an egg allergy, I have posted some links to [egg-free royal icing](#) recipes. (The cottage that I have pictured at the start of this article was glued together with an egg-free icing made from sugar, lemon juice and glycerine.)

There are various royal icing recipes about.

[Link to Google search for royal icing recipes](#)

Make sure you use pure icing/confectioner's sugar when you make up your royal icing. Some sugars are packaged with a measure of cornstarch to prevent clumping. The starch makes royal icing soft and it tends to not set so well. Many recipes contain lemon which helps whiten the icing and dry the surface quickly. Alternately you might find cream of tartar is used. This acidic ingredient also helps set the icing quickly.

Once you have made your icing keep it carefully covered with cling film or a damp tea-towel, or it will start to crust and dry before you can use it. Its best made up at the time that you wish to use it.

Construction

Make sure you allow yourself enough time to assemble the cottage (I have been known to put one together on Christmas morning, which is a completely ridiculous idea) and have plenty of "props" to hand. Props are things like tins, which can sit against a wall or under a roof piece to stabilise it while the icing is setting.



To make up your cottage take a wall and pipe (with a piping bag and nozzle) or spread a line of icing along the bottom edge, then position on the base. If you have someone helping you, ask them to hold the wall in place. Alternately place a prop next to it. Working your way round the cottage, add the adjacent walls in the same manner. Fill the wall seams on the inside and outside with a bit more icing, to cement it well. If you have quick setting icing and the walls fit together nicely, this will be a simple process (*less likely*). If you find it all a bit wobbly, keep using props to keep everything upright until its setting firmly (*more likely*).

Some people say you should wait up to 12 hours before adding the roof pieces. And even then if you are super-cautious, add just one panel at a time, leaving drying time in between. I have made a number of cottages all in one sitting. It depends on how stable you find the cottage is and how quickly the icing is setting. If your pattern is incredibly elaborate, I'd allow for the extra drying time.

To attach the roof, you pipe or spread icing on the seams and match it to the walls of the house. Some people recommend using crossed wooden skewers iced to the inside of the roof, to increase the strength. If this is your first house, doing this might give you a bit of extra confidence.

I have only had one irretrievable cottage disaster in my time. It involved a complete cave-in and was due to rushing and a good measure of carelessness. On the whole, it is possible to save most mishaps. Pieces that crack or break, can be glued or covered with more icing. You can also brace a dodgy piece with some cardboard or more royal icing on the inside. Icing really is the key here - you can never use too much. Take a look at most mass produced or commercial cottages and you will notice that icing features generously.

Decoration

After allowing your cement work to dry, it is time for the really fun part - decoration. You will need more royal icing for this task. You can pipe designs onto your cottage or glue on sweets or both. I read somewhere that "less really is more" when it comes to decorating a cottage. *Pah to that*, I say. If you want to cover your cottage from top to bottom swirly ornamentation and sweets, then go ahead!



Shiny dragees/cashous, nonpareils/sprinkles, sanding sugars, chocolate buttons, candy canes, gumdrops and jellies and other sweets all make marvellous decorations. You might like to made gingerbread trees or people to put in the garden. You are limited only by your imagination ... or ideas that you have borrowed from other people's creations!



Humidity-proofing your house

Humidity: the enemy of sleek hair-styles and gingerbread. I live in Melbourne, a city a long way south of the equator. High humidity rarely troubles us here and a gingerbread cottage will generally hold its stead. However, as you travel closer to the equator, you are more likely to experience rising damp and soginess in your house. At very high humidity there is potential for structural instability and ... *gasp* ... collapse.

Like many people, gingerbread likes a low relative humidity. According to a study ([link to abstract](#)), recommended upper comfort limit for gingerbread is remarkably similiar to humans. At room temperature gingerbread keeps best below 60% relative humidity. In reality, the structural integrity of your cottage probably relies on a much lower level of humidity. You will notice most recipes suggest that you store gingerbread in a *cool, dry place*.

So is it possible to make a gingerbread house in more humid climates? A bit of research and reading via Google, suggests *yes*. Here are some ideas:

- Overbake the gingerbread pieces a little. This will dry them out.



- Use a gingerbread recipe designed for high humidity ([Link to recipe](#))
- Coat the pieces with royal icing to keep out the damp
- Wrap the house in cling film or cellophane wrap overnight
- Make each load-bearing wall using two identical pieces. Sandwich them together with icing. This will give a nice stable wall and the additional icing helps draw moisture out of the gingerbread.
- Put a light inside your cottage. Turn the light on each day and this will help keep your gingerbread dry.

Unfortunately, I can't personally vouch for any of these methods or say which would work best. If I had to pick something to try, I think it might be the light and the icing (as long as it didn't make the house pieces too heavy). You might like to try a combination of things. I'd imagine that each one, however, would reduce the edibility of your cottage. (Especially the gingerbread recipe, which guarantees to break your teeth!).

Lastly, an aside. During my research I chanced upon an article, discussing what happens when you add corn or potato starch to commercial gingerbread. ([Link to article](#)) This got me to thinking about what to do if you bake with a wheat or gluten-free flour. Often these flours contain, amongst other things, a mix of maize and potato starch. I know when I have baked scones with wheat-free flour in the past, I have had to use a great deal more liquid to the mix, than I would if I were to use wheat flour. The article suggests that adding a little potato and/or corn starch to wheat flour will improve the shelf-life of gingerbread, as it will hold more moisture. I'd conclude from this, that wheat-free flour would probably be unsuitable to use for a gingerbread cottage in high-humidity climates.

Hoppo Bumpo

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<http://hoppobumpo.blogspot.com>

liesl@hoppobumpo.com

