

# Delicious Danish

Time-consuming to make, and worth every moment

BY JUDITH FERTIG



*Bakery-perfect pastries that taste better than anything you could buy. You'll know it was well worth the effort to make homemade Danishes when you sit down to savor one of these soft, flaky sweets with a cup of hot coffee.*

**T** rue Danish pastry is almost indescribably good. Buttery and yeasty, soft and flaky, traditional Danish pastry can take on a delightful variety of shapes and fillings, but there's no getting around the fact that it takes a long time to make. When I travelled through Copenhagen, I found that there are hundreds of excellent bakeries, and so the Danes rarely consider making their own pastry. But few areas of America are so fortunate, which means if you want good Danish, you must make it yourself. While it's a project, don't let that daunt you; real

Danish pastry tastes nothing like the pallid "Danishes" you've known. Once you taste the results of your work, you'll know it was worth all the effort.

#### **WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE A DANISH**

Making Danish pastries is an ideal weekend project. One day is devoted to mixing and chilling the dough, rolling the butter layer, and folding and combining—or "turning"—the butter and dough layers. This is also a good day to make the almond filling, which tastes best when it has at least a day to

Photo this page: Eleanor Thompson



ripen. The dough chills, and continues to rise, overnight. On the second day, you roll, cut, shape, and—finally—bake the dough.

With this kind of time investment, it's smart to make a large batch, eat some, and freeze the rest. Just seal the cooled pastries in plastic wrap and put them in the freezer. Frozen Danish pastry will keep about three months. When you warm them in a 375°F oven, the frozen pastries will regain much of their fresh-baked flavor.

### SHORTCUTS THAT DO AND DON'T WORK

If you devote hours to one recipe, it only makes sense to use the best ingredients. Unsalted butter is vital, as is high-quality vanilla extract. Almond filling, or marzipan, is available in a can, but the homemade variety is infinitely better. When you make the almond filling, blanch your own fresh almonds rather than buying blanched nuts, which can be stale. Make sure your yeast is fresh and within the expiration date.

For accuracy, bakers measure their flour by weight, not volume. Weighing the flour gives a truer measure and a more foolproof batch of pastries. I use a small kitchen scale that's available in most grocery stores.

Some shortcuts are useful. For no-fuss fillings, use good-quality jams or preserves. Homemade fillings can be made the night before; almond filling tastes best when it's made at least a day in advance. The dough also can be made a day ahead, folded, rolled, covered, and refrigerated before cutting and baking. The real time-saver comes when you take baked pastries out of the freezer on a winter morning.

### GETTING STARTED: MAKING THE DOUGH

My recipe calls for using a mixer with a dough-hook attachment, but your pastries will be equally good if you make the dough by hand. Of course, it will take longer, but the soft dough is fun to feel. Also, despite its somewhat loose consistency, the dough is surprisingly cooperative and responsive. Nevertheless, stickiness is not unusual. If it becomes temperamental, liberally toss flour over and under the dough as you work.

If at all possible, make Danish pastry on a cool, dry day—or, if it's humid and hot, work in a thoroughly air-conditioned kitchen. While such a climate will keep you comfortable, it's more for the pastry dough's benefit than your own. With its large quantity of butter, the dough gets soft quickly. If the butter actually begins to melt, the layer structure will deteriorate, and the pastries will be greasy and less flaky. If the dough becomes difficult to handle, put it in the refrigerator for 15 minutes. This will help you maintain your patience as well as prevent the butter from melting, which would create a greasy texture.



**A solid whack puts butter in its place.** To make the butter layer, put the butter between two sheets of kitchen parchment (above) and use the length of a rolling pin to pound them flat. After flattening the butter in one direction, give the paper a quarter turn and pound the butter again. Continue in this fashion until the butter forms a rectangle about 10x8 inches.



**Roll the butter flat.** After the butter has been pounded into shape, use the rolling pin to smooth it out (above left). Here, the author has drawn a rectangle on the top sheet of parchment as a guide. She'll use a straightedge to nudge the butter so that it matches the rectangle's outline.

### DANISH PASTRY DOUGH

This recipe makes enough dough to create a variety of shapes, and it's easily doubled. Yields approximately 3½ pounds of dough.

**2 packages (½ oz.) active dry yeast**  
**½ cup warm (110°F) water**  
**½ cup sugar**  
**1 cup milk**  
**2 large eggs, beaten**  
**1 lb. plus 6 oz. flour (about 5¼ cups); more for dusting and rolling**  
**1¾ tsp. salt**  
**¾ lb. (3 sticks) unsalted butter**

**Make the dough.** Sprinkle the yeast over the water. Stir in 1 tsp. of the sugar. Leave the yeast mixture in a warm place to proof for about 5 min. The yeast will bubble and foam. If it doesn't, the yeast is inactive; throw it out and start over.

In a large bowl, combine the yeast mixture with the rest of the sugar, the milk, eggs, 1 lb. of the flour (about 4 cups), and salt. Beat with an electric mixer, using the dough-hook attachment, on medium speed for about 3 min. Scrape down sides to incorporate the flour. (Alternatively, beat with a wooden spoon until the flour is well incorporated.) Gradually add the remaining flour. Turn mixer to medium-high and knead about 5 min., or until the dough is shiny and elastic. (Alternatively, turn the dough onto a well-floured surface and knead about 10 min.) Put the dough in a bowl, drape a piece of oiled plastic wrap directly on the dough, and refrigerate for 30 min. so the dough can chill and rise slightly.

**Make the butter layer.** Arrange the butter sticks a few inches apart from each other on a sheet of waxed paper or kitchen parchment. With a pencil, measure and trace a 10x12-in. rectangle on another sheet of waxed paper. Drape



*This dough has been “turned.” A “turn” is each time the dough is rolled and folded into thirds, like a business letter. Turning builds layers of butter and dough. Baking makes the butter produce steam, which separates the dough layers and forces them to rise. This dough will be turned four times.*



*When making a tea ring, don't slice all the way through. Roll the dough jellyroll style and shape it into a circle. Use a sharp knife to cut the dough circle into 1¼-inch sections. To form the tea ring, turn the sections on their sides, forming pinwheels that are connected by the ring's inner edge.*

this sheet on top of the butter and bang on the butter with a rolling pin to flatten, turning the paper as necessary to even out the butter (see the photos on p. 29). If the butter becomes too soft, dust it lightly with flour. Roll the butter into a 10x12-in. rectangle, about ¼ in. thick, using the marked paper as a guide. (The butter will have rough edges that exceed the rectangle; you can ignore these or scoot them into place with the edge of a ruler.) Remove the top sheet and cut the butter in half to create two 6x10-in. rectangles. Replace the top sheet of waxed paper and refrigerate the butter while you roll the dough.

**Rolling and turning the dough.** Punch down the dough and turn it out on a well-floured surface. Roll it into an 18x13-in. rectangle and dust this with flour. The rectangle should be vertical, facing you. Peel off the top sheet of waxed paper from the butter, hold one butter rectangle in place with the paper, and flip the other half onto the third of the dough closest to you. Fold this third of the dough upward. Lay the other butter rectangle on top of the first butter-and-dough layer. Fold the last third of dough on top of the butter. You should have 6x13-in. rectangle. Slide the dough onto a floured baking sheet and refrigerate for 15 min.

Position the chilled dough so that the fold is to your left and the dough can be opened like a book. Roll the dough into a 12x24-in. rectangle, dusting it with flour to keep it from sticking. Fold it in thirds again; you have just “turned” the dough. Refrigerate for 15 min., and then repeat the turn (rolling and folding) two more times. Cover the dough with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight.

#### CUTTING AND FILLING

Below are instructions for four pastry shapes. All these pastries should be baked in an oven heated to 400°F.

Remove the chilled pastry rectangle from the refrigerator and cut it into quarters. Work with only a quarter at a time; keep the remaining dough in the refrigerator. Each shaping instruction is designed for a quarter of the basic dough recipe.

**Tea ring**—Roll one-quarter of the basic dough recipe into a 10x16-in. rectangle. Spread the dough evenly with ⅓ cup of cream-cheese filling (see recipe at right). Starting with a long side, roll up the dough jellyroll style. Connect both ends of the roll to form a 7-in. circle, pinching the dough to seal. Transfer the circle to a greased or parchment-lined baking sheet. Make about 12 deep cuts into—but not through—the dough, approximately 1¼ in. apart, leaving the dough connected at the inner edge of the circle. Turn the slices on their sides (see photo at left) and let the ring rise for 30 to 40 min. With a floured thumb, make an indentation in the center of each spiral. Brush the ring with egg wash (see recipe at right) and spread 1 tsp. jam in each indentation. Bake for 25 min., or until browned. Cool 5 min., transfer to a rack, and drizzle with icing (see recipe at right).

**Crescents**—Roll one-quarter of the basic dough recipe into a 6x15-in. rectangle. Using a zigzag pattern, cut the dough into five triangles with 6-in. sides and a 3-in. base. Mound the filling (2 tsp. jam, 1 Tbs. cream-cheese filling, or 2 tsp. almond filling) about 1 in. from each triangle's base. Starting at the base, roll up each triangle. Arrange each roll on a baking sheet with the triangle's tip tucked under and bend the roll to form a crescent. Let rise 20 to 30 min. Brush with egg wash and bake for 20 to 25 min. Cool for 5 min., transfer to a rack, and drizzle with icing.

**Bear claws**—Roll one-quarter of the basic dough recipe into an 8x16-in. rectangle. Cut the dough into eight 4-in. squares. Spread 1 Tbs. of cream-cheese filling, almond filling, or jam in the middle of the square, leaving a ½-in. bor-



*Three cuts make a bear claw. Mound the filling across the center of a dough square, fold the square in half, and cut through the edge with the filling at 1-inch intervals. When you brush the claw with egg wash, don't forget to get in between the “toes”; this helps prevent the filling from oozing out.*





## YOU CAN'T BUY DANISH PASTRY IN DENMARK

*We give these flaky pastries a Danish name, but to buy one in Copenhagen, you'll have to ask for weinerbrod, or "Viennese bread." The name helps to explain the pastry's origins, which stem from a war and a labor strike.*

*In 1815, the Congress of Vienna met to stabilize Europe after the fall of Napoleon. Denmark's rulers were among the guests at the Austrian emperor's lavish banquets, and the Danes were greatly impressed by the talented Viennese bakers.*

*The wonderful pastries of Vienna might have remained only in Danish memory, but Copenhagen's bakers went on strike in the mid-1800s. This crisis became opportunity, as Danish bakery owners "imported" Viennese and German bakers as replacements. When the strike ended, the reinstated Danish bakers learned the pastry secrets of the Viennese bakers, and the rest is gastronomic history.—J.F.*

**A drizzle of white icing is the final touch.** The icing makes the pastries look even more tempting, but it's the soft, flaky pastry and the rich fillings that make them impossible to resist.

der all around. Brush one side with egg wash, fold it over, and make three cuts in the filling side, but not all the way to the seam side. Arrange the "claws" on a baking sheet and fan out the "toes" slightly. Let rise 20 to 25 min. Brush with egg wash and bake 20 to 25 min. Cool for 5 min., transfer to a rack, and drizzle with icing.

**Pinwheels**—Roll one-quarter of the basic dough recipe into a 10x16-in. rectangle. Spread evenly with one of the following:

- ◆ 3 Tbs. melted butter, followed by a mixture of ¼ cup sugar and 2 tsp. cinnamon
- ◆ ½ cup cream-cheese filling
- ◆ ½ cup jam
- ◆ 1 cup almond filling, rolled out to a 10x16-in. rectangle between two layers of kitchen parchment

Roll up the dough jellyroll style, starting with a long side. With the roll seam side down, cut it into 1-in. rounds. Put the rounds on a baking sheet and let rise 20 to 30 min. Brush with egg wash and bake 20 to 25 min. Cool for 5 min., transfer to a rack, and drizzle with icing.

### ALMOND FILLING

Scandinavians love vanilla-flavored almond filling. If you want a stronger almond flavor, substitute almond extract for the vanilla extract. *Yields 1⅓ cups.*

8 oz. (1½ cups) whole almonds  
1 cup sugar  
1 tsp. vanilla extract  
1 large egg white

Heat the oven to 300°F.

**To blanch the almonds**, put them in a bowl and pour boiling water over them to loosen the skins. Let the almonds stand in the water for about 3 min. Drain the water and peel off the skins with your fingers. If the skins are resistant, let the almonds soak a few minutes longer and try again.

**To toast the blanched almonds**, spread them on a baking sheet and put them in the oven for about 15 min., or until golden. Don't let them go from golden to dark brown; if they do, throw them out and start over.

**To make the filling**, put the cooled almonds into the work bowl of a food processor fitted with the steel blade and grind them fine. Add the sugar and process until the mixture feels like coarse flour. Add the vanilla extract and the egg white and process again until the mixture becomes a stiff paste, about 3 min.

This almond filling tastes best if matured two days before using, but it can be used right away. Sealed in plastic wrap, it will keep for several months in the refrigerator.

### CREAM-CHEESE FILLING

This favorite filling is extremely easy to make. *Yields 1⅓ cups.*

8 oz. cream cheese, softened  
1 large egg yolk  
¼ cup sugar  
1 tsp. vanilla extract  
2 Tbs. flour

Blend all the ingredients together. This filling will keep for two days in the refrigerator.

### EGG WASH

Brush this egg wash on your pastries just before baking for a golden finish.

1 egg  
2 Tbs. water

Lightly beat the egg with a fork or a small whisk, add the water, and whisk together.

### WHITE ICING

Drizzle warm pastries with this thin icing for a sweet finale. *Yields 1⅓ cups.*

1½ cups confectioners' sugar  
1 large egg white

Pour the sugar in a bowl and add the egg white. Mix with a wooden spoon until it becomes a smooth, glossy paste.

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