

russian tea cakes

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Russian Tea Cakes

The same cookie appears under half a dozen names — Mexican wedding cookies, *polvorones*, *kourabiedes* in Greece, *kifli* in Hungary, snowballs on an American Christmas tray. All of them are shortbread with ground nuts replacing part of the flour, baked pale, and rolled in powdered sugar twice.

The Spanish name is the descriptive one: *polvo* is dust, and a proper one collapses to powder in the mouth rather than snapping.

What makes it work

- **Ground nuts are the tenderiser.** Nut flour has no gluten and its oil coats what wheat protein is left, so the crumb shortens past what butter alone can do. See [Nuts](#) and [gluten](#).
- **No egg at all.** Egg would bind it into something chewy. The dough is held together only by butter, which is why it must be worked cold and why it eats as dust.
- **Bake pale.** Pull them when the bottoms are barely tan. Colour on this cookie reads as burnt because there is no brown sugar or spice to hide behind.
- **Roll in sugar twice: once hot, once cold.** The first coat melts into the surface and seals it; the second is the visible snow. One coat alone always looks patchy.

Ingredients

Makes about 36.

- 225 g unsalted butter, softened
- 60 g powdered sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla — see [Pure vanilla extract](#)
- 250 g all-purpose flour
- 120 g [walnuts](#) or [almonds](#), very finely chopped
- 3 g fine salt
- 200 g powdered sugar, for rolling

Method

Cream the butter with the 60 g of powdered sugar for two minutes — powdered sugar has no crystals to cut air, so this is about smoothness, not aeration. Beat in the vanilla.

Fold in the flour, nuts and salt. The dough will look dry and refuse to come together; press it against the bowl with the back of a spoon and it will.

Roll 20 g balls and chill 20 minutes. Bake **175 °C / 350 °F for 14–16 minutes**, until set and only just coloured underneath.

Let them stand five minutes — hot from the oven they fall apart in the hand — then roll each in powdered sugar. Cool completely and roll again.

Notes

- **Toast the nuts first** at 175 °C for eight minutes and cool them before chopping. It is the difference between a nut flavour and a nut texture.
- Grind the nuts with a spoonful of the flour if using a processor, or they turn to butter.
- **Keeps three weeks** in a tin, which is why every Christmas tradition that bakes in advance has a version of this cookie. Re-roll in sugar before serving.
- The Greek [kourabiedes](#) is the same idea with brandy and a clove pressed into each; [nankhatai](#) is the South Asian cousin, made with ghee and semolina.

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