

Food & Drink

Coconut oil a versatile kitchen helper

Mild, sweet taste ideal for baking

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Coconut cookies with white chocolate and cherries

Last summer, I bought a container of virgin coconut oil for a Recipe Swap dish. Since I had a lot left over, I started looking into other recipes to use it up. I found a lot of possibilities, from Thai stir-fries to roasted vegetables.

Virgin coconut oil is less chemically altered by high heat, so it's good for frying, and it can help nudge up so-called "good cholesterol." It's still saturated fat, of course, but many people prefer it to animal-based solid fats, and with its mild, sweet, very subtle coconut taste, it works very well in a lot of baking.

In many recipes, room-temperature coconut oil can be swapped in at a one-to-one ratio for softened butter, allowing for tasty dairy-free cookies and cakes. I've included a coconut chocolate pound cake, adapted from *Bon Appetit*, which uses some butter and some coconut oil, as well as a basic recipe for coconut oil-based chocolate chip cookies.

Kept in the pantry, virgin coconut oil is solid but soft, at least until 24 C (76 F), when it starts to melt — and quickly! On warm days, you might need to let coconut oil firm up in the fridge a little before using in baking. (Until I figured that out, my August coconut chocolate pound cakes ended up with a much thinner batter.) Coconut oil also needs a little more beating than butter to get fluffy, and because it's softer than butter, it doesn't sub in well for recipes that require hard, chilled solid fat, such as pastry.

If you can help with a recipe request, have your own request, or a favourite recipe you'd like to share, send an email to recipeswap@freepress.mb.ca, fax it to 204-697-7412, or write to Recipe Swap, c/o Alison Gillmor, Winnipeg Free Press, 1355 Mountain Ave., Winnipeg, MB, R2X 3B6. Please include your first and last name, address and telephone number.

Coconut Cookies with White Chocolate and Cherries

125 ml (1/2 cup) virgin coconut oil, room temperature

125 ml (1/2 cup) brown sugar

75 ml (1/3 cup) granulated sugar

1 egg

10 ml (2 tsp) vanilla extract

375 ml (1 1/2 cups) all-purpose flour

15 ml (1 tbsp) cornstarch

5 ml (1 tsp) baking soda

1 ml (1/4 tsp) salt

110 g (4 oz) white chocolate, chopped, or about 125 ml (1/2 cup) white chocolate chips

125 ml (1/2 cup) pecans, lightly toasted and roughly chopped

60 ml (1/4 cup) dried cherries, roughly chopped

Using an electric mixer on medium speed, beat coconut oil and sugars until light and fluffy, about 4 minutes. Add egg and beat 2 minutes more. Add vanilla and beat just to blend. In small bowl, whisk together flour, cornstarch, baking soda and salt. Add to sugar mixture, and stir just until combined. Fold in white chocolate, pecans and dried cherries.

Form cookies into generous 15 ml (1 tbsp) balls and flatten slightly. Place on a plate, cover with plastic wrap and chill for about 60 minutes. Preheat oven to 175 C (350 F). Place on cookie sheets lightly greased or lined with parchment, spacing about 5 cm (2 inches) apart. Bake for about 9-11 minutes or until edges are set and just slightly browned. Cool on pan for 2 minutes and then transfer to wire rack to cool completely. Makes about 24 cookies.

Tester's notes: This is a good basic recipe for lactose-free cookies that are soft in the middle with a bit of crispy chew at the edges. The white chocolate, cherry and pecan combo works well with the slight coconut undertone, but you can use your favourite add-ins.