

## BUONA DOMENICA

### Mostaccioli

#### *Spiced Christmas Cookies from Abruzzo*

Numerous Italian regions—Abruzzo, Basilicata, Campania, and Puglia among them—lay claim to a spiced Christmas cookie that goes by the name *mostaccioli* (pronounced ‘moh-stah-CHO-lee’). Versions of the cookie can be traced to ancient Rome, and it remains one of the most popular holiday cookies in Italy. One of my old Italian baking books contains 13 different recipes, with one hailing from Alto Adige, in the far north of Italy, and another from Sicily.

While the recipes vary in ingredients, as well as shaping and baking methods, one thing almost all of them have in common is that they are usually diamond- or rhombus-shaped—though, of course there are exceptions. Another common characteristic is that the dough typically contains a mix of spices, especially cinnamon and clove. And, in the days before sugar was a common ingredient, the dough was sweetened with *mosto cotto*, grape must syrup, which is where the cookie is believed to have gotten its name.

I wrote extensively on *mosto cotto* in my book [Preserving Italy](#), where you’ll also find a recipe for it. It’s made by slowly cooking down the freshly pressed, unfermented juice of wine grapes (grape must) until it reaches a syrupy consistency. The Abruzzesi use Montepulciano d’Abruzzo grapes to make it. Left to age for a period of weeks to months (or longer), *mosto cotto* mellows in flavor and takes on notes of prune, raisin, fig, cherry, and spice. It gives these cookies a slightly chewy, cake-like crumb and a rich, almost raisin-like flavor.

Even without *mosto cotto*, you can still make a festive batch of mostaccioli. Many modern recipes replace the *mosto cotto* with runny honey. The online purveyor Gustiamo sells [saba](#), the Emilia-Romagna equivalent of *mosto cotto*. You can also substitute [date syrup](#) or [fig syrup](#).

Makes about 3 dozen cookies

#### INGREDIENTS

1/2 cup (70 g) raw skin-on almonds

3 cups (390 g) unbleached all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting the work surface

1 cup (200 g) sugar  
2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon  
1/4 teaspoon ground cloves  
3/4 cup (300 g) *mosto cotto*, saba, date syrup, fig syrup, or runny honey  
2 large eggs, lightly beaten  
1 pound (454 g) bittersweet chocolate, for glazing  
2 tablespoons sunflower oil or other neutral oil  
Candied orange peel, sprinkles, or other decorations (optional)

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat the oven to 350° F (180° C) and line two rimmed baking sheets with parchment.
2. Spread the nuts on a small, rimmed pan (I use a small pizza pan) and bake until they are fragrant and start to crackle, 7 to 8 minutes. Remove them from the oven and let cool completely. (You can leave the oven on or turn it off and then reheat it while the dough rests.)
3. Grind the cooled almonds in a food processor until finely chopped. Add the flour, sugar, cocoa powder, baking powder, cinnamon, and cloves to the work bowl of the processor and pulse until everything is well combined. Using the feed tube, pulse in the *mosto cotto* and eggs and mix until a soft ball of dough forms.
4. Gather the dough onto a lightly floured surface, knead it briefly, and pat it into a disk. It may not be completely smooth; this is fine. Cover tightly with wrap and let it rest at room temperature for 30 to 60 minutes. If you turned off the oven, turn it back on to 350° F (380° C).
5. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and roll it into a rough rectangle about 1 cm thick (slightly less than 1/2 inch). With a diamond cookie cutter, a sharp knife, or a pastry roller, cut the dough into diamond shapes about 2 inches wide and 3 inches long (5 x 7.6 cm). Gather up any scraps and re-roll them to make more mostaccioli. You should end up with about 36.
6. Place the mostaccioli 1/2 inch (1 cm) apart on the parchment-lined baking sheets. Bake, one sheet at a time, until the cookies are set and lightly crackled on the surface, about 15 minutes. Let them cool on the sheets for 10 minutes, then transfer them to racks to cool completely.
7. To temper the chocolate for glazing: Coarsely chop 12 ounces (340 g) of the chocolate and leave the rest in larger pieces. Put the chopped pieces in a heat-proof bowl and set it over a pan

of barely simmering water, taking care that the bottom of the bowl does not come in contact with the water. Slowly melt the chocolate, stirring occasionally. Remove the bowl from the pan of simmering water and wipe the bottom to prevent any water from coming into contact with the chocolate. Stir in the remaining chocolate and the oil and continue to stir until all of the chocolate has melted. Use an instant-read thermometer to check the temperature of the chocolate. It will stay glossy without any white streaking if the temperature is between 86° and 90° F when the cookies are dipped.

8. Have ready two baking sheets lined with parchment (I use the same parchment on which the cookies were baked). Dip the tops of the mostaccioli into the bowl of melted chocolate, allowing the excess to drip back into the bowl. Set the cookies on the baking sheets and let the chocolate set completely, about 1 hour, before serving. If you would like to make them look even more festive, you can sprinkle decorations on them right after dipping, or garnish them with a piece of candied orange peel.

Store the mostaccioli in an airtight tin. To prevent scuffing, arrange the cookies in layers, with sheets of waxed paper or parchment between them. The mostaccioli will keep for up to a week.