

Hamantaschen! – Recipes and Related Stories

by Matt Klionsky



ORIGINS

My father's maternal grandmother – my great grandmother 'Bubbie Bluma' (born 1879) – was revered as a great baker. But she relished that role too much and, perhaps for fear of competition and to retain her reputation, did not share her recipes and generally banned others from her kitchen when she was baking. She also didn't measure ingredients, and had limited literacy; and these factors too may have been impediments to sharing.

The last time she visited us (maybe, 1964, when I was about 11), her mobility and eyesight were limited, and she didn't know our kitchen, but she still wanted to bake. My mother had anticipated this - it meant that Bubbie would have to allow someone in the kitchen with her, someone to fetch ingredients; as a consequence of this realization, my mother spent several days prior to the visit teaching herself how to estimate ingredient volumes. She figured out the range of how much flour was in a 'handful,' what a half-teaspoon of salt looks like on one's palm, how long it took to fill a cup by pouring oil from a bottle. The strategy worked, and the result was a rough estimate of ingredients and processes. Then, after the visit, my mother made repeated attempts to duplicate the recipes, working by trial-and-error until my father said things tasted right.

My hamentaschen dough in its original incarnation was the result of that process. It was actually used, on the occasion of Bubbie Bluma's last visit, to bake babka - but her daughter later told us that the same dough was used for hamentaschen. So, that's what I've done ever since.

It is a rich yeast dough. In the original version, the only liquids were butter, sour cream, Crisco, milk, and eggs. In recent years I created a pareve version and even a vegan one. All of these will be described in the recipe. Fillings have a slightly different origin – but only in some senses. My mother's mother – my Bubbie Rose – (incidentally, from the same Lithuanian shtetl (Baltermans/Butrimonys) as my father's Bubbie Bluma), while not much of a cook, did know how to make the 'mun' and 'lekvar' that constitute the most classic hamentaschen fillings. So, in the end, while my hamentaschen aren't pure Bubbie Rose or pure Bubbie Bluma, they're pure Baltermans – or at least they were until I began to create fillings in addition to those two classics.

I started baking these myself as a teenager, and have made at least 20 dozen every Purim since then. I made over 600 for my son's bar mitzvah, and for about a

decade led yearly fund-raising projects with Akiba Schechter students, producing hamentaschen for the annual UChicago Hillel Latke-Hamentasch debate, as well as for Purim, using these recipes and producing over 1000 pastries per year.

Notes before you begin:

Technique matters a lot in this recipe, and there are actually reasons for just about every instruction. That's why there are technique notes throughout. There's no way to speed things up. The dough really does need to rise for many hours or overnight. They really do taste much better if the dough is rolled very thin. You cannot close the triangles by pinching the dough edges together instead of using the overlap technique I describe - they'll open up when you bake them. Substituting liquid oil or margarine for Crisco will make the dough fragile and difficult to work with. If you roll the dough-balls or otherwise over-handle the dough, it will shrink rather than cooperate when you're trying to fill the pastries.

Your production skills will develop with practice – faster if you're already experienced with pastry baking, slower if you're 'all thumbs.' But I think people who have tasted the results will tell you that it is worth the effort.

The dough recipes as published here are designed for use of an electric mixer with dough hooks and 5 qt bowl capacity. That said, I made them 'by hand' for many years, and the batch size here (which makes 5 - 6 doz.) works by hand as well. If you are using a mixer with sufficient power and bowl capacity, you can multiply the recipe by 1.5.

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DOUGH

The dough is a rich yeast dough which takes about a day to rise. After one day, any unused dough may be refrigerated for use one or two days later. If refrigerated, allow to warm thoroughly at room temperature before using. The same dough makes an excellent "babka" (coffee cake). Although the dough is very rich, one batch goes a long way. It is rolled very thin (a little thicker than a CD); one batch makes five to six dozen triangular pastries with 3 inch to 3 1/2 inch sides, or 6 - 7 dozen with sides of 2 1/2 inches.

Prepare for baking by having 3 eggs, 1/2 cup (1 stick) butter or margarine, 1/2 cup milk and 1/2 cup sour cream at room temperature. (See below for vegan and pareve options)

MIX (in cup or small bowl) and let mixture rise until doubled in volume.....:

- 1 T (=one 1/4 oz. foil pkg.) dry baker's yeast with
- 1 t sugar, and stir until completely dissolved in
- 2 T lukewarm water;

MEANWHILE, mix together (sifting if lumpy) in a large bowl:

- 6 cups flour (preferably a high-gluten, "bread" flour, unbleached)
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 t salt

THEN, pour the risen yeast into a depression you create in the middle of the flour mixture.

NEXT, add all room temperature ingredients to the flour mixture, then knead:

- 1/2 cup butter or margarine (not the "light" variety)
- 1/2 cup solid Crisco
- 1/2 cup sour cream (stabilizers/preservatives will inhibit yeast)
- 1/2 cup milk
- 3 previously beaten XL eggs (if smaller, compensate with more milk)

[For pareve dough, use these substitutions in recipe below:

7 1/2 oz unflavored soy milk + 1 T vinegar + 4 oz coconut oil) instead of sour cream, milk, and butter; can also use emulsion of ground chia seeds instead of eggs (i.e., 3T ground chia plus 2T oil plus 7 oz warm water) for full vegan dough version.]

Beat and knead until the dough is homogeneous, soft, smooth, and quite elastic. When done, lightly oil the dough surface, place in a large bowl, cover with a clean cloth, and let rise at room temperature for a day (12 hr minimum; 24 is better; more is OK)

The dough is not punched down or allowed to re-rise before using. If a crust forms when rising, gently turn the risen dough over just before using, even though this will cause the dough to deflate somewhat.

WHEN READY TO BAKE, make small dough balls, a few at a time, each about the diameter of a film canister or medium-size walnut (i.e., ~1 1/8"). (Do NOT roll the balls in your hand! That would deflate the dough and make the rest of the process difficult. They don't really need to be balls, just the right amount of dough - minimal handling is best! If you have a food scale, you can check ball size easily – they should be about 20 grams each.

Then, follow ASSEMBLY INSTRUCTIONS

Baked pastries may be frozen for several months without loss of texture or flavor. If frozen, thaw in open air so dough doesn't get soggy.

ASSEMBLY AND BAKING

Hamentaschen are baked on lightly greased baking sheets, and are prettier if glazed before baking. It is best but not necessary for the dough to rise for an additional

hour or so after pastries are formed but before baking. Each batch takes about 20 - 25 minutes baking time in a 375 degree (F) oven. Pastries can be spaced fairly closely on the baking sheets, as they don't rise much.

As previously noted, the dough should be quite thin. This can be achieved (with a bit of practice) by pressing and stretching a dough ball on a hard surface with fingers and palms. Rolling out a large sheet with a rolling pin and cutting circles in it with a cookie cutter doesn't work very well. The best and fastest method I've found requires a tortilla press. (see Note 2 below). The goal is to get the dough thicker than a shirt cardboard but thinner than the cardboard on the back of a pad of writing paper, 4" diam.

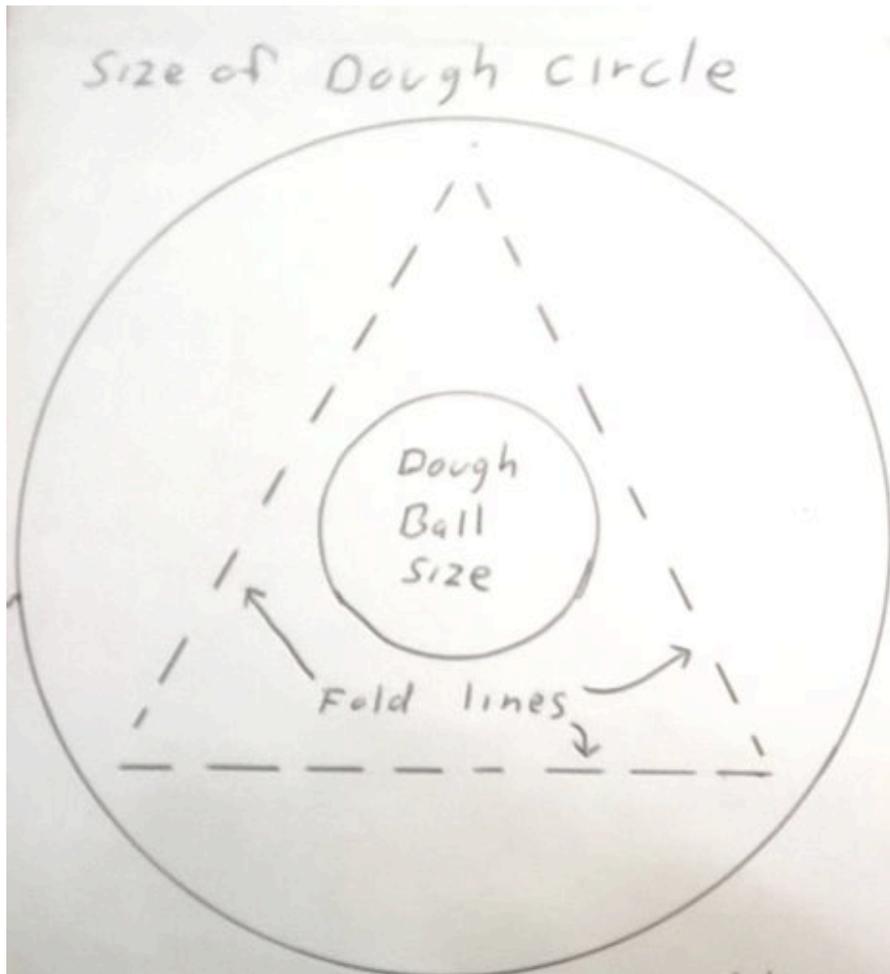
- 1) Gently make 1 1/8" dough balls (the size of small walnuts or a little smaller).
- 2) Use your preferred method to flatten a dough ball into an approximate circle, around 4 inches in diameter – see diagram. Handle dough as little as possible – if over-handled, dough circles will shrink and thicken and become hard to fill and fold.
- 3) Place about a tablespoon (20 gm; 2/3 oz) of filling in the center of the dough.

Shape filling into a rough triangle, approx. to dotted lines in diagram. (Use spoon to shape filling, not fingers! Sticky fingers will cause pastries to open when baking! And, KEEP FILLING AWAY FROM EDGES OF DOUGH.

4) Fold one edge of dough over the filling along one edge of the filling triangle. Then, fold another dough edge over a second filling edge, partially overlapping the first dough fold. Finally, fold the third dough edge so it overlaps the other two and completely enfolds the filling, making a triangular pastry about the size of the dotted-line triangle in diagram. Lots of overlap is good - it keeps them from opening. Do NOT pinch!
NOTE1: no need to try to get perfectly round dough circles – shape and size of pastry depends on where you make the folds, not on initial dough shape.

- 5) Move raw pastry to very lightly greased baking sheet, folded edges up, not down
- 6) (optional) Glaze lightly with equal-parts mix of egg yolk, honey, and orange juice [a soft feather-baster (from a cooking store) works better than a brush]
- 7) Sprinkle with something to identify filling (e.g., poppyseeds, chopped cranberry bits, or whatever else is appropriate to the filling you're using)
- 8) Allow to rise for 1/2 - 1 hour (if possible)
- 9) Bake 18 - 25 minutes at 375F until golden on top and bottoms are beginning to brown. (in professional convection oven, bake at 300F rather than 375F)
- 10) Immediately remove to cooling racks

Note 2 on tortilla presses (also known as a puri makers to Asian Indians) – press should be at least 5 inches in diameter and with evenly spaced face-plates (CHECK before you buy - Some are even, some are not – even of the same brand/model.) Cost is about \$10 - \$15 in Mexican or Indian stores. Make sure that the faces of the press are stiff, non-flexible, smooth, and absolutely parallel when closed. Proper spacing is very important. My standard 20 gm dough ball should get flattened into a circle about 4 inches across. If the spacing between plates is too wide, the dough circle will be too small; this can be corrected by make shims out of wax-paper covered cardboard, cottage-cheese-container tops, or whatever, and placing them along with the dough between the press-plates. (i.e., trial and error to find right thickness for shims)



FILLINGS

Hamentaschen can be tastily filled with almost any fruity/nutty confection, but the filling must be stable enough not to melt and get runny at baking temperatures. And, somewhat tart fillings work particularly well to contrast with the sweet dough.

Each of the following filling recipes is enough to use up about one batch of the dough. I suggest that each pastry have about equal weight of dough and filling; my preferred size is about 20 gm (2/3 oz) each. For fillings, this equates to about 4 dozen per quart.

Leftover fillings can be frozen for future use, or used to spread on bread (or whatever).

As with the dough, the fillings are best prepared the day before the baking project.

POPPYSEED (MUN) FILLING

Prepare for baking by having a food grinder or processor, a large fine-pore sieve or piece of cheesecloth, and a citrus-rind grater, as well as common utensils.

This filling is also perfect for poppyseed cakes or coffee cakes.

Place 1/2 pound dry poppyseeds (= 1 1/3 c.) in a 3 qt. pot with at least 2 qts. water. Bring to a boil, and allow to just simmer for 15 minutes, then turn off and allow this to cool completely at room (or refrig.) temperature.

When cool, rinse well – there will be a lot of scum to remove. (Pour water from pot, refill, stir, and re-drain; at least five times until rinse water is almost clear). Then drain fully: tightly tie fine cheesecloth over pot and turn pot on side and drain until no longer dripping.

While poppyseeds are draining, finely grate the peel from half a lemon, then squeeze the juice from the lemon and mix both lemon components with:

- 1/2 cup honey [substitute Agave Nectar for vegan version]
- 1/2 cup raisins (about 3 oz, by weight)
- optional:-1/2 cup dry pitted prunes (about 4 oz, by weight)
- 1 cup walnut pieces (about 4 oz, by weight)

Put the above mixture through a course food grinder. (Or, use food processor as follows: First, process walnuts to about the size of sesame seeds. Remove nuts, and then process raisins, prunes, honey, and lemon juice into a thick paste. Finally, combine this paste in a bowl with nuts and drained poppyseeds and mix thoroughly.) Refrigerate for use in the next 1 - 3 days, or freeze for future use.

(NOTE 1: The prune option has gastrointestinal benefits particularly appreciated by people who tend to eat too many poppyseed hamentaschen, which tend to be constipating.)

(Note 2: Prepared like this, poppyseeds have a mild flavor...if you like a more pronounced poppyseed taste, grind them into a meal first. This requires either a grain mill, a very fast/powerful device like a Magic Bullet blender, or a LOT of time by hand with a mortar and pestle.)

PRUNE (LEKVAR) FILLING

This is a classic.

Place 1 1/2 pounds of pitted prunes in a 3 quart pot with plenty of very warm water, and let soak for a couple of hours. (Alternative, if a faster process is desired: simmer prunes briefly, then allow to cool.) While prunes are soaking, finely grate the peel from half a lemon and half an orange, then squeeze the juice from both and save all citrus components for later use.

When prunes are soft and plump but each fruit retains its integrity, drain completely and mix in:

- 1/2 cup brown sugar (optional)
- citrus zest (rind) and juice
- 1 cup walnuts (4 oz by weight)
- 1 1/2 cups raisins (8-9 oz, by weight)
- Cinnamon to taste

Put the entire mixture through a food grinder or processor so that it becomes a thick, homogeneous paste. Refrigerate until ready to use.

(Note: There's always a warning on packages of pitted prunes saying 'may contain pits'. I have found this to be a reasonable warning, and I've learned to squeeze each prune by hand after soaking to check for (and remove) any pits. You do NOT want pits going through your food grinder/processor!)

TROPICAL FILLING – Apricot/Pineapple/Coconut

Empty 20 oz can of chunk/sliced pineapple (with juice) into bowl, bring to boil, and turn off. (This kills enzymes that would otherwise destroy flavors during baking.) Drain off juice and reserve. Then, combine drained pineapple with:

1 1/2 lb dried apricots

Zest and juice of 1 orange.

1/2 lb dry coconut (sweetened, or not)
ginger powder, to taste (1/2 – 1 tsp)

Put all through food processor or grinder to obtain a thick paste.
If resultant paste is too thick to work easily, add some/all of the reserved juice.

NEW WORLD FILLING – CRANBERRY

This can be converted to a more classic cherry filling by using pitted cherries and dried cherries as substitutes for the cranberries. As neither fruit is in season at Purim time, canned or frozen may be used. This cranberry version requires additional foresight (i.e., a stockpile of frozen cranberries) as whole frozen cranberries aren't easily available in March. If using canned cranberry sauce, reduce sugar in recipe accordingly. **OPTION:** mix cherries and cranberries.

Place contents of 24 oz (two standard bags) of fresh or frozen whole cranberries in a microwave oven in a lightly covered container and heat on HIGH until all the berries split (5-10 minutes) [If done on stovetop, use a steamer; don't boil or add extra water.]. While cranberries are cooking, finely grate the peel from an orange, then squeeze its juice and save for later use.

When cranberries have popped, and while still hot, mix in

- 12 oz (by weight) dried cranberries (OK if sweetened)
- orange rind and juice
- 2 cup finely chopped walnuts (8 oz by weight)
- 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 cup white sugar (to taste)
- 2/3 to 1 cup packed brown sugar (to taste)

Mash mixture with hand tool, or put through a food grinder or processor so that it becomes a thick, homogeneous paste. Refrigerate until ready to use. Leftovers can be eaten like cranberry sauce.

FIG WITH ANISE (This is REALLY good)

1 1/2 lb. dried figs
3/4 C honey (or Agave nectar)
Juice and zest of 3 oranges and 3 lemons
1 T ground anise seed

Mix above together and heat/simmer (I do it in a microwave), then put warm mixture through grinder or food processor to make a thick paste. Add in and mix well: 3/4 C ground nuts (almonds preferred, others OK)

If too thick, add a little more citrus juice or honey

DATE WITH CARDAMOM AND FENNEL – (Exotic and excellent!)

Soften 1 lb date paste (this is just a mash of pitted dates; available in middle eastern stores; much cheaper than buying dates). To soften, heat in microwave on 'high' for 1.5 - 2 minutes; this will greatly soften the block of date paste and make mixing possible. When done, you will have a homogeneous thick paste that can be spread fairly easily even once it returns to room temp.

Mix in:

1 1/2 t each ground fennel and ground cardamom

2 t cinnamon

3/4 t ground cumin

1/4 C chipped/shredded coconut

zest of ~2 oranges

~1/2 C orange juice (add half at the beginning; reserve other half to use at end to adjust consistency)

~2 T pomegranate molasses

a pinch of salt

If paste is too thick for easy working, add more of the reserved OJ as needed.

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Matthew Klionsky holds degrees from Brandeis University, the Hahnemann Medical College (now part of Drexel University in Philadelphia); and the Booth Graduate School of Business of the University of Chicago. Before retiring he worked as Senior Scientist for The Health Data Institute and Director of Research for FirstHealth and co-founded HealthGnostics. His work involved development and application of analytic systems to elucidate issues pertaining to quality, effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of care, as well as identification of fraud and abuse, in medical care databases.

Matt has been active in the Hyde Park community, serving on the University of Chicago Medicine Community Advisory Panel and the boards of a community health center, his condo association, the University of Chicago Hillel, and Akiba Schechter.

His other interests include baking (especially Jewish cultural specialties), urban foraging (about 300 lbs of fruit per year), cycling (over 3000 miles/year), and the collection and use of tools (enough to fill his basement and fix most repairable things). He's married to Susan Rosenberg, and they raised four children here, Gideon, Abigail, Naomi, and Devora.