



COOKIES CUM LAUDE

Now that summer vacation is over and the kids are back in school, moms can finally enjoy some long-awaited downtime—in between carpools, PTA meetings, and helping with homework, that is. Make the most of your extra minutes with this back-to-school cookie swap. There is no other party where you can relax with friends and simultaneously stock up on afternoon snacks for your kids.


This party's lesson in creative entertaining begins with an invitation crafted from a recycled report card, with a grading system that assures high marks in "cookie swap etiquette." To help guests make educated decisions, spell out their cookie choices in chalk on craft-store slates. Before the snacking begins, hand out compact composition books or pencil pouches filled with blank index cards. As guests munch their way from one cookie to the next, they'll be happy to have paper nearby for jotting down recipes from their baker-friends.

Fast, no-trouble cookies dominate the desktop display and fulfill the prerequisites for multi-tasking moms. Loaded with chocolate, peanut butter, marshmallow, and other ingredients that kids love, these goodies are just as likely to please the partygoers as the folks who await their arrival at home.


Cause to Celebrate: Back-to-school, an autumn birthday (especially for scholarly sorts), Labor Day, a class reunion, a graduation

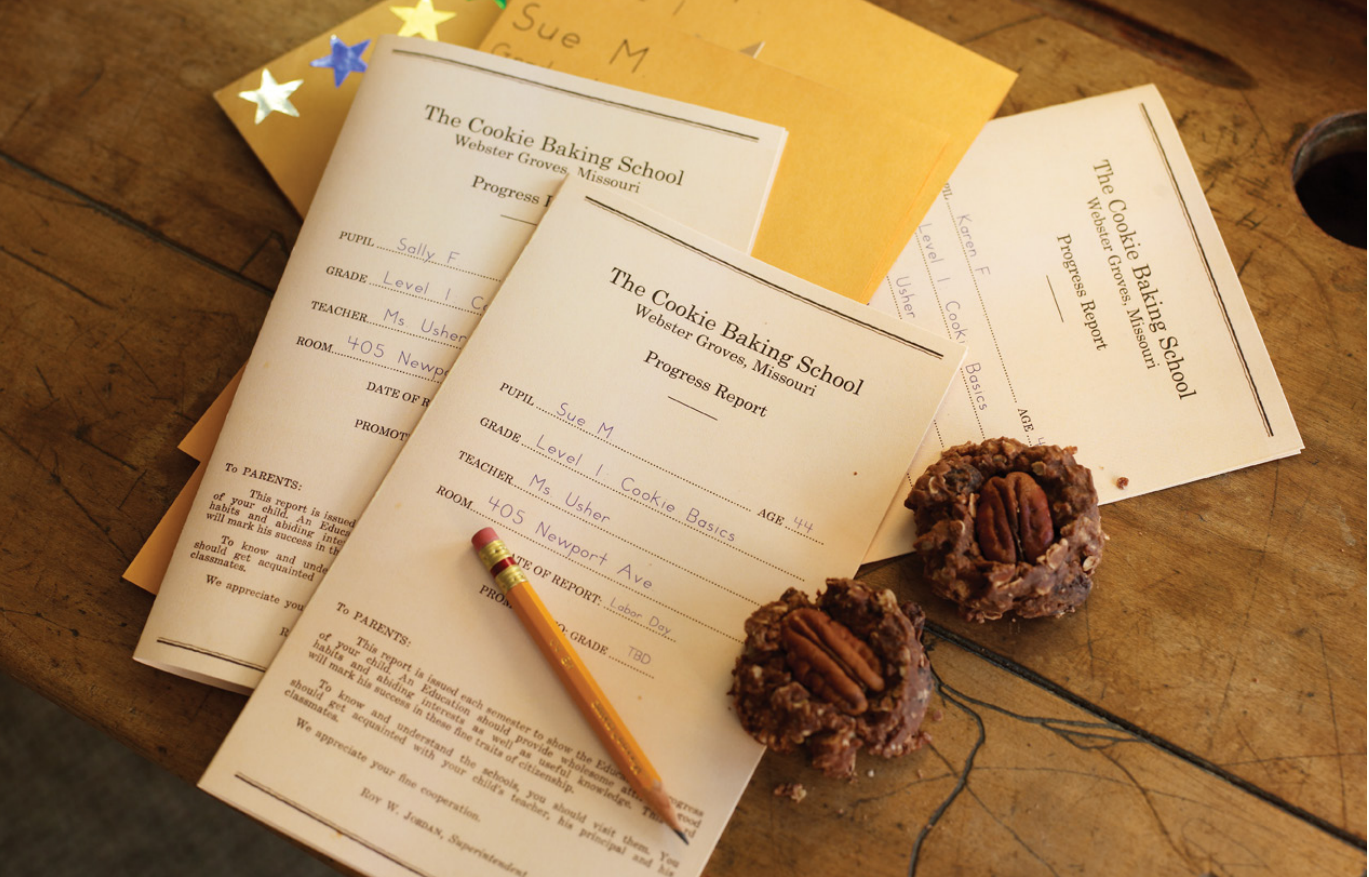
Clockwise from lower right, The Brown(i.e)-Noser; Gold Star Macaroons; Teacher's Pet; No-Hassle, No-Bake Oatmeal Fudge Cookies; Brain Teaser; and (center) Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches.

Report Card Invitations (right top)

 **To make:** Choose an old report card (the less that's been written on it, the better). Digitally scan both the inside and outside and then modify it with photo-editing software to include information such as a cookie grading system or the party's date, place, and time. Print out both sides of the card back-to-back, trim the invitation to size, and fold it in half. Stick a gold star on the envelope.


Note-worthy Recipe Books

 **To make:** Write guests' names on strips of cardstock and glue each strip to the front of a compact composition book (available in office supply stores or online). Loop shorter strips around small pencils; then affix the strips to the inside back covers. If you've collected the recipes in advance, print them on notebook paper and glue them into the books as well.



Icing 101
To keep Royal Icing contained on small cookies, or to fill small angular spaces on larger cookies, the run-in icing technique (p. TK) is the way to go. When applying details, thick Royal Icing is preferred for piping sharp, well-defined lines as on "LEE" and "KAREN," whereas a relatively thin consistency is best for dots like those on "SALLY" and "SUE." For consistency adjustments to Royal Icing, see page TK.

Papier-mâché Book Boxes

 **To make:** Cover a papier-mâché book box (available online, p. TK, and in craft stores) with papers or images, using spray adhesive for large areas and decoupage medium for small and curved areas. Avoid placing paper over the joint where the cover meets the spine. Cover the inside front cover with a table of contents that lists each cookie by name, or mount a self-adhesive pocket in the same place and fill it with recipe cards. Let the boxes dry thoroughly before lining with parchment paper and filling with cookies. The parchment paper will keep the oils in the cookies from staining the box.

Stand-ins.
Other take-away containers with a scholarly bent, only quicker . . .

- *Plain tin lunchboxes. Some thoughtfully applied paint or pretty paper will contribute the needed character.*
- *Brown paper lunch sacks embellished with a name tag or old school portrait of each guest.*
- *Clear plastic pouches ordinarily used for pencils and other school supplies.*





Teacher’s Pet

Makes 2½ to 3 dozen (2½-inch) cookies

When a simple apple no longer satisfies, try these overstuffed apple-spice cookies on for size. Note: Feel free to alter the mix-ins to satisfy your kids.

Cookie Key:
Complexity: Easy Active Time: 45 minutes Type: Drop

Prep Talk: Store in airtight containers at room temperature for 3 to 4 days. Due to its fruit content, this cookie is soft and will only get softer after the first day. Eat freshly baked to enjoy a crunchy exterior.

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¾cup plus 3 tablespoons firmly packed light brown sugar
- ½ cup (1 stick) plus 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- 1 large egg
- ¼ cup apple cider (or juice), room temperature
- 1½ teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- 1¼ cups peeled, cored, and chopped apples (1 to 2 tart cooking apples, such as Granny Smith, cut into ¼-inch dice)
- 1 cup walnut halves, lightly toasted and chopped
- 1 cup pitted, chopped dates (cut into ¼-inch dice)
- ½ cup butterscotch morsels

Apple Cider Glaze (optional)

- 3 cups powdered sugar, sifted
- 1 tablespoon strained freshly squeezed lemon juice
- About 4 tablespoons apple cider (or juice)

Powdered sugar (to thicken glaze, as needed)

1. Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Line two or more cookie sheets with parchment paper.
2. Mix the flour, cinnamon, baking soda, and salt together in a small bowl and set aside for use in Step 4.
3. Place the brown sugar and butter in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment. Beat on medium-low speed until well combined. Add the egg, turn the mixer to medium speed, and beat until fluffy, about 1 to 2 minutes. Gradually add the apple cider (or juice) and vanilla extract, and beat well. Scrape down the sides of the bowl asneeded to ensure even mixing. (The mixture may separate slightly, especially if the cider is cold, but this is not a problem.)

4. Turn the mixer to low speed and gradually add the dry ingredients, mixing just until incorporated. Stir in the apples, walnuts, dates, and butterscotch morsels, taking care to evenly distribute the goodies and to break apart any date pieces that may be clinging to one another.

5. Portion the dough into mounds using a level 1 5/8-inch (#40) scoop or 1 heaping tablespoon per mound. Place the mounds about 2 inches apart on the prepared cookie sheets. Flatten each mound into a 2-inch disk using the palm of your hand. Lightly dampen your palm as needed to prevent sticking.

6. Bake the cookies about 15 minutes or until golden brown and firm around the edges. (For a plumper cookie, do not flatten the mounds and bake closer to 17 minutes.) Transfer immediately to wire racks using an offset spatula to prevent breakage. Cool completely before glazing or storing.

7. **Make the Apple Cider Glaze (optional).** If you’d like to generously frost the cookie tops, combine the powdered sugar, lemon juice, and enough apple cider or juice (about 4 tablespoons) to make a thick, spreadable glaze. Whisk or stir vigorously until very smooth. Spread about 1 teaspoon glaze on top of each cookie.
If you’d rather drizzle the glaze, cut the glaze recipe in half and mix as described above. Thin the glaze by stirring in a small amount (1 to 1½ teaspoons) of additional cider. The glaze should flow freely off a fork but still cling to a “test” cookie without running off. Adjust the glaze consistency as needed by adding more cider to thin it or powdered sugar to thicken it.

8. Place the cookies on wire racks set on parchment paper. (The paper will catch any drippings and make for easy cleanup later.) Use a fork, thin-bladed knife, or parchment pastry cone to distribute the glaze over the cookie tops.

9. Let the glaze dry before storing or packaging the cookies for gift-giving.



The Brown(ie)-Noser

Makes 3½ to 4 dozen (1½–inch) squares

Buttering up a teacher, boss, friend, or family member is as easy as 1-2-3 with this super-charged blonde brownie.

Note: Omit the rum if too adult for the kids.

Cookie Key:

Complexity: Medium

Active Time: 45 minutes

Prep Talk: Allow 1 to 2 hours for the bars to cool before glazing and another 3 to 4 hours for the glaze to chill before cutting. Glazed bars should be stored in the refrigerator.

(The glaze is perishable.) Unglazed brownies are better stored at room temperature. Bars will stay fresh longer if kept in the pan, tightly wrapped in foil, and cut to order. For best eating, serve at room temperature within 3 to 5 days.

1 tablespoon unsalted butter

4½ teaspoons all-purpose flour

½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Butterscotch Brownies

2½ cups all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

3/8 teaspoon salt

1¼ cups (2½ sticks) unsalted butter, chopped into tablespoon size pieces

2¼ cups firmly packed light brown sugar

3 large eggs, room temperature

1½ teaspoons pure vanilla extract

3 tablespoons dark rum (optional)

2 cups pecan halves, toasted and coarsely chopped

Ganache Glaze (optional)

1 recipe Ganache (p. TK), chocolate increased to 1 pound

1. **Make the Caramel Topping.** Unwrap the caramel candies and combine with the cream and butter in a small nonreactive (stainless steel or coated) saucepan. Place over medium heat and cook, stirring regularly to prevent scorching, until the caramels and butter are completely melted and the mixture has boiled. Remove from the heat. Stir in the flour, mixing well to break apart any lumps. Add the vanilla extract and set the topping in a warm place so the caramel stays fluid while you prepare the brownie batter.
2. . Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line a 10 x 15 x 2-inch glass baking dish (sometimes called a roasting pan, p. TK) with foil, leaving a 1-inch overhang around the top edge of the pan. Smooth out any big wrinkles in the foil and then lightly coat the foil with nonstick cooking spray.
3. **Mix the Butterscotch Brownies.** Combine the flour, baking powder, and salt together in a medium bowl. Set aside.
Place the butter in a medium (3-quart) saucepan over low heat. Once the butter has fully melted, remove it from the heat and stir in the brown sugar, mixing until smooth. (Note: Don't be surprised if the butter and sugar do not completely come together at this point; some separation is normal.) Cool a few minutes; then add the eggs one at a time, whisking well after each addition. Add the vanilla extract and rum, if desired. Gradually add the flour mixture, whisking all the while to keep the batter lump free. Stir in the pecans.
Turn the batter into the prepared pan and level with a small offset spatula. (The batter will be less than 1 inch thick, but it will bake to about twice its original thickness.)

4. Drizzle the caramel topping evenly over the batter. (If the caramel has thickened and is difficult to drizzle, gently reheat it.) Marble the top (and break apart any large caramel blobs) by drawing a spatula through both the topping and the batter in a random pattern. Bake until a cake tester inserted into the center comes out with moist crumbs on it, and the brownie has pulled away from the edges of the pan, about 35 to 40 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack and cool completely in the pan. (Areas that had larger helpings of caramel topping may sink slightly, but don't worry; the ganache will completely cover any holes.)

5. **Prepare and apply the Ganache Glaze (optional).** Make the glaze only after the brownies have completely cooled. Follow the instructions for Ganache, p. TK, but increase the chocolate to 1 pound.
6. While the ganache is fluid, pour it evenly over the brownie. Gently tilt or shake the pan so that the ganache completely coats the top. Cover with foil, taking care to keep it from touching the ganache. Refrigerate 3 to 4 hours, or until the ganache is firm enough to cut cleanly.
7. Remove the brownies from the pan in one block by gently pulling up on the foil overhang. Place directly on a cutting board. Remove all foil, and trim any uneven edges before cutting into 1½-inch squares. For the neatest cuts, slice the bars while the ganache is firm and wipe the knife clean with a warm, damp cloth between slices. Serve at room temperature.



Gold Star Macaroons

Makes about 2 dozen (1¾ -inch) macaroons

Of all the macaroons I've ever tried (and that's a lot), this version gets a big gold star due to additions of cocoa and chocolate chips.

Cookie Key:

Complexity: Easy

Active Time: 45 minutes

Prep Talk: Because of their high sugar content, macaroons are especially susceptible to humidity. Package in airtight containers as soon as they've cooled and store at room temperature. For best eating, serve within 1 to 2 days while the exterior is still crisp.

2½ cups lightly packed sweetened coconut flakes, divided

½ pound pure almond paste

6 tablespoons granulated sugar

6 tablespoons powdered sugar

2 tablespoons cake flour

1 tablespoon unsweetened non-alkalized cocoa powder

¼ teaspoon salt

2 large egg whites

¾ teaspoon coconut extract

1¼ cups miniature chocolate chips, divided

1. Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 325 degrees F. Line two or more cookie sheets with parchment paper.
2. Place 1 cup coconut in the bowl of a food processor fitted with a metal blade. Break the almond paste into small pieces and add to the coconut. Process 1 to 2 minutes, or until the coconut is very finely ground and the dough begins to come together in a large mass.

Sift the sugars, cake flour, cocoa powder, and salt together, and add to the coconut-almond mixture. Process to thoroughly combine. Add the egg whites and coconut extract, and process just until the mixture forms a sticky mass, about 15 seconds. Stir as needed to ensure even processing.

3. Turn the dough into a bowl and stir in ½ cup coconut flakes and ½ cup chocolate chips.
4. Pour the remaining 1 cup coconut flakes and ¾ cup chocolate chips into a large bowl or cake pan to form a shallow layer, and break apart any coconut pieces that may be clinging together. Toss to evenly mix.
5. Portion the dough into mounds using a level 1½-inch (#50) scoop or 1 level tablespoon per mound. Roll the mounds between your palms to form 1¼-inch balls, dampening your hands as needed to keep the dough from sticking. Drop the balls, a few at a time, into the coconut-chocolate chip mixture, and roll to evenly coat.
6. Place the cookies 1 inch apart on the prepared cookie sheets. Bake 25 to 30 minutes, or until the coconut flakes are nutty brown and the cookies have puffed and cracked ever so slightly. To ensure even browning, rotate the cookie sheet about midway through baking. Cool the cookies 1 to 2 minutes on the cookie sheet; then transfer to wire racks to cool completely before storing. (As the cookies cool, they will get crispy on the outside, but will stay lusciously soft on the inside.)



No-Hassle, No-Bake Oatmeal Fudge Cookies (lower right) and Brain Teaser (lower left). Storage Tip: Though cookies can be mixed and matched in a display or take-home container, it's best not to store them this way long term, as they will absorb each others' flavors.

Brain Teaser

Makes about 2 dozen (1¾-inch) squares

Here's a sure way to slip some carrots, raisins, and pineapple into your kids' diets. But don't be fooled by all the good things—these carrot Congo-bar twists are succulent and rich.

Cookie Key:

Complexity: Easy

Active Time: 45 minutes

Prep Talk: Allow about ½ hour for the crust to cool before topping and another 2 hours for the cookies to cool before cutting. (The bars will cut more neatly if completely cooled.) Bars will stay fresh longer if kept in the pan, tightly wrapped in foil, and cut just before serving. For the crunchiest crust, eat within 1 to 2 days. (Because of its high sugar and fruit content, the filling is moist and will soften the crust over time.)

Shortbread Crust

1½ cups all-purpose flour

¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar

½ teaspoon salt

¾ cup (1½ sticks) unsalted butter, softened and cut into tablespoon-size piece

Carrot “Cake” Topping

2½ tablespoons all-purpose flour

1¼ teaspoons ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground ginger

¾ teaspoon ground cloves

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon baking soda

1 14-ounce can (about 1 cup plus 3 tablespoons) sweetened condensed milk

¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons packed light brown sugar

2 large eggs

1 large egg yolk

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

1 ½ cups peeled, shredded carrots

(about 1½ large carrots, 4 ounces each)

1 ½ cups walnut halves, lightly toasted and chopped

1 cup raisins

½ cup dried pineapple pieces, about 1 (3-ounce) bag, finely chopped (optional)

¼ cup powdered sugar (for dusting, optional)

1. Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line a 9 x 13 x 2-inch baking pan with foil, leaving a 1-inch overhang around the top edge of the pan. Smooth out any big wrinkles in the foil and then lightly coat the foil with nonstick cooking spray.
2. **Make the Shortbread Crust.** Combine the flour, sugar, and salt in the bowl of a food processor fitted with a metal blade. Add the butter and process until the mixture just clings together in a ball, about 15 to 20 seconds. Pat the crust into an even layer in the prepared pan. (It may not appear as if you have enough dough, but the crust will puff upon cooking.) Generously prick the dough with a fork.
3. Bake the crust 20 to 25 minutes, or until lightly browned and firm to the touch. (Prick the crust again about midway through baking if it appears overly puffed.) Transfer to a wire rack and cool completely before topping, about ½ hour.
4. **Mix the Carrot “Cake” Topping.** Combine the flour, spices, salt, and baking soda in a small bowl and set aside
In a large bowl, whisk together the sweetened condensed milk, brown sugar, eggs, egg yolk, and vanilla extract. Beat until well combined. Gradually whisk in the flour mixture, taking care to break apart any lumps. Stir in the carrots, walnuts, raisins, and, if desired, pineapple. Pour the topping over the cooled crust and evenly distribute the goodies.

5. Bake the bars 35 to 40 minutes, until the edges are caramel-brown and the top is slightly puffed. Transfer to a wire rack and cool completely before cutting. (For easiest cutting, allow about 2 hours for the bars to fully cool and set.)

6. Remove the bars from the pan in one block by gently pulling up on the foil overhang, and place directly on a cutting board. Remove all foil, and trim any uneven edges before cutting with a sharp knife into 1¾-inch squares. For the neatest cuts, wipe the knife clean with a warm, damp cloth between slices. Lightly dust with powdered sugar, if desired, just before serving.

No-Hassle, No-Bake Oatmeal Fudge Cookies

Makes about 2½ dozen (2-inch) cookies

These creamy no-bake cookies go from mixing bowl to mouth in about 30 minutes. Note: Getting all your ingredients measured and prepped before you start mixing is especially important with this cookie. Once you reach Step 3, you will need to add ingredients quickly before the mixture begins to get firm.

Cookie Key:

Complexity: Easy

Active Time: 1/2 hour

Prep Talk: A candy thermometer is helpful in Step 2. Store in airtight containers at room temperature up to 1 week, or in the refrigerator if you prefer a firmer consistency.

1½ cups granulated sugar

½ cup evaporated milk

½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into tablespoon-size pieces

¼ teaspoon salt

½ cup unsweetened non-alkalized cocoa powder, sifted

¾ cup creamy peanut butter
1½ teaspoons pure vanilla extract
2¼ cups quick-cook oats
¾ cup raisins
¾ cup pecan halves, lightly toasted and coarsely chopped

About 2 ½ dozen pecan halves, lightly toasted (for topping)

1. Line two or more cookie sheets with parchment paper.
2. Combine the sugar, evaporated milk, butter, and salt in a medium (3-quart) nonreactive (stainless steel or coated) saucepan. Place over medium to medium-high heat and bring to a rolling boil, stirring as needed to make sure the butter has completely melted by the time the mixture boils. Boil about 2 minutes longer, or until the syrup just registers 238 to 240 degrees F on a candy thermometer. Stir as needed to keep the mixture from scorching on the bottom of the pan. (Avoid boiling longer than specified, or the resulting mixture will harden very quickly and become crumbly and difficult to scoop.)
3. Remove the pan from the heat and immediately add the cocoa powder, whisking to break apart any lumps. Whisk in the peanut butter and vanilla extract; then stir in the oats, raisins, and pecans. (The mixture should be shiny and loose at this point.)
4. Work quickly to scoop all the dough while it is still loose. (If the dough begins to set as you scoop, the resulting texture of the cookies will be crumbly.) Portion the dough into mounds using a level 1 5/8-inch (#40) scoop or 1 heaping tablespoon per mound, and place them about 1 inch apart on the prepared cookie sheets. Top each cookie with a pecan half and press gently to flatten the cookies to about 2 inches in diameter.
5. Freeze the cookies 15 to 20 minutes, or until completely set. (Alternatively, place them on the counter so the kids can watch them turn into fudge. Setting time will vary considerably, depending on the ambient temperature.)

Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches

Makes about 2 dozen (3-inch) sandwiches

This favorite lunch box staple-turned-cookie ranks top in its class.

Cookie Key:
Complexity: Easy Active Time: 1 hour 15 minutes
Prep Talk: For easiest handling, the dough must be chilled at least 3 hours before rolling and cutting. Store unfilled cookies in airtight containers at room temperature up to 1 week. Once filled, the sandwiches are best eaten within a few days, as the cookie will soften next to the jam.

1½ cups all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
¾ cup creamy peanut butter
½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
½ cup firmly packed light brown sugar
1/3 cup granulated sugar
1 large egg
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

¾ to 1 cup seedless red raspberry or strawberry jam (for filling)

1. Combine the flour, baking soda, and salt in a small bowl. Set aside for use in Step 2.
2. Place the peanut butter and butter in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, and beat on medium speed until well combined. Gradually add the sugars. Turn the mixer to medium-high speed, and beat 1 to 2 minutes longer, until light and fluffy. Add the egg and vanilla extract. Mix until well combined. Scrape down the sides of the bowl as needed to ensure even mixing. Turn the mixer to low speed and gradually add the dry ingredients, mixing just until incorporated.



3. . Divide the dough into two equal portions and flatten each portion into a disk. Wrap tightly in plastic and refrigerate at least 3 hours or until firm enough to roll without sticking.
4. Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Line two or more cookie sheets with parchment paper.
5. Work with one disk of dough at a time. On a lightly floured surface, roll the dough to a 3/16-inch thickness. Cut into squares using a 2 ¾-inch square cookie cutter, and then cut each square along the diagonal into two triangles. (Should the dough get too sticky to easily roll at any point, simply return it to the refrigerator or freezer until it has firmed up. Chill any scraps before re-rolling.)
6. Place the triangles about 1 inch apart on the prepared cookie sheets, and bake 10 to 12 minutes or until golden brown around the edges. Immediately transfer to wire racks using an offset spatula to prevent breakage. Cool completely. Repeat Steps 5 and 6 with the remaining disk of dough.
7. Preheat the broiler. Turn half of the triangles upside down on a cookie sheet and top each with 1 ½ level teaspoons jam. Spread the jam into an even layer with a small offset spatula, covering the cookie as completely as possible. Place the cookies under the broiler, in the top third of the oven, for 1 to 2 minutes, just until the jam begins to bubble around the cookie edges. Watch carefully, as the jam and any exposed cookie edges can quickly burn.
8. Transfer the cookies to wire racks. While the jam is still warm, top each cookie with another triangle and gently press together. Cool completely before storing. Note: As the jam cools, the sandwiches will hold firmly together without sliding. The bottom cookie, which may have softened under the broiler, will also return to its original crisp state.

