



Non c'è pane senza pena
No bread without work

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LEMON-SCENTED ALMOND COOKIES

Sweet and crunchy almonds are an integral part of the agricultural landscape and the unique cuisine of Puglia, or Apulia, the distinctive region that forms the narrow heel of the Italian boot. Along with Sicily, Puglia is the largest producer of almonds in Italy, a nut in particularly high demand, since Italian bakers, cooks, and consumers consume nearly 200,000 tons of almonds a year.

Almonds are among the first cultivated foods on the planet; they originated in Asia Minor, made their way to Greece and eventually became part of the Roman diet. Almond trees are actually the cousins of plum trees; instead of producing a soft fruit, they yield a greenish, hard pod which eventually dries, splits and falls away, revealing the hard, woody shell of the almond. Inside lies what is unquestionably the world's most popular nut: mandorla in Italian, almendra in Spanish, mandel in German, amande in French, badam in Indian, and badam in Persian.

There has always been an association between the white, flowering almond tree and themes of love, forgiveness and immortality. The story Phyllis and Demophoon, from Ovid's *Heroides* is my favorite. Phyllis was the Queen of Thrace who married Demophoon, the son of Thesus and Phaedra. Demophoon left Phyllis to visit Athens, promising to return in a month. When he did not return, Phyllis was so heartbroken and distraught, the gods took pity upon her and turned her into an almond tree. Eventually, Demophoon did return and found Phyllis, a leafless, brown, withering tree. He ran to the tree, clasped it to his chest in a loving embrace and it spontaneously burst into brilliant bloom. Phyllis transformed back into a Queen, and the almond tree became known as a symbol of true and inextinguishable love and forgiveness. The Ancient Romans gave almonds as gifts at weddings, to wish the happy couple everlasting love, fertility and prosperity, a tradition that continues today in the form of colorful, candied almonds that are a must at most Italian weddings.

Almonds are an excellent source of vitamins and minerals; eating a handful of almonds every day provides you with magnesium, phosphorus, zinc, calcium, folic acid and Vitamin E. What I love most about them is their sweet, almost floral flavor and their rich, crunchy texture. There are numerous almond groves thriving in the plains of the Lecce province in Puglia, and almonds find their way into both sweet and savory local recipes. I love almonds in breads, cakes, and especially in cookies, where their crunchy texture can be showcased. These cookies are wonderful at any time of year, but I especially enjoy them when the weather turns chilly, with a cup of hot, lemony tea.

Makes 5 dozen cookies

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 325F degrees.

For the Cookies:

½ cup sliced, **blanched almonds**

2 cups unbleached **all-purpose flour**

½ teaspoon **kosher salt**

½ teaspoon **baking powder**

1 cup (2 sticks) **unsalted butter**, softened

1 cup **granulated sugar**

1 large **egg yolk** (reserve the white for the coating, below)

Freshly grated **zest** of one lemon

1 teaspoon **pure vanilla extract**

For the Coating:

2 large **egg whites**

2 cups sliced **blanched almonds**

Confectioner's Sugar for Dusting

Spread the ½ cup of sliced almonds in a single layer on a cookie sheet and toast them in the oven until they are lightly golden brown. Allow the almonds to cool completely, then grind them finely in a food processor.

In a medium bowl, stir together the flour, ground almonds, salt and baking powder and set aside.

Using an electric mixer with the paddle attachment, beat the butter and sugar together on medium speed until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Beat in the egg yolk, followed by the lemon zest and vanilla extract. Beat in the dry ingredients to make a stiff dough. Wrap the dough in plastic and chill until it is firm enough to roll, about 1 hour.

Lightly grease two cookies sheets with non-stick cooking spray or butter. Place the sliced, blanched almonds in a shallow bowl. In another shallow bowl, lightly beat the egg white with a fork until it is frothy.

Remove the dough from the refrigerator and divide it in two pieces. Roll each piece into a log, about one inch in diameter and 12 inches long. With a knife, cut the log into ¼ inch wide slices. Dip each slice in the beaten egg white, then in the sliced almonds to coat them evenly. Place the cookies on the lightly greased or parchment-lined cookie sheet(s), evenly spaced, ½-inch apart.

Bake the cookies until they are firm and the almonds are lightly golden brown, about 14 to 16 minutes. Allow the cookies to cool on the pan for 2 to 3 minutes, and then use a spatula to move them to a wire rack to cool completely. Dust the cookies generously with confectioner's sugar. The cookies can be stored in an airtight container, layered with parchment paper, in a cool, dry place.

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