

VANILLA SHORTBREAD

I know that cookies sound like the sort of cooking someone else does, but you need never have baked anything ever in your life to be able to make these with untroubled ease. And I hate to say this—as someone with a once-serious Bahlsen habit—but they are so much better than anything out of a package.

2/3 cup confectioners' sugar

1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour, preferably Italian 00

2/3 cup cornstarch

3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons very soft unsalted butter

seeds from 1 vanilla bean

vanilla or ordinary granulated sugar for sprinkling

Preheat the oven to 325°F.

Put the confectioners' sugar, flour and cornstarch into the bowl of a food processor fitted with the metal blade and give them a quick blitz (just to save you sifting, which is my most-hated job in the kitchen) before adding the butter along with the vanilla seeds you've scraped out of a bean. (I find the easiest way to do this is by cutting the bean in half across, and then splitting each short half lengthwise and prising out the seeds with the point and edge of a sharp knife. Don't even think of throwing the seeded bits of bean away; stash them in a jar of granulated sugar to use next time a recipe requires vanilla sugar.)

Process again until the soft mixture coheres and begins to form a ball, loosely clumping around the blade. Turn this out onto a jelly roll pan and press to form an even (or as even as you can make it) layer, using fingers or the back of a spoon, or both. Be patient: I promise you it will fit smoothly.

Using the tip of a sharp knife cut the pressed-out shortbread into fingers. I make two incisions lengthwise—i.e. to form three rows—and then make ten cuts down—so that you end up with eleven fingers per row. Obviously, the aim should be to cut at regular intervals, but don't start getting your ruler out. Just go by eye: uniformity is the province of the conveyer belt not of home cooking. Use the tines of a fork to make little holes in each marked-out biscuit: I press down about three times, diagonally, on each finger.

Now that you've pressed, incised, and punctured, slide the jelly roll pan into the oven and bake for about 20–25 minutes, by which time the shortbread will be pale still, but not doughy. Expect a little goldenness around the edges, but shortbread should be not crisp but melting. Remove the pan from the oven and let cool for 10 minutes or so, before removing, with a palette knife and your fingers, to a wire rack. Sprinkle with sugar and leave them to cool completely before storing in a tightly lidded tin.

Makes 33 fingers.