

## THE WHOLE LEAF

BY DEBBIE ANDERSON

Try a piece of this baked-goods plan

PHOTOS BY KYLE VAN HORN



**SCONES** are a staple on any tearoom menu, and you can personalize them to fit your shop by selecting two or three unique flavors and pairing them with homemade jams, curds and cream.

**A**dding baked goods to a tea shop menu is not a casual task. The possibilities can be overwhelming, and the process of trying to narrow down selection can be daunting. So what to do?

It's wise to start slowly. A good first step is to build a small, manageable menu containing a couple of traditional offerings that might be expected from a tearoom. Be certain that these are items you can do exceptionally well and with consistency. Your customers are spending their time and money with you because your ambiance, service, presentation and (especially) tea and food choices are all expected to be outstanding.

**S**cones are a staple on many tearoom menus. Start by offering a plain scone served with a selection of fabulous jams, curds or cream. There are some extraordinary jams and curds available, but you will need to look a little farther afield than the standard selection in most grocery stores. For best results, make your own fresh concoctions—recipes can be easily found online for lemon curd, as well as a very credible “mock” Devonshire cream.

In addition to plain scones, you might also plan to offer a couple

of flavors that are unique to your menu. People love walking into their favorite establishment and ordering what they enjoyed on their last visit. If they know they can find that special item only at your shop and that it will be there consistently, they'll very likely become regulars and spread the word about your spot.

You can then develop another one or two flavors that rotate in and out of the menu—employ this practice to take advantage of seasonal flavors and tastes, or simply to have a little creative element of mystery on your menu. Lighter flavors might make their appearance in the warmer months, while pumpkin and gingerbread might be saved for fall and winter. If you choose to serve seasonal flavors only during the corresponding seasons, you might consider announcing in advance when those flavors will reappear on the menu and make an event out of the seasonal debut of the products.

Besides being creative with flavors, you can add twists to your product line by using different shaped cutters to cut the scones, or using different flavors of glaze to adorn the top. Heart-shaped scones loaded with chocolate chips and cherries can be offered in February, for example. For even more flavor, you might top those with a drizzle of chocolate glaze that has a

dash of brandy. Don't be afraid to experiment—it often doesn't take much to really boost the flavor to a level that customers will relish and remember.

Scones, as we all know, are best served fresh and warm. Many recipes lend themselves well to being made in advance—in other words, you'll cut the scones and then freeze the dough. This strategy takes what seems like an impossible venture (serving several different flavors of fresh scones daily) and makes it a very manageable task. All you have to do is to pull the chosen scones from the freezer and bake. Baking scones from frozen dough will generally take 20 minutes or less.

“EACH DAY, TEST A COOKIE AND COMPARE IT TO A FRESH-BAKED BATCH. BE CERTAIN THAT THE STORED PRODUCTS MEET THE SAME STANDARDS AS THEIR FRESHLY BAKED COUNTERPARTS—**FLAVOR AND TEXTURE ARE THE TWO MOST CRITICAL ISSUES.**”

Shortbread-type cookies are another traditional tea-time treat. Unlike scones, these are best when baked in advance because it takes a couple of days for the flavors to meld and develop. Once baked, the cookies can be stored at room temperature in an air-tight container. Be certain that each type of cookie is stored in a separate container so that the flavors don't begin to blend. If that happens, individual flavors will be indistinguishable.

Three to four weeks is the longest you should store cookies, but you should determine for yourself the perfect timeline for your baked goods. Bake a batch and store the cookies as you normally would. Each day, test a cookie and compare it to the fresh-baked batch. Be certain that the stored products meet the same standards as their freshly baked counterparts—flavor and texture are the two most critical issues. Once you begin to see a decline in either of those factors, note how long it's taken for the product to get to that point. Plan to remove future products in that line from use three to four days earlier than the timeline you've noted, just to ensure that you never offer a sub-standard cookie.

Your choices in shortbread are many. For shape, they can be made in traditional molds, as “fingers” or as rolled cutouts (which again can be varied by season or event). Flavor options are plentiful. As with your scones, pick one or two offerings to keep as standards, and then offer one or two others that you can rotate in and out of your menu. Russian tea cakes or

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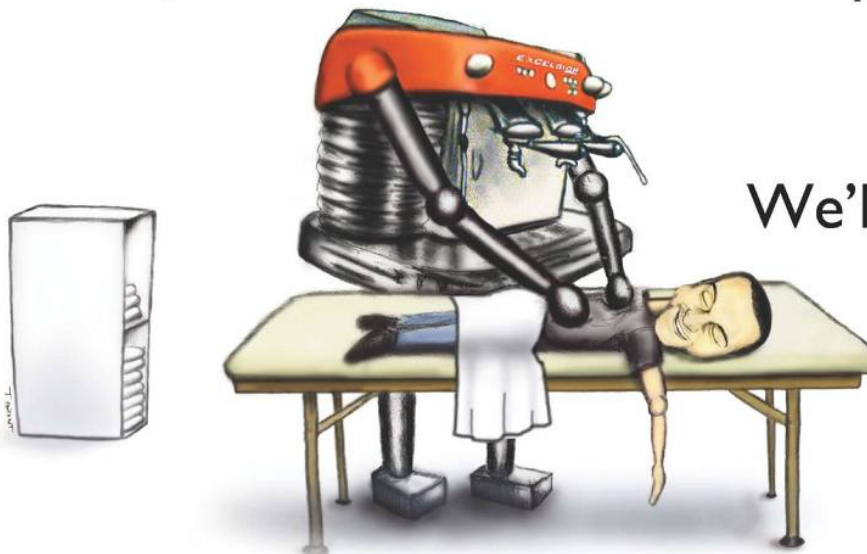
Mexican wedding cakes (often considered to be interchangeable) are cookies that fall into the traditional definition of shortbread.

“OVER TIME, YOU MIGHT **DEVELOP A LIST OF SEVERAL TEAS** THAT WORK WELL WITH CERTAIN FLAVORS OF BAKED GOODS, AND YOU CAN GENTLY STEER THE CUSTOMER TOWARD ORDERING ITEMS THAT COMPLEMENT ONE ANOTHER.”

Other desserts such as cakes or tarts can also be added to your menu. You again want to apply the principle of quality versus quantity and side comfortably on the side of quality. Find one or two cakes or tarts that you offer at a consistently exceptional level. Be sure you know how long you can hold that cake before it needs to be discarded and a fresh one baked. Are you known far and wide for your Italian cream cake or red velvet cake? Or are lemon and Key lime tarts more your style? Find one extraordinary recipe that you love, and then develop a fool-proof production system that ensures you have enough fresh items to satisfy your customers at all times, but not so much that you're throwing product away.

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**SHORTBREAD COOKIES** are another traditional tea-time treat that can be varied by season, trend or event.

Once you have become comfortable with your base menu offerings, you can introduce new options. Maybe sample a new cake for each customer, asking whether they think it should become a regular feature. Ultimately, it is your customers and their taste preferences that will decide whether an item is an unqualified success or not.

The other task you have as you assemble your baked goods offerings is determining the best pairings of baked goods and teas. You do not want the flavors of the tea to fight with the flavors of the scone, cake or cookie. Each flavor should enhance the

overall experience. Over time, you might develop a list of several teas that work well with certain flavors of baked goods, and you can gently steer the customer toward ordering items that complement one another.

**A**s you create and continue to build your baked goods menu, you'll probably need to recruit some fellow testers and critics. This is usually a nice part of the process, though. In my experience, I've often ended up with more volunteers than I had food to offer. ☪

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