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Deerhurst chef shares the magic of gingerbread.

By Andrew Hind and Maria Da Silva

# Heavenly Holiday Houses

*To warm up the whole house and fill the air with delicious Holiday season scents, there's nothing better than spending an afternoon making gingerbread. In a season of traditions, there are few more timeless and cherished. >>*



“Gingerbread has been made for centuries, and gingerbread homes are so much fun and easy to make,” says Nancy Dame, pastry chef at Deerhurst Resort in Huntsville. Deerhurst is famed for its festive gingerbread house lobby and annual gingerbread contest.

We joined Chef Nancy in the Deerhurst kitchen to see how it’s done. Chef Nancy first made sure Maria at least looked like a chef with a clean white apron, though it didn’t remain clean for long. “The flour flies in the kitchen,” Chef Nancy laughed, as she began to guide Maria through the baking process.

Begin by mixing the dough and then, after dusting your work surface with flour, rolling it out. As you’re rolling, slide a spatula under to check if the dough is sticking. If it is, simply move the dough to the side and sprinkle more flour. If you’re making cookies, press cutters into the dough, slide them onto a baking sheet and into the oven. Because they’ll last months, you can use gingerbread cookies as decorations on the tree. With a straw poke a hole in the gingerbread before you bake and again after they come out (the dough will expand in the oven) through which you can run a ribbon.

Making a gingerbread home is a bit more involved, but more rewarding. It begins with planning, Chef Nancy explains. “You have to envision the home you want and design it beforehand. You’re an architect. You have to understand the building’s structure and make it self-supporting.” Prefabricate the house first in cardboard to make sure all the pieces fit together, and then trace it out on the dough. If you want doors or windows, now’s the time.

Place the dough on baking trays and put into a preheated oven. It takes only about 15 minutes to bake. Overcooking is the number one mistake people make. Pull the trays out when the top is still spongy, because the dough is still baking even as it cools.

When the gingerbread has cooled, brush it with an apricot glaze (made from apricot jam or preserves mixed with water) to give

it a nice shine and a stickiness that helps hold the house together.

The real ‘mortar’ holding the walls together, however, is icing, applied with a piping bag. You have to work fast because it dries quickly, and you have to get the right consistency: too thin and it won’t have any adhesive strength, too thick and you won’t be able to squeeze it from the piping tube. Using a base (such as floor tiles from a dollar store) helps give the building stability, and in addition allows you to create landscapes around the building.

Now the fun begins: decorating the home. “When you start putting candies on the house it begins to develop its

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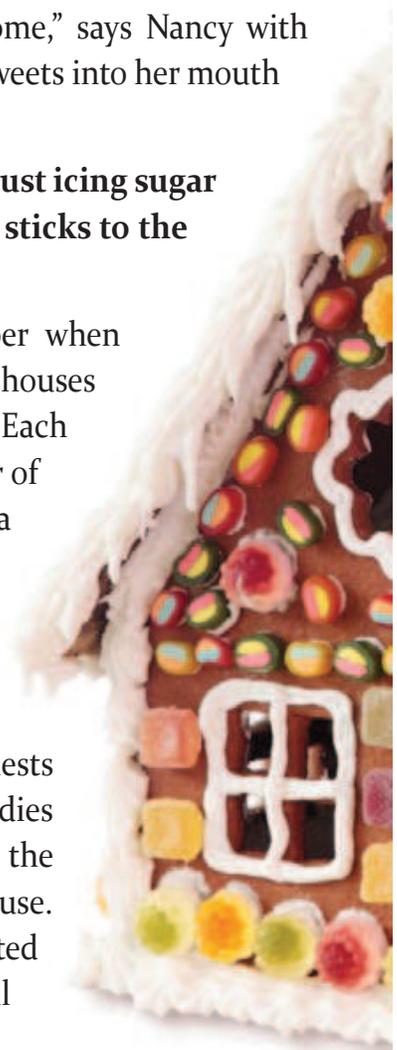
character and personality. Tell a story with the home,” says Nancy with obvious passion, eyeing Maria as she puts as many sweets into her mouth as on her home.

**One great tip: To replicate freshly fallen snow, dust icing sugar over the home. The apricot glaze will ensure it sticks to the roof and walls.**

For inspiration, visit Deerhurst during December when as many as a dozen of Chef Nancy’s gingerbread houses transform the lobby into an oasis of Holiday cheer. Each year she does a different theme. In 2010, in honor of the G8 meetings held at Deerhurst, she made a building representing each of the participating countries.

Deerhurst also holds a Gingerbread Competition every December. A \$10 contribution to the Salvation Army allows guests the opportunity to decorate a house with candies supplied by the resort. A crew of judges picks the winner, and participants get to keep their house. That same day, Chef Nancy’s masterfully crafted gingerbread homes are raffled off, with all proceeds once again going to the Salvation Army.

Gingerbread is a traditional part of the Holiday season, fun for young and old alike. “Being creative together brings a family together. It’s a great Christmas tradition,” says Chef Nancy. “I think there should be gingerbread in every home at Christmas.” ●





## *Make dough like a pro!*

Courtesy of Chef Nancy Dame

### GINGERBREAD DOUGH

2-1/2 cups all purpose flour

1-1/4 cups sugar

3/4 cup brown sugar

3/4 tbsp. baking soda

1/2 tbsp. salt

3/4 tbsp. ginger

3/4 tbsp. cinnamon

5 oz. shortening.

- Mix all ingredients together in mixer with paddle for 2 min. at low speed.
- Add 1oz. molasses and 5 eggs, mix till dough forms. It will be sticky, so dust the dough with flour.
- Remove from bowl and dust with flour while forming a large ball shape.
- Take a third portion of the dough and roll it out to about a little more than 1/4 inch thickness.

### ROYAL ICING

1 oz meringue powder

2 oz cold water

4 1/2 cups icing sugar.

- Place powder and water in mixing bowl and beat with whisk till frothy, about 3 or 4 min. at med. high speed.
- Switch to paddle and gradually add all the icing sugar.
- Beat at medium speed about 5 min. till thick and glossy.
- Add vanilla for taste (about a tsp.)
- Cover icing with plastic wrap so it doesn't dry out.

*The icing and dough can be kept in a refrigerator well wrapped for 2 or 3 weeks.*

Deerhurst

