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## Baking up tradition

### cookie swaps | Holiday favorite gets updated with guys, alcohol and even helicopters

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BY JULIANNE WILL

Back in the day, a proper Wellesley cookie swap meant lacy aprons, long skirts and lighted luminaries.

It even involved a little silver bell: Just as with Pavlov's dogs, the ringing signified it was time to drool. On cue, the women who were gathered at Mary Bevilacqua's lovely home would present and exchange their baked treats, following a set of rules codified in their 1970s classic, *The Wellesley Cookie Exchange Cookbook*.

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**Kyle Johnson (second from right) hosts a cookie exchange in her River North home, where her friends gather for a cookie competition.**

*(Keith Hale/Sun-Times)*

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quest to ask, "How could I ever bring cookies to your house?"

But whether they've manned the oven all night or persuaded a friend to fill a plate for them, it's no matter.

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"I tell them, 'Don't even worry about it. Just come and have fun,' " Johnson says.

And they do. After the cookies are spread around the table, a group of guy friends is supplied with milk and clipboards and invited to sample, judging the selection for best presentation, best tasting and most original. They have to resist attempts at wooing and bribery before awarding prizes.

Finally, the women get a turn to taste, then all indulge in some turkey chili, adult beverages and holiday cheer before sorting batches and heading home.

Johnson's is just one type of party. She stole the idea from another girlfriend who hosts a full-blown sleepover. Everyone stays up all night to bake together, then they share brunch before divvying the goods and going home to sleep.

Myke Koscielski attended a more casual party last year on the North Side hosted by a fellow member of MEETinChicago, the local arm of a national social club. About a dozen other men and women in their mid-20s to mid-40s also came out on a weeknight in early December with plates of cookies they may or may not have baked. (Koscielski's wife baked his, but she had to work and missed the sweet rewards.)

There were few-to-no rules. Everyone grabbed a plate and made a pass around the table taking samples. The hostess served coffee, milk, tea and cocoa to wash it all down. Fortunately for Koscielski's wife, there was enough cookies left for each to take home.

Michelle Klarchek's annual cookie extravaganza turns the heat up a notch. Her guests each have a job. There are frosting stations, stations for chopping nuts and stations for unwrapping Hershey's Kisses.

"Mine is completely, completely different," Klarchek says. "We're working."

It's hardly a hardship, however. Klarchek sends a helicopter to the city for her friends and flies them to her lodge at Lake Geneva for the festivities. They send out for Asian food. Each guest receives an Egyptian cotton chef's coat stitched with her name and the emblem for that year's party. Baking on the spot spares the women any preparation -- with the exception of Klarchek, of course.

"I spend months getting ready," she says.

Her party is a labor of love. Klarchek's mom was a big cookie baker and when she passed away in 1991, "I wanted to do something. That's how it got started," Klarchek says.

So for the past several years, she and 15 to 20 of her friends come together around 4 in the afternoon, don their coats and dig in. They break for a photo in front of the Christmas tree and outside the lodge, but otherwise they're fairly busy until 1 or 2 in the morning.

Virginia Dew-Siddons often finds herself up to her elbows in suds at Klarchek's party. But she keeps coming back. In fact, she was the first to bake for the holidays with Klarchek.

"The participation is the most fun part of it," Dew-Siddons says, "working together."

Everyone takes home a giant box of cookies -- with the exception of Klarchek. "All the cookies are gone," she says.

But she doesn't seem to mind too much. "It's a gift of time and a gift of friendship. The girls have a great time," she says.

As hip or as simple as a cookie swap may be, there still is a bit of sentiment baked into that gooey goodness. Johnson's mom has taken up

baking to join her daughter in the holiday tradition. Dew-Siddons remembers making Hungarian nut crescents with her grandmother as a young girl.

And each year, Klarchek includes her mother's apricot bars on the to-do list for her party. "It's something that makes my heart feel good and makes me think of my mom," Klarchek says.

Funny, that's just what the women of the Wellesley cookbook would say.

*Julianne Will is a Chicago freelance writer.*

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