

The Cookie Lady's baking delights friends and neighbors at Coral Gables senior community

Retired music teacher Sandra Davis learned to bake with her mother in Long Island. Her favorite cookie is cinnamon, but her most requested is chocolate chip.

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After some six decades of baking, after measuring innumerable cups of flour and rolling out countless sheets of dough, after making thousands of people smile at first bite, Sandra Davis knows a thing or two about what makes the perfect cookie. "The ingredients, they have to be fresh," Davis says. "And pure butter. No margarine, no substitute. You want to use the real thing."

At The Palace at Coral Gables, where Davis has lived since 2013, she is known as The Cookie Lady. You'd be hard-pressed to find a resident who hasn't savored one of her creations, be it a thumbprint cookie handed out during a social or a chiffon cake awarded for a birthday. As a volunteer on The Palace welcoming committee, Davis greets newcomers with her homemade cookies. And if a resident has dietary restrictions, she can whip up a loaf of sugar-free banana bread, too.

"When I see people's face light up, it's such a great feeling," she adds. "That's my reward."

Davis, 82 and a retired music teacher, bakes at least once a week, and where she does it illustrates both her ingenuity and drive. Because residents take most of their meals in a spacious dining room downstairs, The Palace apartments' kitchens don't come with ovens. But that hasn't stopped Davis.

When she moved in, Davis brought her trusty Breville toaster oven. Deep front to back but shallow in height, it's perfect for cookie baking. When another Palace resident gave her a Hamilton Beach countertop oven, she put it to good use baking cakes. Her stand-up Kitchen Aid mixer, which she brought with her from her Kendall house, now rules the kitchen from the countertop.

The shelves of her pantry are packed with bags of flour, boxes of brown sugar and small jars of spices. She stocks up on essentials when there's a sale at Publix but notes: "Have you seen the price of eggs? And butter!"



Sandra Davis, 82, mixes dough for her thumbprint cookies in her apartment in Coral Gables. Davis learned how to bake from her mother and has continued to bake all her life. She now makes cookies for neighbors at her retirement community. Allison Diaz For the Miami Herald

Davis' reputation as The Cookie Lady started almost immediately after she moved into the senior living community. Though The Palace has a pastry chef known to whip up some tasty confections, Davis decided to bake cookies for the residents who shared her table in the dining room. Others found out about it and just happened to wander by whenever she brought down a platter. Soon she was baking for special occasions and upon request.

She doesn't like others to go without, so when someone misses out on cookie day, she makes an extra batch.

"It's not the cookies that are so good," she explains. "It's that they made people feel important."

But the cookies are good: rich, buttery and oh-so-tasty to the very last morsel.



Sandra Davis, 82, holds a tray of her freshly baked cookies in her apartment in Coral Gables on Dec. 1. Her reputation as The Cookie Lady started almost immediately after she moved into The Palace senior living community. Using fresh ingredients — and butter — are important to making great-tasting cookies, she says. Allison Diaz For the Miami Herald

MADE WITH LOVE

Esther Skolnick is convinced the magic ingredient in Davis' cookies is simple: "She makes them with a lot of love. She's even better than her cookies."

Skolnick met Davis soon after she moved to The Palace in late 2013. When Skolnick's husband got sick, Davis insisted on driving her to the hospital. When he died, Davis was there, too, "like family." So were the samples of her baking prowess.

"She really lives to make everybody happy," says Skolnick, who has a soft spot for Davis' crescent cookies. "And baking for others is how she makes herself happy."

The most-requested cookie is chocolate chip, but Davis' favorite is a cinnamon made with rolled oats and shortening. The dough can be made ahead of time, then frozen until needed. The sour cream coffee cake also "gets raves from those who have eaten it."

Davis is adamant about baking her goodies on the same day they're expected to be served. And though she is willing to experiment when she spots an interesting recipe, "I don't like if there are too many ingredients or instructions."

'IT HAS TO TASTE GOOD'

How does she decide if a recipe is a keeper? "It has to taste good," she says. "If I don't like it, it goes right out to the garbage."

Davis has been baking since she was a child. Born and raised on Long Island, she learned to make cakes, pies and cookies in "a nice big kitchen" with her mother. A rainy day invariably meant her mother would bring out the ingredients and cake pans and cookie sheets. "She always had an apron on," Davis recalls.

While raising her three sons in Miami — two of whom still live here, another in North Carolina — Davis continued the tradition. Though she often worked into the evening as a private piano teacher and devoted many hours to volunteer work for the Florida Federation of Music Clubs, her kitchen was always redolent with the mouthwatering scents of something homemade.

It was not uncommon for her students to be treated to a baked good or two. Until she downsized, she had two refrigerator freezers and one chest freezer, where she would store her cookie dough.

Neighbors at The Palace have suggested she sell her creations. Everyone, after all, can use an extra buck. But at the thought of turning commercial, Davis makes a face.

"I would never sell this," she says.

"That's when the love goes out."



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