

Home Cooking Episode 14

Samin: Okay

Hrishi: So, I get a call yesterday from Samin and she says “I’m inscribing these books and someone has asked me for a short joke.” So you called me-

Samim: Yeah, I was kind of surprised because there was like a lot of silence on the other end of the line, I was like “come on, come on,” and then you really delivered. Cause you were like, “why did the cookie” ..what was it?

Hrishi: Why did the cookie write an IOU?

Samin: Oh, why did the cookie write an IOU?

Hrishi: Why?

Samin: Because he was short on dough.

Hrishi: Nooo!

Samin: What?

Hrishi: That’s not the punchline. Because he was shortbread.

Samin: Oh, cause he was shortbread.

Hrishi: Oh my god. Cause you needed a short joke, and it’s shortbread. All my talents wasted.

Samin: I’m Samin Nosrat.

Hrishi: And I’m Hrishikesh Hirway.

Samin: And we’re Home Cooking.

Hrishi: And today is episode 14, of our four-part series. The theme of the episode is cookies and the it’s the final part of our four-part series.

Samin: I’m so sad. I kind of can’t actually fully process that our show is ending.

Hrishi: Are you really sad though?

Samin: I think obviously people know that it’s a shtick that I hate you.

Hrishi: I'm totally reediting that to make you say:

Samin: "Obviously, people know that I hate you." No, I am incredibly heartbroken. You know, the pandemic's not over.

Hrishi: Oh, but thank god 2020 is over. I feel like it's a good time to wrap up our show too.

Samin: Yes. And I don't know that I could have made it through this year without you, without this show, without this connection to our audience.

Hrishi: Yeah, I feel the same way.

Samin: Yeah

Hrishi: If this is our last episode, I'm glad we are going out on a sweet note.

Samin: Oh no, you're starting early.

Hrishi: Does that count? I mean, I just meant it sincerely.

Samin: This whole cookie tin idea, I mean I've had it for months, I was like "I want to do this cookie tin episode. I want it to be all the cookies for Hrishi." I really wanted this as a gift of friendship to you.

Hrishi: And I'm already making you regret it.

Samin: Yeah.

Hrishi: Okay well let's get started. Here's our first question.

Samin: Okay.

Sally: This is Sally from Berkeley. Growing up, my extended, extended family back in the Midwest always had a very large, very extravagant cookie party every December, where we would all exchange cookies. And most of the attendees were so distant family that I don't even know their names. I just know them as the person who brought the crescent cookies, or the person who brought the chocolate covered pretzels. And now, for COVID, obviously the cookie party isn't happening, but a small part of the family is re-creating it in a virtual format this year. So I need a signature cookie, something that's fun and festive but also not too much work.

Samin: Ooh.

Sally: Thank you so much.

Samin: I love this question.

Hrishi: Right? The only thing I'm worried about a little bit is, the "not too much work."

Samin: Well, the only thing I'm worried about, is that some Midwestern people think a chocolate covered pretzel is a cookie. I mean, I'm really into that but come on, it's not a cookie.

Hrishi: What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of signature cookie idea for Sally?

Samin: Okay. Unfortunately, the most ultimate best signature holiday cookie I've ever experienced is called the Baby Boo.

Hrishi: I love the Baby Boos! You told me about the Baby Boos back before the days of this podcast.

Samin: Yes. Unfortunately, it does not fit her main requirement of not being super labor intensive, because I think they're the most labor intensive cookie I've ever seen in my life.

Hrishi: Okay, wait. Explain what it is.

Samin: Okay. If you imagine a chocolate chip cookie that's exactly the size of as much cookie dough that it takes to surround one chocolate chip, that is a Baby Boo.

Hrishi: Uh, I can't wait to have these some day.

Samin: It's amazing. The Baby Boo is the brainchild of my friend and editor, Emily Weinstein's father-in-law. I mean, I've never had Cookie Crisp cereal but I imagine it's like the experience of just eating Cookie Crisp cereal by the handful. Because you're just like, "Oh, I just ate a tiny cookie, but who cares? I can eat 30 more."

Hrishi: Wait. How do these get actually constructed?

Samin: A man, I believe in his 70s, painstakingly by hand digs out the chocolate chip cookie dough, which over the years he has tinkered with, I believe the toll house recipe to his perfect proportions of all of the different ingredients

Hrishi: Does he make the dough with the chocolate chip cookies in the dough and then pulls them out? Or does he make the dough and separately he has the chocolate chips and then he-

Samin: No, no, no, no. He makes chocolate chip cookie dough, and then I think he uses grapefruit spoons or two tiny little teaspoons or something, to pull out an amount of dough. I mean, he's not that precise that he actually really only pulls out one chocolate chip, but the ideal Baby Boo really is just one chocolate chip and the amount ... Sometimes you get a baby boo that has two chocolate chips.

Hrishi: Got it. Got it. Got it.

Samin: Then he has over the years his preferred cookie sheets, which are the specific ones that are not those other specific ones, I don't know.

Hrishi: Really detail-oriented information on this podcast.

Samin: And listen, I only visited once and my eyeballs are falling out of my head. It was amazing. It was just the best thing I had ever seen in my whole life. There was too much information for me to absorb. It was too exciting.

Hrishi: Okay, but I think the principle that we can give to Sally here is, make a chocolate chip cookie that is tiny. Just the tiniest chocolate chip cookie.

Samin: Yeah, I mean that would be amazing, but I also don't think that that's going to fly, but I do have another idea, because when I think of cookies that are not super labor intensive, I think of slice and bake cookies.

Hrishi: I actually had an idea for what could be a signature cookie, and it happens to be a slice and bake cookie.

Samin: Talk to me, my friend.

Hrishi: My mother-in-law's cookies, which are unbelievable, and she makes them every Christmas. And once she realized how much I loved them, she started sending me tins of these cookies. She sent them for my birthday. And then last year, for Thanksgiving, when they came to visit, I asked her if she would show me how to make them.

Samin: Tell me about them.

Hrishi: Okay. They're roasted pecan chocolate chip cookies, and they come from a recipe from Shirley Corriher.

Samin: I love Shirley Corriher. Do you know anything about her background or should I tell the listeners a little bit about her?

Hrishi: I know that she's a scientist, which my mother-in-law also is.

Samin: Oh, okay.

Hrishi: Which is part of the reason why I think she likes her.

Samin: And she so funny. She has written two wonderful cookbooks that I know of, CookWise, and BakeWise. They are written in her signature style of really conversational explanatory food science-y ... So many things that I didn't understand, especially about baking, I have really come to understand because of Shirley. And so, tell me more about this recipe.

Hrishi: So you roast some pecans. Which already, the house just smells great once you do that, but then you take some of them and you crush them into a meal to add to the dough. And then the rest of them, you use as bits along with the chocolate chips. And so the pecans in these two different forms really change the texture from a regular chocolate chip to this nutty crunchy thing that's so good. Oh and then as far as the slice and bake, you make the dough and then you roll it into logs, like you were saying, and then you wrap the logs in plastic wrap, and then you refrigerate them anywhere from an hour up to 36 hours. And then you take them out, you slice them into these half-inch disks and then you bake them.

Samin: Oh, that sounds so good.

Hrishi: Yeah, it's one of the best homemade chocolate chip cookies I've ever had. So Sally, I hope you try it.

Hannah: Hi, Samin and Hrishi. As we come into the holiday season, I wonder if you could make some recommendations for gifts for the home cooks in our lives. I've already got Unicorn Salt on my list, but I'm looking just for some more ideas. Thank you. Bye.

Hrishi: Yes. Magic Unicorn Sea Salt.

Samin: Do you have anything that you noticed this year that you really need for your kitchen?

Hrishi: Well, we talked about this with Stella. I still don't have a stand mixer. I've been doing all my baking.

Samin: Are you just saying this in hopes that some stand mixer company is going to send you a stand mixer?

Hrishi: I wasn't. But now that you mentioned it, yes. Yes, please. No, I still don't have a stand mixer. But that's obviously not a gift that somebody's going to get me. But the Magic Unicorn Sea Salt from Beautiful Briny Sea is so awesome. I love it so much. Yeah, that would be a good gift. But she's already got some, so what else?

Samin: Let me see. I have a little list here that I've been working on. Maybe we can link to it in our episode notes?

Hrishi: Yeah

Samin: But it's just a list of some of my favorite food products and small producers. Things like really excellent balsamic vinegar, great olive oil, some of my favorite cheese. Like there's this illustrator who I love named Molly Reader who makes really beautiful watercolor illustrations of beans and all sorts of stuff. So every day or two days when I think of something, I go back and add it to that thread.

Hrishi: Oh, perfect.

Samin: And people have asked questions, so then I've been adding sort of ideas to it. But to be honest, a lot of the ideas for that thread have come from our resources page.

Hrishi: Yeah. We've got a bunch of this stuff on our website already.

Samin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh, actually speaking of cookies, some of what I think are probably some of the most exquisite cookies that anybody can buy on the Internet or in person are from a little teeny tiny shop at a tea shop in the West village in New York called Té Company, and they specialize in teas from Taiwan. They make only one kind of cookie, these pineapple Linzer cookies and they are so exquisite. And it would be an exquisite gift for somebody you like, or yourself.

Hrishi: Wow. Well for shouting out our favorite cookie makers that you can order from, let me give a shout out to Crumpets Bakeshop .

Samin: Oh, yeah. That's the cookie I just ate.

Hrishi: It's the cookie you just ate. The first time we ever hung out, I took you to Crumpets Bakeshop. That led to the Pop-Up Magazine story that I did called Cookie Exploder about my favorite cookie in LA, which was a mocha fudge chip cookie that Marian Mar the baker of Crumpets Bakeshop created when she was the pastry chef at the LINE hotel. And you can actually order these cookies from her.

Samin: Having just eaten one, they're like both soft, and they have little distinct pieces of chocolate in them. And then they have this little coffee undertone, they're perfectly salty. They're so good.

Hrishi: They're so good.

Samin: Speaking of gifts, I know a popular gift is a cookie tin.

Hrishi: Uh-huh (affirmative) yeah.

Samin: And I saw something that I felt was a really important cookie related point that we had to discuss today.

Hrishi: Okay.

Samin: Please click this link. It's a link to my friend Tim's Instagram. It's a picture he recently posted of some very beautiful ginger cookies.

Hrishi: Yeah

Samin: Would you read this caption aloud?

Hrishi: Okay. This is from Tim Masaryk "It is time to start thinking about holiday cookie platters people. Why when people publish guides to putting together cookie tins (see Melissa Clark in the New York Times yesterday) do we never talk about how if you store a bunch of different kinds of cookies together, they will end up tasting bad. The flavors get all muddled. You can't store gingerbread, shortbread, chocolate cookies, all in the same box. This is why I never order any of those fancy boxes of those assorted pasty chef cookies, they don't taste good. Someone just needs to put a peanut butter cookie into that thing and the whole lot of them are ruined.

Why are we not talking about this? #CookieBoxControversy
#FollowTheMoney”

Samin: Oh, look. Even Dorie Greenspan weighed in. She says, "These are gorgeous, and just yesterday I told a friend not to pack her gingerbread cookies with her plain butter cookies. Really?"

Hrishi: Wow. Once again, we were leaning into Samin's pro segregationist views. And she's saying, "Do not intermingle your different kinds of cookies."

Samin: Wait a minute. Are you telling me that you're an intermingler? You want to have your rum ball next to your..? You like it when all the things touch?

Hrishi: A cookie miscegenist?

Samin: Yeah. Is that what you're saying? You seem of all of the people, like you would be the most pure, the ultimate purist.

Hrishi: So I get the Christmas cookie tin from my mother-in-law, from Dr. M, that has all of the roasted pecan chocolate chip cookies. But there's only one type of cookie.

Samin: That does not count!

Hrishi: The only other cookie tin that I'm familiar with is the cookie tin that all immigrant families, I think in America are familiar with-

Samin: Oh, the Danish butter cookie tin.

Hrishi: Yes. Royal Dansk. Then the real key is then you keep the Royal Dansk box and used it for storage.

Samin: And then child gets to the grandma's house and is so excited for the cookies and opens it, and it has like a sewing kit or receipts in it.

Hrishi: Yeah, exactly.

Samin: And it's just like disappointment. Then I would just keep a stupid person, hopefully opening it and just being just like being like, "Maybe they'll be cookies in it this time." Yeah but those are all butter cookies.

Hrishi: There's the rectangular one-

Samin: With a jam thumbprint, but it's still a butter cookie.

Hrishi: Yeah. I see,

Samin: But what I'm saying is if you're going to gift, please just gift one kind of cookie, or from the same type of family. Like many ginghers, many butters, many chocolates.

Hrishi: All right. What if you were to put all your different types of cookies, the individual types of cookies, in freezer bags. Because I don't want us to be dissuading people from making a diverse range of cookies.

Samin: No, I just want you to be thoughtful about the spice interchange in the air.

Hrishi: Right. So please folks, if you're including different types of cookies within one tin, segregate them by type, but then they can co-mingle within the tin.

Samin: This will also help keep them fresher, frankly.

Hrishi: That's true. On the topic of broadening the horizons of your cookies, here's a question we got from Hailey.

Hannah: Why does everyone hate oatmeal raisin so much? And if you were going to do it differently, how would you do it? I love it. I find them very comforting, but if you wanted to share your love oatmeal cookies, how would you do that without the raisins? How do you make this cookie more exciting for people?

Samin: I mean, I have an answer.

Hrishi: Yeah.

Samin: I feel like you definitely have an opinion.

Hrishi: Oh, sure. Yeah. My solution is get other friends. Who hates on an oatmeal raisin cookie?

Samin: No, a lot of people hate an oatmeal raisin cookie.

Hrishi: Really?

Samin: Yeah.

Hrishi: I'm glad I don't know them.

Samin: I'm not one of them, but I fully get it because it's like why would you choose oatmeal raisin when you could choose a chocolate chip?

Hrishi: Well, we've discussed my best cookie that I think I've ever made, which is an oatmeal cookie that has both raisins and chocolate chips in it.

Samin: No I agree. I enjoy an oatmeal raisin chocolate chip as well. And I cannot remember if this is a Stella Park's trick, or if it's a trick that comes from somewhere else, but I've heard of things where sometimes people toast the oats a little bit in advance, or they might take some portion of the oats, not all of them, but some portion of the oats and grind them up so that you are changing the texture of the whole cookie so that there's not just only that whole oat texture. Because I do think some part of the dislike has to do with the texture for people, but I do think they're very homey tasting. It's that cinnamon-y, apple pie kind of cozy feeling. And I agree, I think a nice chewy oatmeal raisin cookie is definitely a cozy thing.

Hrishi: Oatmeal cookies rule. End of debate. That brings us to our next question. Actually, it's kind of a set of questions.

Samin: Okay.

Sarah: Hello Hrishi and Samin, this is Sarah calling from Seattle. My oven is currently broken and while I wait for the new heating element to come in the mail I'm wondering if you have any recommendations for cookie recipes that don't require any baking.

Samin: Well, I mean, if you ask me the answer to that question is you can do what I do, which is just make the cookie dough and even roll out the balls with the full intention of baking them, and then even freeze them. Freeze the cookie dough balls.

Hrishi: Right, right.

Samin: And then just one by one and pulling out of the freezer and be like, I'm just going eat it.

Hrishi: So just make cookies and just omit the step where you bake them.

Samin: Yeah, just do that.

Hrishi: That's a no-bake cookie recipe. That's true.

Samin: Yeah.

Hrishi: Honestly, I had never actually heard of a no-bake cookie before we started this podcast, but when we got this question from Sarah, I did have an idea in mind because of a question that we got way back in August. This is from Allison and I'm sorry, Allison, that it took us this long to get to it, but I'm just going to read the email cause there's no audio attached. Hi Samin and Hrishi. My family loves preacher cookies AKA no bake cookies, but they are too sweet, and obviously because there's a lot of sugar. For both health and taste reasons, I'd like to make these cookies with less sugar, but it feels risky to mess around with the recipe since I don't want to waste ingredients or ruin the sacred cookie. We use the recipe my grandma wrote down on an index card 20 plus years ago that is stained and now preserved in a plastic baggie. My main concern is that if I reduce the sugar, it'll change the texture of the cookie, which would not be good. How much sugar could I reasonably take out and not immediately have a cookie failure?

Samin: Oh, this is a question for Shirley Corriher.

Hrishi: And how would it change the cookie other than making it less sweet? The recipe is below for reference. Two cups sugar, one stick butter, half cup of milk, two cups of oats, one cup of coconut unsweetened, half a cup of cocoa powder, and one teaspoon of vanilla. You combine the sugar, butter, and milk in a sauce pan, bring it to boil, cook it for three minutes. Then you add the other ingredients, dollop onto a parchment lined baking sheet, and I love this. Let set as long as you can wait. And she also says, "Also, if you're wondering about the name, the story goes that back in the day, if the preacher came to pay an unexpected visit, you could spot them coming down the road and have these whipped up before he makes it inside."

Samin: I love that.

Hrishi: Yeah. So I got really excited about this and I wanted to try and see if I could solve this for Allison.

Samin: You chef detective.

Hrishi: Have you ever heard of preacher cookies before?

Samin: I've never heard that name, but once you read the recipe, I realized I have encountered something like this.

Hrishi: Oh.

Samin: It definitely feels very 1980s and before.

Hrishi: Interesting. Yeah, I'd never heard of these, I'd never tasted them. And so I went into this sort of with the advantage/disadvantage of having no frame of reference. But I thought, okay, this is what the situation is. They're too sweet as is, so what can I do to make something that's tasty, but changes it up a little bit? I will say my variation is still very sweet, but I don't really have that much of a problem with it, but I would not say they are too sweet.

Samin: Okay.

Hrishi: And I just changed things a little bit. Two cups of sugar is a lot of sugar.

Samin: That's a lot of sugar.

Hrishi: Yeah, So what I did was I changed it to one and a quarter cup of sugar and added half a cup of brown sugar.

Samin: Okay.

Hrishi: Do you disagree with me?

Samin: So I wouldn't say that quantitatively, I wouldn't say it's any less sweet, but what I'll say about brown sugar, because you know that brown sugar if you buy it at the store, it's just white sugar with some other stuff added back in.

Hrishi: Oh, but it just has molasses mixed.

Samin: It just has some molasses added back in. So it's not any less sweet, it's just that it has other stuff that you're tasting to balance it out. So in a way it can taste more balanced and more even. And that's why maybe what you feel is that it's less sweet, but it's not any less sweet, right?

Hrishi: Yeah.

Samin: But what it is and what you're right, and I think you're on the right track, is that it's much moister and it's much wetter. But I was like oh, what if we went even bolder ultimately, and did a larger switch and cut out all the white sugar and switched and reduced even a larger percentage and just made all of what we kept brown.

Hrishi: Yeah.

Samin: Because then we could cut out more and what we kept would be moister, you know?

Hrishi: Yeah..

Samin: Allison, if you taste this and if you like Hrishi's version and you want to push even farther, I'd say go harder and take out more white sugar and go even browner.

Hrishi: And also for the sake of balance, I added a half a teaspoon of kosher salt. And then the other thing was at the end, after you're doing your dollop of your cookies, I added some flaky sea salt.

Samin: Ohhh

Hrishi: And again, not knowing how these are supposed to taste I have to say, to me they tasted great. And especially considering the amount of effort that went into them which was really not that much.

Samin: They look awesome.

Hrishi: They kind of remind me of a Samoa, my favorite Girl Scout cookie.

Samin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). One thought I have, which definitely would take things in another direction.

Hrishi: You just keep talking, I'm just going to eat this one that I made.

Samin: Okay, yeah. You keep eating and I'll keep talking. I also wonder what would happen if you added ... Or maybe instead of some of the butter, if you used nut butter, like whether it's almond butter or peanut butter. Some savoriness kind of could in that same way do something to balance out some of that sugar. That's all. That's a thought I had.

Hrishi: The little bit of saltiness from the flaky sea salt really does help balance the thing out and that brings me to the third of this triple decker sandwich of questions.

Samin: Triple decker sandwich cookie.

Hrishi: This comes from Mira.

Mira: My question is about chocolate chip cookies and salt. I was wondering what the best salt is to sprinkle on top of cookies and whether you'd recommend doing this before or after they come out of the oven. Thanks so much.

Hrishi: What do you think? What's your salt philosophy?

Samin: I definitely am a post baking salter. I think it depends what you're baking, but for a chocolate chip cookie, maybe I'm a pre baking salter. Actually, I don't know that I have the strongest feelings about this.

Hrishi: You came out of the gate so confident.

Samin: I feel like I'm supposed to have really strong feelings about stuff, about salt anyway.

Hrishi: Yeah.

Samin: Shoot. Okay, what I will say is a really nice salt to put on top is a flaky salt, and when we say flaky salts, in general we're talking about the fancy salt that you buy and they're made according to a very slow method where the water is evaporated and what's left are these really delicate sort of pyramid shaped flakes that when they land on your tongue they dissolve with this incredibly light crunch, and so they're really delightful to experience on the top of your cookie or brownie or baked good. And what that's all about is the texture.

Hrishi: Right.

Samin: If that is outside of your price range, which totally understandable, the next thing down is I would recommend Diamond Crystal kosher salt. Which is the kosher salt that comes in the red box, which is kind of one of my everyday salts. And it's very light and flaky on a much smaller scale and also really nice to sprinkle, but you don't

get quite as much of a distinct crunch. What's your go-to sprinkle salt, Hrishi?

Hrishi: I use the Maldon sea salt.

Samin: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Hrishi: Yeah, and as far as salt philosophy in terms of when ...

Samin: Before/after.

Hrishi: Yeah, yeah. I follow the existentialism of Jean Paul Saltra.

Samin: Oh, no.

Hrishi: But I believe in salting after they come out of the oven.

Samin: Well, okay. The thing about it is sometimes I put the salt on before, it depends on what the texture of the thing I'm sprinkling it onto is. So if the salt's not going to dissolve, say brownie batter, if I'm going to put the salt on top of brownie batter, it's going to dissolve into the brownies and go bye-bye and so my expensive salt will just make some salty topped brownies, where I don't get any crunch.

Hrishi: Yeah.

Samin: And so I wouldn't do that. I would immediately salt the brownies the second they come out of the oven-

Hrishi: Yes, that's what I do.

Samin: Or if I'm feeling real spicy, I might open the oven halfway through the baking, once the brownies have really set on top, and salt them at that point. Just to make sure that the salt's not going to go inside and dissolve into the brownies.

Hrishi: Yeah.

Samin: And same thing with the cookies, I might wait until they've started to form and started to set, form a skin, and then salt. Or I might just do it the second they come out of the oven. I don't want to wait too much longer after that, because sometimes if you wait too long, then you're just salting it and the salt will fall off.

Hrishi: That's the real crucial thing, is you got to do it right after it comes out while it's still setting, otherwise it just falls off and then you just get a salty tin.

Samin: Yeah. Then you just wasted your expensive salt.

Hrishi: All right. We got a question from Katie. A chef detective question. I'm going to play it here. I've already shared it with Samin so she could get ready for it.

Katie: This is Katie calling from Brooklyn. I'm not going to be able to make it home to my parents' place in Canada for Christmas this year because of COVID. And I know my mom is really super sad. So I had this great idea that I would enlist Chef Detective's help to try to uncover a cookie recipe that was so beloved in our family, but that we lost about 10 years ago. My mom clipped this recipe from Gourmet Magazine sometime in the '80s and it was called Lemon Icebox Cookies. She used to make up the dough. It kind of looked like a sugar cookie dough. It was a sort of buttery yellow sweet with sort of a lemony tanginess. She would roll it up in a cylinder in wax paper, throw it in the fridge for a day and then cut it up into disks, bake them in the oven and they would come out to be these incredibly delicious lemony cookies, about three inches in diameter with a kind of caramelized brown ring around the edge. And the surface would be sort of bubbled just like a pancake. They're not too thick. They're not cakey when you bite into them, they're more sort of chewy. And they were topped with some icing sugar. They were really so tasty and my mom loved these cookies more than anything. I just think she would completely freak if I were to find this recipe or at least something comparable. We've never been able to find something that compared. Happy holidays y'all. I super love your show.

Samin: When you forwarded me this email, I was really excited. Because immediately I was like, "Oh, okay. I have to get in touch with some old time Gourmet people from Gourmet magazine."

Hrishi: Oh I see, like people who worked at Gourmet, not like O-L-D-E- People who dress up in costume from colonial times

Samin: Not like Renaissance fair, old timey

Hrishi: chefs. It's not like, "Tell me about churning butter."

Samin: No, because I don't know if you know this, but Gourmet Magazine is no longer in existence, very sadly.

Hrishi: Oh, I didn't know that.

Samin: So it's like, you have to track down the people who used to work there.

Hrishi: So wait you actually went to the recipe's original source.

Samin: I was like how do I find the people who worked in Gourmet Magazine and would know about this. That was what I wanted to do.

Hrishi: Wow! Awesome!

Samin: But I didn't know exactly who those people would be. So the first person who came to mind was my friend Francis Lam, who hosts the Splendid Table podcast, because he is probably my closest friend who actually worked at Gourmet Magazine.

Hrishi: Oh cool.

Samin: And he listed a bunch of people. He's like, "Oh, you could email Dorie Greenspan or I could try and put you in touch with some of the test kitchen people."

Samin: And so then when he said Dorie, I said, "Oh, of course," because Dorie is a legend and she's also my colleague, and I felt really comfortable to write to her. Okay so Dorie immediately writes back, "Hi, and I love the way Kate described the cookies. Sign this woman up for headnote writing," which is true.

Hrishi: Will you explain what a headnote is?

Samin: Oh, a headnote is in a recipe, the little paragraph at the top of the recipe that describes the recipe before you make it, so that it kind of entices you into making the cookie or whatever. And I have to say, Kate did such a great job of describing these cookies. I got a really clear picture of what this cookie was like from her description.

Hrishi: For a dame who's walking into the detective's office, she gave you a lot of leads to go on.

Samin: She really did.

Hrishi: Can I say dame? Is that okay?

Samin: You can say that.

Hrishi: All right, cool.

Samin: So then Dorie goes on, she says, "I don't know the cookies, but I think Zane Stewart would. Zane was at Gourmet for just shy of 100 years."

Hrishi: And do you know who that person is?

Samin: I don't know who Zane is. She's like, "And Zane remembers exactly how many grains of salt were added to every dish that ever went through the test kitchens." So then, I was waiting on pins and needles for Zane to write to me. So this morning I woke up to an email from Zane, "Dear Samin, I'm hot on the trail of the lemon cookies. Your correspondence letter contains a vital clue in the one page bit, which let me know that the recipe was "The last touch", the last page of the magazine for decades. By the way-

Hrishi: Oh, that's the feature. The last page feature was called-

Samin: Yes. "The Last Touch" was sort of the name of the last page of the magazine.

Hrishi: Got it. Yeah.

Samin: "By the way, Dorie was exaggerating just a bit. I was only at Gourmet for 36 years. The recipe attached, just copied from The Best of Gourmet, the annual book containing recipes from 1986."

Hrishi: Oh, 1986?

Samin: Yep. Isn't that exciting?

Hrishi: Yes! Katie said she thought it was sometime into the early 1980s.

Samin: Pretty close, pretty close.

Hrishi: I'm feeling good.

Samin: "This was in the last touch from October of that year. There was another lemon icebox cookie in November 1977 that I might be able to find if I route through the most spidery shelves of my garage.

However, if Katie thinks this might be the one, I can avoid donning my anti arachnid personal protective gear.”

Hrishi: I'm going to say, on the behalf of Katie, I'm going to say, I think it's probably going to be this 86 one, not this 1977 one.

Samin: Well let's take a look. She attached the recipe.

Hrishi: Okay.

Samin: And so it's called Tangy Lemon Cookies.

Hrishi: Okay.

Samin: So then I was pretty excited about it. And I really was like, okay, I feel pretty good about this. But I have to say, as a detective, I really want to come through for our clients. And so luckily right around that time, I checked my email again, and Francis had written back saying that he had a lead because he thought of somebody who had every issue of the Gourmet magazine from the 1980s, and he could put me in touch with that person. So I forwarded Zanne's email to Francis to forward to his friend so that could just give, straight to

Hrishi: October 1986.

Samin: Exactly. And then also, maybe that person could also look for the 1977 one, and then we could just get straight to the bottom of things.

Hrishi: Yeah.

Samin: So, just a mere few hours later, Francis and his friend, the wonderful Ian Knauer, sent me two scans of two recipes, including the entire last touch from 1986, a whole page of icebox cookies.

Hrishi: Oh man.

Samin: German spice cookies, apple cream cheese cookies, double chocolate peanut butter cookies, and tangy lemon cookies. I believe this is the page.

Hrishi: Wow!

Samin: And so then just to make sure I baked off a batch.

Hrishi: Hell yes! Okay. What did they turn out to be like?

Samin: I have to say these cookies are so good.

Hrishi: Can I see one, can you hold it up to the camera?

Samin: Yeah.

Hrishi: Oh, interesting. Oh, okay. That's not what I was picturing.

Samin: I might've sliced them a little too thin, but do you see, it does have that brown ring.

Hrishi: Yes.

Samin: You see that brown ring?

Hrishi: Yeah.

Samin: And they smell heavenly, like so lemony. So as I was making them, I was really surprised so pleasantly by how much lemon product is in there. There's the zest of three entire lemons, which is a lot of lemon zest and the juice of two lemons. It's so lemony, which one of my pet peeves in a lemon dessert is when it's not lemony enough.

Hrishi: Right

Samin: The only thing I changed about it, me being me, I just up to the salt a little bit, but everything else was just totally amazing and really, really wonderful and so simple. And I have to say, I really loved sort of going back in time to the way recipes were written, in 1986. This just says like, in a bowl with an electric mixer, cream together the butter and the sugar. Add the vanilla, the rind and lemon juice and beat the mixture until it is smooth. And then it says into the bowl, sift together, the flour, the baking powder, the baking soda and the salt and blend the dough well. That's the whole recipe, that's like making the whole batch of cookies.

Hrishi: Yeah

Samin: You assume a sort of like adeptness or you assume that there's a person around who can explain something to them. And I loved that because I loved imagining Katie with her mom. So maybe if Katie

didn't know, she was with her mom and her mom could say, "Oh, this is how you sift some things together."

Hrishi: Right, that's great. So will you write up your version of the recipe with your additional salt and put it on our website?

Samin: Absolutely. And I will also put this amazing PDF scan.

Hrishi: That's great. What a fantastic journey that was. How many people you ended up having to get in touch with.

Samin: And everybody had so much fun I think, being part of it. So yeah, it was really fun. It felt very gratifying to be able to solve it, so...

Hrishi: So you know, in Sherlock Holmes.... Sherlock Holmes has a bunch of people that he always goes to for help. They were called the irregulars, but even better, you know what they were called, the Baker Street Irregulars.

Samin: Uuuuw!

Hrishi: Somehow I had forgotten this, but Sherlock Holmes lives at 21 B Baker street. Even better.

Samin: I just wish you could eat some of these cookies, too bad.

Hrishi: Let's take a little break. And then when we come back, we're going to talk about cookies some more with our friend Helen Zaltzman.

Samin: Joining us now is our dear friend, Helen Zaltzman. Host of the podcasts, The Allusionist, Answer Me This!, And Veronica Mars Investigations.

Hrishi: Helen Zaltzman, welcome to Home Cooking.

Helen: Thank you so much.

Hrishi: What was your relationship like to cookies when you were growing up?

Helen: Well, I was very excited by them because I lived in a household where we weren't really allowed very much sugar. So the opportunities for sugar were very precious, and on some days, my mom had this Good Housekeeping cookbook with a big color photo preface with photos of all the things that you could cook in it. And I would go through it and pick a cookie to make each Sunday.

Hrishi: So you were baking cookies when you were a kid?

Helen: Yeah. Keep me off the streets. Give me something to do.

Samin: So my household was the same. My mom was really controlling about the sugar. And so we very rarely had desserts, unless it was a special occasion and somebody else brought a fruit tart. And also, for some reason, Iranians have this obsession with Parisian pastries, and so all Iranian pastry shops are a facsimile of a Parisian pastry shop, and for whatever reason, the one my mom always got and the one everyone got to bring to our house was always this fruit tart with a gelee glaze. It was just ... I was like, why won't somebody just bring a proper thing of chocolate chip cookies?

Helen: Right?

Samin: Like why don't we just get brownies, for God's sake?

Helen: Why does everyone waste time with the other things?

Samin: Yeah, I'm like, what's up with this tart with kiwi slices on it?

Helen: Yeah, it's just basically whipped cream and kiwi slices on top and everyone's like, oh, brilliant. But we know the truth, Samin.

Samin: I know. At some point, I was like, okay, I guess if I want this thing, I'm going to have to make it myself.

Hrishi: Helen, we know that one cookie that you make is gingerbread. It's one of the reasons why we wanted to have you on this episode. Can you tell us about your gingerbread adventures?

Helen: Yeah. Well, in 2004, I was sharing a house with four other people. And it was the first time that I had had my own Christmas tree. Unwittingly bought one that was huge. And we didn't have any decorations. So I was like, well, this is a real misfire. And then I thought, well, what I'll do is bake a lot of gingerbread and have people over to decorate it, and then cover the tree with that. And then did that every year for ten years. Have gingerbread day. Because it was really interesting, seeing what decorating gingerbread brought out in people who may not have done arts type of things since they were children. And suddenly, they were like, whoa, me and an icing gun. So it was really delightful. Actually, my Twitter profile picture is from that very first gingerbread day.

Hrishi: Is that what that is?

Helen: Yeah.

Samin: So is it always ginger people? Or are there other ginger shapes?

Helen: Oh, so many other shapes. There was one year I did gingerbread houses, which, I have a little scar on my hand from making them, because the cement is boiling sugar. And people, they had to make gingerbread scenes with the houses, and the only rule was everything had to be edible. So even if it wasn't nice, it had to be edible. So someone made a log pile with sushi rolls,, someone made a Columbo case in a building site, where someone are being crushed by a falling cookie falling off a crane and the crane was made out of candy bars. It was amazing.

Hrishi: That's very elaborate.

Helen: Yeah.

Hrishi: What about the gingerbread itself? Do you have a recipe that you always use for this tradition?

Helen: I've tried a couple. I think I tried a Prue Leith one, because Prue Leith, before she was judging the Great British Baking Show, had written a book called Leith's Baking Bible, with seems very authoritative. And I can't remember whether I used that or a Good Housekeeping one. It's just whichever one involves melting the butter with the sugar rather than having to do a lot of work with a spoon or a fork to combine them.

Samin: Oh, my style.

Helen: Yeah. I'll do it if I have to, but if it can be done by melting, great. But my secret for gingerbread is just adding about, I don't know, 60 percent more spice than the recipe calls for.

Samin: Yes. I agree. I think ginger cookies, gingerbread, ginger cake, all that kind of stuff is never spiced enough. And I often, if a recipe doesn't have black pepper, I'll add a little bit of black pepper or white pepper into it, too.

Helen: Interesting.

Samin: Or, often, people tend to keep spices, especially pre-ground spices around for a really long time. And so then they lose all of their aromatic compounds. And so they're just not as strong. So it doesn't hurt to bump that up a little bit beyond whatever a recipe calls for. Especially the dried ginger.

Helen: It's a fun game when I visit my parents to see how old the oldest spice is.

Samin: Oh yeah. And a thing I love to do any time I visit a house and I'm cooking, is be like, how old's your baking soda? How old's your baking powder? I just throw stuff away. I clean people's pantries out, and throw stuff out.

Helen: Wow.

Samin: Yeah.

Helen: Oh my god. Never come to my place. You know, 1998 was a great year for baking soda, Samin.

Hrishi: Do you have a cookie cutter that you will always use as the base for which people can then decorate from? Or do people just freestyle from the get-go?

Helen: Well, because I have to prepare the gingerbread, there has to be some kind of shape imposed by me because there'll be hundreds of gingerbread cookies prepared for them to come and decorate.

Hrishi: Okay.

Helen: So when I saw an interesting-looking cutter, I would add it to the collection. It's worrying now to think how many I might have. I guess at least 40. There's quite a good lobster one, and that also lends itself to being a moose head or an angel. You can be ingenious with these things. There's a hedgehog one and because those often spread, that can just be, I don't know, a rising sun that's slightly pointier at one end.

Hrishi: I like the idea of Helen, as the ancient Greek staring at the night sky-

Samin: Totally.

Hrishi: ... she's staring at her gingerbread, imagining what she might see.

Helen: What are you?

Samin: But then once you decorate it, it doesn't matter what the outline is.

Helen: Exactly. In 2016 I went on a very long running radio show called Women's Hour. And they had challenged me to make the year 2016 in gingerbread. And so I made a Donald Trump and a Hillary Clinton out of gingerbread and I think I did Theresa May, because she'd just become our Prime Minister. But the non-depressing gingerbread item was Beyonce, because 2016 was the year of Lemonade. So I made a gingerbread Beyonce in the Hold Up video, and she was holding a pretzel stick to smash the car with.

Samin: She's wearing the regal, golden dress. It's amazing. It's really the most exquisite cookie ... Is it a cookie? She's more than a cookie.

Hrishi: It's truly amazing.

Samin: What did you do with her?

Helen: For all I know, she might still be at the BBC. Because also, gingerbread lasts for years. I think, if I were really going for it, and maybe I could still do this this festive season, is try to do Beyonce's 2018 Coachella set in gingerbread. So you've got the big pyramid, you can have cookies in yellow or pink icing on it for the band, and then you can have Beyonce in that cape that is lots of gold and silver embellishment on it. Oh, this is a plan.

Hrishi: And then if you like it then you should have put icing on it-

Samin: Oh no.

Helen: Oh, all right. I'll allow it. He's back in the room.

Hrishi: Helen, thank you so much.

Helen: Thank you both.

Hrishi: Okay, great. So you can follow Helen on Instagram @HelenZaltzman. You can also find her on Twitter @HelenZaltzman. And you can listen to all of her brilliant podcasts. You can find them wherever you found this one. They are, The Allusionist, Veronica Mars Investigations, and Answer Me This.

Hrishi: We get a lot of questions from people who were having technical difficulties with their cookies. And I thought maybe we could do a little lightning round to just try and give some information on cookie basics?

Samin: Let's do it!

Hrishi: So I am going to play you a couple of questions. We got multiple examples of these kinds of questions but these are gonna stand in for all the other people who called in with the same basic issue.

Samin: I hope I know the answer, chances are I don't.

Hrishi: All right, here's one.

Tori: Hi, I always have a problem when I'm baking cookies that they turn out really cakey, even ones that I've chosen the recipe to specifically be something that's definitely not cakey. And I think I'm following all the directions correctly, even like buying new baking soda and baking powder and this year my family got me one of those fancy stand mixers too. Thanks so much.

Samin: Wait, I have a question for you. What's a cakey cookie?

Hrishi: You can't imagine?

Samin: Well, I can sort of imagine a cakey chocolate chip cookie I guess.

Hrishi: Yeah

Samin: But to me I'm like well that's a specific type of recipe.

Hrishi: This is a common issue for, well maybe not James Beard Award Winners, but for the rest of us mere mortals, cakey cookies is a common issue.

Samin: Uh-huh (Affirmative) describe it please.

Hrishi: Well, I'll tell you what my suspicion is.

Samin: Yeah, you answer this lightning one because I don't even know..we're just talking like a chocolate chip cookie.

Hrishi: Yeah. If your cookie is coming out too cakey I think there's probably too much egg in it.

Samin: I mean, that would make sense because I'm imagining when you're saying a cakey cookie, as in they're very soft and fluffy

Hrishi: Yes

Samin: Is that what we're talking about?

Hrishi: Yes, that is exactly what we are talking about. Another issue I think could be, she mentioned that she has a stand mixer, it could be whipping your dough too much.

Samin: Like over creaming?

Hrishi: Like over creaming, yeah exactly.

Samin: I think it would be really hard to cream so much.

Hrishi: Yeah

Samin: I think that's less likely. To me I think-

Hrishi: I don't know because I don't have a stand mixer so what do I, how would I know?

Samin: What do you know? Oh, boo-hoo-hoo, woe is me! You can only imagine. Also there might be too much leaven like too much baking soda or too much baking powder in there.

Hrishi: Okay, another kind of question we got was the opposite. For example, Emily writes, "I love making cookies but they always turn out paper thin. What am I doing wrong? I use room temperature, unsalted butter and chill my dough for a few hours and have even tried to chill it for 72 hours"

Samin: Woah

Hrishi: That's a lot

Samin: That is a lot

Hrishi: "But my cookies still come out flat. Help me please."

Samin: It sounds like you have taken a lot of the good precautions that I would have recommended. So it sounds like possible your oven is not at the right temperature when the cookies are going in and they are spending a lot of time spreading in the oven rather than going

immediately in and rising. You know, and so maybe your oven is not properly preheated or maybe you need to get an oven thermometer or have your oven calibrated. That's one thing I would suggest. Another thing is, when I made the tangy lemon icebox cookies, they spread a ton, they're super spreaders.

Hrishi: No, you can't use that term. Samin, you can't say "super spreaders" do not eat those kinds of cookies.

Samin: I went back and I looked very closely at the recipe and I realized it's just a very very buttery recipe.

Hrishi: Exactly.

Samin: It's just a really high butter recipe and so those kind of cookies just spread a lot.

Hrishi: This is relevant to Tori's question in that it's also about ratios. If she's chilling the dough that much, which is normally where the fat firms up and lets the cookie hold its shape better I think it's probably just that there's not enough flour for how much butter she's got in there.

Samin: Yes, I definitely think that's correct. I think flour, but I'm not saying that you need to tweak your recipe, I'm just saying that is a spreadable recipe.

Hrishi: Okay, and our final cookie question, I might have saved my favorite for the end. This comes from Megan.

Megan: So here is what the situation is, I want to make the cookie cookie cookie. So what you do is you take and bake the chocolate chip cookie, amazing, easy. You take that and then you chop it up. And that's a mix in for a new chocolate chip cookie dough, so you have chocolate chips and the prebaked cookie in one. And then that's the dough-

Samin: What?

Megan: Delicious. And so then, there's a second dough that is a sugar cookie dough. And then that is going to get wrapped in the chocolate chip cookie cookie dough. So it's three cookies in one right? So the situation that I'm dealing with is that the internal cookie is bleeding into the external cookie and my goal for this

cookie creation is that it's two distinct cookies one at external, the surface, and then one internally for the lovely little surprise.

Samin: Ohhhh

Megan: But it's just bleeding into each other, it's kind of getting raw in the middle. I've tried freezing it, I've tried rolling the sugar cookie in flour and I'm really having an issue. So if you have any ideas on how to help me create this Frankenstein cookie cookie cookie monster creation, please help me. Thank you.

Hrishi: How great is this?

Samin: Okay, first of all, Megan, I really salute your cookie cookie cookie and just Hrishi's face is lighting up.

Hrishi: I just love it. It's a turducken but it's made of cookies.

Samin: It's a turcookie. Cookie-ookie-ookie. The only reason I sort of have an idea about how this could possibly work and I'm not saying that it's gonna turn out well I'm just saying I think it will turn out better than how things are currently going for you. And it comes from early days of like BuzzFeed where you would see these strange sort of like hybrid foods on the internet. And you'd be like Oh! So I say a chocolate chip cookie that when you bit into it revealed an oreo.

Hrishi: Oh yeah.

Samin: And so I was like, I have to make this, I have to make this, this is a work of art. But the key is that the center cookie was already baked and I think that's what the problem is. It's that you're trying to put a raw dough inside of another raw dough. So I think you gotta pre-bake your sugar cookie.

Hrishi: At least par-bake it right?

Samin: No I think you gotta all the way bake it.

Hrishi: All the way, bake it, okay.

Samin: I think you gotta all the way bake it and then enrobe it in your chocolate chip cookie chocolate chip cookie dough.

Hrishi: Your chocolate chip cookie chip dough.

Samin: Yes

Hrishi: By the way, I think if Megan just stopped there at the first two parts of the cookie. Oh my god, that would be so great. The idea of using a chocolate chip cookie as a mix in, is already - I'm already sold.

Samin: I can't wait to see a picture of these.

Hrishi: Okay, here is an update from the future.

Samin: Here's an update from the future. I was in the middle of editing this episode and I got something in the mail! Wait I recorded a video to send to Samin and I'm just gonna play it right here. Well, I'll play you the audio.

Hrishi: [On recording] I just opened the door and found something at my doorstep. Look at what it is!!!! Ahh!!

Samin: Woah.

Hrishi: That's me trying to do angel voice, like Ahhh.

Samin: Yeah.

Hrishi: Because I opened the door and there was a Kitchen Aid stand mixer there!

Samin: Can you believe it?

Hrishi: No, not really. What did you do? Earlier in this episode when you said "Are you just talking about this so you can get a free stand mixer?" And I said, "I guess, kind of." Is that what started this for you?

Samin: I think so, I think that planted a little seed.

Hrishi: It was so nice of you. It was incredible, I can't believe that you pulled that off.

Samin: It was very fun. I felt very Santa-ish. I mean I had help from a lot of elves including Kitchen Aid who immediately said yes, so.

Hrishi: That's amazing. Thank you to everybody. Also wait, hold on, did you know that Samin Nosrat, one second, did you know that Samin Nosrat is an anagram for Minor Santa?

Samin: Oh my god. No but I do know my name backwards is Tarson Nimas. What's your name backwards?

Hrishi: Unpronounceable. Well Samin.

Samin: That's the end of the podcast.

Hrishi: That's the end of this episode, bye.

Samin: I'm not going, I'm chaining myself to the desk.

Hrishi: That's a wrap on our four-part series.

Samin: I have to say I'm really sad.

Hrishi: I know, but you're gonna go work on your book and you're gonna make all kind of cool things and I'm excited to see what you do with all the extra time that you have now that I'm not bothering you.

Samin: I mean do you promise that you're not going to bother me anymore?

Hrishi: I could but you know I can't keep that.

Samin: I know. We're so grateful to Margaret Miller, Zach McNeese, Gary Lee and Casey Deal for their help with this podcast. We couldn't have made it without them.

Hrishi: And of course to Mamie Rheingold, who made all of our wonderful artwork.

Samin: And we're a proud member of Radiotopia, a collective of independent podcasts.

Hrishi: You can learn more about all of the Radiotopia shows at radiotopia.fm.

Samin: And remember, our website is homecooking.show, where you can find recipes and transcripts for all of our episodes.

Hrishi: And if you can't remember that but you can remember shrimpjenga.com that also works. I hope you follow us so you can stay in touch.

Samin: You can follow Hrishi on Twitter and Instagram, @hrishihirway.

Hrishi: And Samin is @ciaosamin.

Samin: Stay healthy, eat well and take care of each other.

Hrishi: And have Happy Holidays and a Happy New Year. And all the best for a much better 2021.

Samin: Knock on wood.

Samin: Yeah. And until then, I'm Samin.

Hrishi: And I'm Hrishi.

Samin: And we'll be home cooking. And we'll be home cookies.

Hrishi: And we'll be homies cooking,

Samin: We will be homies cooking, awe.