

TIMELESS COMFORT IN A MALL COOKIE

words and photography by *Alexander Roberts*

Comfort, or, “the sense of something providing physical ease,” is something humans gave a name in the 17th century, although it was probably recognized much sooner. It comes from many things: good friends, good food, good places and things. My grandmother’s voice on the other end of the phone line. The teddy bear my mother knit me. Chicken pot pie. A fresh, stank bowl of weed in my favorite pipe—that’s comfort.

Having baked professionally over the last 10 years I’ve formed a special connection specifically with food.. Baking is fun (having a beautiful dessert to eat after baking is a huge plus) but sharing a freshly baked dessert with someone brings me more joy than all else.

When I was a child growing up in coastal North Carolina, my grandmother worked at the local mall. I come from a working class family, and most of us don’t hold college degrees (myself included). We’ve never had a two story house and I’ve still never been to Disney World. I grew up eating cheap and processed foods, because that’s what my mother grew up eating, and that’s what her mother grew up eating. Little Debbie Cakes, boxed dinners totally lacking in nutrition, canned veggies, every fast food chain available—the works. Had I never left my mass-produced, fast-food haven of a home in Wilmington, North Carolina, I’d have never known anything was missing.

My grandma worked the day shift at JCPenny while my mother worked the night shift at a local restaurant. To avoid having babysitters and to save some cash, my mom would drop me off at JCPenny for my grandma’s last hour of work. One of my favorite parts of these special afternoons would be the M&M cookie Grandma would sneak me when I joined her at work. She would take me to Great American Cookies after her shift and we’d get my favorite candy-covered cookie—I can still smell and taste them when I close my eyes. The cookies were big, flat, and chewy, almost too soft to even hold themselves together. Depending on what region you’re from, your mall may have had a Mrs. Fields’ or Nestle Toll House instead. Same difference.

Fast forward a decade and my very first job (naturally) ends up being in the same shopping mall, slinging cookie dough at Great American





Cookies. My boss, Kathy, had worked there for nearly 20 years. “Wow,” I said, “I bet you were here when I used to come as a kid!” I was super nervous to start working, but I ended up being a natural in the bakery setting. I loved scooping cookies, smelling them as they baked, and then handing them to happy customers. I started enjoying working way more than going to school, which I’d always hated. It was sweet, fun, and an escape from home life, which was not always the best. I ended up at the cookie store for almost 3 years before moving to New York City.

As I moved to NYC and into my 20s, foregoing college, I worked as a baker and made my way up the ladder to sous chef and eventually pastry chef. I loved being in the kitchen. My people were there. My work was there. My skills were there. Comfort was definitely there. However, after 6 years of professional baking, the luster wore off. Upon realizing my current path was leading nowhere careerwise, I stumbled into the food media world after a few gatekeepers let me pass. These days I work as a food stylist and recipe developer. My taste has changed immensely; I can no longer shovel down junk food without feeling sick to my stomach (not saying that I don’t). Today, I’d much rather take the time and effort to home make perfectly-flavored ice cream than buy anything from the freezer aisle. I’m not sure where I developed this newfound snobby taste, given my past, but admittedly, every once in a while, those less-than-glamorous foods still provide the comforting vibe I need.

One thing that hasn’t changed is my love for a proper M&M cookie—that will never change. That kind of love is eternal, unconditional, everlasting. A soft, crispy-around-the-edges chocolate chip cookie that takes a dunk in mini M&Ms before baking?! Sign me up! Sure, I can make croissants and eclairs and French macarons, but sometimes, you just want a taste of home; a blast from the past. You want to remember visiting your grandma, your very first job, and how far you’ve come since then. You want to be reminded of how easy things were before you grew up and life knocked you down and 2020 became a thing. So, now, it is my duty to pass along my best recreation of a mall cookie. Try it once then bake it a million times and enjoy this bite of comfort from me to you. No mixer needed, just a big bowl, whisk, and spatula. **CB**

CLASSIC M&M COOKIES

Makes 18 cookies

- 1 1/4 stick butter, melted*
- 1 cup brown sugar (packed)*
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar*
- 1 tsp vanilla extract*
- 1 egg*
- 1 1/2 cups all purpose flour*
- 1/2 tsp baking soda*
- 1/2 tsp kosher salt*
- 1 cup roughly chopped semisweet chocolate*
- 1 to 2 cups mini M&Ms, in a bowl for dipping*

Preheat the oven to 350° F/175° C. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper and set aside.

In a large bowl, whisk together melted butter (not too hot), brown sugar, granulated sugar, and vanilla extract. Next, whisk in the egg until combined.

Switch to a spatula or wooden spoon and pour the flour, baking soda, and salt into the bowl on top of the other ingredients. Gently stir together until no flour streaks remain—make sure to scrape the bottom of the bowl!

Lastly, stir in the chopped chocolate. If the dough is too soft to scoop, refrigerate for 10-15 minutes until scoopable.

Scoop cookies into 2.5 tablespoon/65g portions (yellow cookie scoop if you have it!). Immediately dip the cookie in the bowl of M&Ms and press them onto the cookie with the palm of your hand. Press more M&Ms into the cookie one by one if they fall off.

Place dipped cookies on the baking sheet 3 inches apart and bake for 12 to 13 minutes, or until spread and lightly golden brown. Remove from the oven and cool as long as you can wait. Enjoy!

Recipe Notes: Chopped chocolate helps make the cookie chewier, which is why I always opt for it rather than chocolate chips (but they’ll work fine too!). Mini M&Ms are ideal for this recipe since you can get more on the cookie, but regular sized will work too! If you have leftovers, the cold dough should be softened while the oven preheats before baking.