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Olive the desserts

Branching out into heart-healthy baking options



Photo by [Parker Eshelman](#)

HEART-HEALTHY DESSERTS “Extreme Lemon Sugar Cookies” are dusted with powdered sugar.

By [Marcia Vanderlip](#)

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Correction appended

Micki Sannar comes from a long line of cooks and dessert lovers. So about seven years ago, the trim, active mother of four was surprised and disappointed when she learned both she and her husband suffered from elevated levels of LDL cholesterol — the bad kind. The doctor told them both to cut out the buttery, trans-fat loaded desserts or risk heart disease. Sannar was only 40.



Photo by [Parker Eshelman](#)

“Olive Oil Desserts” by Micki Sannar offers 51 recipes made with olive oil.



Photo by [Parker Eshelman](#)

"Micki's Simple Brownies" are chewy on the inside and crunchy on the outside. For added crunch, try adding cocoa nibs.

“I thought we ate pretty healthy,” she said recently over the phone from Highland, Utah. “But stop eating dessert? I don’t think so,” she said. “I’m known around here as the dessert queen.” So she began her quest to find heart-healthy ingredients to use in her realm without sacrificing taste and texture.

Since then, she has developed and published a cookbook, “Olive Oil Desserts: Delicious and Healthy Heart Smart Baking” (April 2009, Mikko Publishing, \$24.95). It includes more than 50 recipes for cakes, cookies, bars, pastries and pies, as well as health tips, conversion charts and attractive color photos of many of her adaptations. None of them includes butter, shortening or margarine. The best part about these desserts is how good they taste.

The main culprit in the Sannar family diet was “bad” fat, so she experimented with olive oil, which is rich in monounsaturated fat (mostly oleic acid). Olive oil also is rich in antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids. Studies show that olive oil lowers LDL cholesterol and raises HDL, or good, cholesterol. “I looked for dessert recipes made with olive oil. I couldn’t find any, so I just started playing with recipes” I had.

Sannar learned what Italians have long known: Olive oil can be delicious in desserts. She found a way to substitute olive oil for butter, margarine and shortening in all of her favorite desserts — even pie crust. After some oily disasters in the kitchen, Sannar came up with a winning formula: About 2/3 cup of olive oil can replace one cup of butter.

Although Sannar likes to use various flavorful extra-virgin olive oils in other aspects of cooking, she learned she did not have to use the pricier extra-virgin olive oils in baking to get the health benefits. For the cookbook, “I decided to go with pure olive oil,” which is blend of refined olive oil and virgin olive oil — still heart-healthy, easy to find and less expensive than extra-virgin olive oil. “The health benefits from the monounsaturated fatty acids are the same in both oils,” she said.

It turns out the small change had a big impact on her health. Over the past six years, her cholesterol has

dropped 100 points, from 270 to 170. “I didn’t expect that big of a drop.”

Still, dessert is sweet. These desserts contain sugar, which hardly qualifies as a health food. “Small changes,” Sannar repeated, can lead to big results. In the cookbook, she “thin glazes,” or dusts the baked goods with powdered sugar rather than using the heavy fat-filled frostings — cutting the fat, sugar and calories.

“Most people want to do little things to make changes. For me, it was just that one thing. Almost every homemade or pre-packaged dessert is loaded with saturated fat, hydrogenated oils — you can’t really get away from that. There aren’t a lot of options.”

For home bakers who want to experiment, the back of this book offers an olive oil substitution chart for butter, margarine or shortening, another chart suggests dairy substitutions, and a wheat icon signifies the recipe can be made successfully with whole-grain flour.

After testing some of the recipes, we were delighted to find the olive oil proved every bit as good as butter or shortening. “Micki’s Simple Brownies” actually came out better in texture and taste than brownies made with butter.

My baking friend, Jennifer Jantz Estes, and I tested a handful of recipes from the book. We used extra-virgin olive oil because that is what I had on hand. I buy it by the 3½-quart jug at Sam’s Club for about \$18, so it is not as pricey as some. Sannar suggests you know your olive oil if you are using extra-virgin oil. “It can be strong” and overpower a recipe.

We made the lemon-laced blueberry cookies, the extreme lemon sugar cookies, Micki’s simple brownies and Co-Co’s amazing bran muffins. The bran muffins were a hit in the Estes household. Jennifer followed Sannar’s tip of making a large batch of the batter. “Use it as you need it. It keeps in the refrigerator for 6 weeks,” Sannar wrote.

Jennifer added a little culinary lavender to one batch of Micki’s simple brownies, and I tried some chocolate nibs in another batch for extra crunch — both were good calls. We found that adding an extra tablespoon of lemon juice and more lemon zest to the extreme lemon sugar cookies seemed just right for those of us who are lemon extremists. Dusting powdered sugar on sugar cookies seemed a little over the top — so we left the dusting off most of the lemon cookies, pretty as it looked.

Here are three of the hits among our families and friends. We will be trying many more of these recipes. They are heart-healthy, after all.

MICKI’S SIMPLE BROWNIES

4 ounces unsweetened chocolate baking squares

1/3 cup pure olive oil

3 large eggs

3/4 cup flour

1-1/2 cups granulated sugar

2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips or

1/2 to 3/4 cup cocoa nibs

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Coat an 8-inch-by-8-inch pan with olive oil cooking spray.

Place chocolate and olive oil in a small glass mixing bowl. Heat in microwave for one minute. Stir until melted and smooth. Set aside. Or heat chocolate and olive oil over low heat in a small pan, stirring until melted and smooth.

In mixing bowl, add eggs, sugar and vanilla and mix on medium/high speed for five minutes.

Add in chocolate mixture and blend until smooth and creamy.

Fold in flour and salt. Mix until just moistened. Do not over-mix. If adding chocolate chips or nibs, fold them in gently.

Bake for 20 to 25 minutes or until a knife inserted in the center comes out clean. Remove, cool slightly. Serve.

Editor's notes: When we baked these, the knife did not come out completely clean. After 25 minutes they are done, even if they are still a bit gooey inside. We also tried adding a little culinary lavender to one batch. They were good. We did not add the chocolate chips, but we really liked the ones with cocoa nibs.

Makes: Nine to 12 squares

Adapted from "Olive Oil Desserts: Delicious and Healthy Heart Smart Baking" by Micki Sannar (April 2009, Mikko Publishing, \$24.95)

EXTREME LEMON SUGAR COOKIES

2/3 cup pure olive oil

1 cup granulated sugar

1 large egg

2-1/2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

2 tablespoons lemon zest

2 tablespoons lemon juice

2-1/4 cups flour

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1 tsp baking powder

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup additional sugar for rolling

1/2 cup powdered sugar for dusting

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Coat cookie sheets with olive oil cooking spray. In a mixer bowl, add olive oil, sugar, egg, vanilla, lemon zest and lemon juice. Blend until smooth. Add flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Mix until well blended. Drop by teaspoonfuls or by a small-size cookie scoop into sugar and roll until coated. Place on prepared cookie sheets. Bake eight minutes, cool on wire racks, dust with powdered sugar.

Editor's notes: The batter tends to be very sticky. Don't worry about it. Once it is rolled in the sugar, it will be easy to handle. We added the zest of two large lemons and an extra tablespoon of lemon juice to ours. These cookies are addictive. Whole-wheat pastry flour may be used in this recipe. We used unbleached, all-purpose flour. I sifted the flour, salt and soda together.

Makes: 32 to 36 cookies

Adapted from "Olive Oil Desserts: Delicious and Healthy Heart Smart Baking" by Micki Sannar (April 2009, Mikko Publishing, \$24.95)

CO-CO'S AMAZING BRAN MUFFINS

2 cups boiling water

4 cups all-bran cereal

5 teaspoons baking soda

2 cups granulated sugar

2/3 cups olive oil

2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

1/2 teaspoon butter extract (see note)

1 quart buttermilk

2 cups 40 percent bran flakes

5 cups flour (see note)

1 teaspoon salt

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line muffin tins with paper liners or coat with olive oil cooking spray. In a medium-size mixing bowl, add boiling water, all-bran and baking soda. Mix until all ingredients are moistened; set aside. In a large mixing bowl, add sugar, olive oil, vanilla and butter extracts, buttermilk and bran flakes. Blend together until well mixed. Add water/bran mixture and blend. Fold in flour and salt, mixing until completely moistened. Fill muffin tins 2/3 full and bake for 15 to 20 minutes. Cool on wire racks.

Notes: You can make one large batch and use as much as you need. It keeps refrigerated for six weeks. A whole-wheat pastry flour may be used in this recipe. Butter extract is concentrated butter flavoring and not a butter product.

Makes: 50 to 60 muffins

From "Olive Oil Desserts: Delicious and Healthy Heart Smart Baking" by Micki Sannar (April 2009, Mikko Publishing, \$24.95)

This page has been revised to reflect the following correction:

SECOND THOUGHTS: Thursday, June 4, 2009

An ingredient was missing in a recipe for Micki's Simple Brownies on page 8C of yesterday's Food section. The ingredient list should have included 3/4 cup flour. Also, the recipe for Extreme Lemon Sugar Cookies was missing 1 tsp baking powder. In addition, 1 tsp baking soda should have read 1/2 tsp baking soda.

Reach Marcia Vanderlip at 573-815-1704 or e-mail mvanderlip@columbiatribune.com.