

Gammy's Pinwheels: A story of baking, tradition, and peanut butter cookies

My great grandmother died when I was 2 years old. While I have little to no memory of my own namesake, she left me something much greater than a memory. She left me a recipe. Although each Christmas of my lifetime has been different, there's always been one constant: Gammy's pinwheel cookies. Chewy and crispy slice-and-bake peanut butter cookies with a swirl of semi-sweet chocolate create something close to perfection. Making these cookies connected me to her and baking in such a deep and meaningful way, and taught me about the power of a family recipe and how I could, someday, create my own.

The first time I remember tasting these cookies was when I was around seven years old. Even at that age, I was fascinated with baking, and would often sit in the kitchen while my mother whisked, stirred, and boiled. I watched my mom melt the chocolate chips on a double boiler, spread them onto the peanut butter dough, and roll it up tight, "Like a jelly roll", as Gammy states in her original typewritten recipe. At that point in my life, I had little to no care for the time and patience that went into making these cookies. All I cared about was the final product, and dreamed about biting into the peanut butter filled delicacies swirled with rivers of melted chocolate, and how my whole family would gather in the kitchen the second the oven timer went off. Well, it was mostly about the taste.

The funny thing about this recipe is that I don't ever remember learning how to make it. It seems like one Christmas I was watching my mom in the kitchen, and the next year, I was making the cookies myself. When my mom suggested that I make the pinwheels for a change one year, I was incredibly nervous. I had this unshakable feeling that I would mess them up somehow, and ruin Christmas for everyone. Not only that, but I would somehow be disrespecting Gammy and her memory. I imagined an older woman perched among the clouds, shaking a finger in my direction and cursing under her breath in Polish. Unfortunately, I turned out to be right. Pinwheels were a lot more difficult than my mom made them look. The first time I rolled up my sleeves and attempted the recipe, the dough turned out crumbly

and dry, with visible chunks of shortening, and when I attempted to roll the grainy dough and melted chocolate into a roll, it cracked, molten chocolate spilling out onto the counter. I threw the mess of chocolate and peanut butter into the trash, convinced that it couldn't be saved. I didn't want to try again, but some part of me felt like if I didn't make the cookies, I would lose the connection to Gammy that I had craved for so long.

Later, I would pore over the recipe, trying to figure out where I had gone wrong. Did I use the wrong brand of peanut butter? Was my shortening too cold? As I was reading it over for what seemed like the hundredth time, I noticed something. There, in the margins, written in a red pen that contrasted sharply with the black of the typewriter ink, were notes in my mom's handwriting. They were only little changes, like using less flour, or a mix of dark and semi-sweet chocolate for the filling, but finding them felt like picking the last piece of the puzzle off the floor after you thought it was lost forever. I began to realize that the magic of a family recipe was that it wasn't set in stone. Even with the slight changes, it still was, and would always be, Gammy's recipe. Each new family member that it is passed down to can add their own spin, which makes it even more special. With that, I cleared the counter, and started again.sm

Butter. That was the key to what I thought were perfect pinwheels, and my family agreed. It turned out that subbing half the shortening in the recipe for butter improved not only the flavor of the cookie, but the texture, the dough holding itself together no matter how much melted chocolate was added. I rolled it into a log and threw it in the fridge to harden, before using a bread knife to chop the log into smaller, round cookies. Each chop of the knife revealed a perfect swirl of chocolate on the inside of the log, and I felt a warmth spread in my chest. I slid the tray into the oven, and within minutes, the cookies were ready. And, they were delicious. Ever since that first time, I've made the pinwheels for Christmas. And every time I pull out the worn red recipe book and flip to Gammy's pinwheels, I can find my mom's notes in a red pen, and alongside them, written in blue, my own.

