

## Her specialty: big fat Greek Wedding Cookies

**Who:** Renee Ambrose, 55, of St. Petersburg, owner of Central Vacuum Stores, mother of five and grandmother of seven.

**What:** Greek Wedding Cookies

**About the recipe:** Ambrose spent years trying to remember the secret ingredient. What made her aunt's recipe so special? Every Christmas, she baked the Greek Wedding Cookies with the finest ingredients she could find, including the best butter and a few extra pecans. And every Christmas, they turned out almost as good as her aunt's — but not quite. Then one year, she remembered. Growing up, Christmas was "always a big occasion" for her family. She and her three sisters helped their mom bake the Greek Wedding Cookies every year. The original recipe came from their Aunt Dorothy Dennis, whose family owned the historic Dennis Hotel in downtown St. Petersburg.

"It was a family tradition," Ambrose says. "We'd (bake the cookies) every Christmas. And every Christmas, we would also make sure that we made a trip to Aunt Laverna's so we could have some of her cookies, because they were better."

Ambrose describes Aunt Laverna as friendly, kind — and frugal. She only let the girls sample two cookies each, but those two were worth it.

"After I got married, I continued the tradition and I made them every year," Ambrose says. She always intended to ask Aunt Laverna her secret, but she never did before it was too late.

Ambrose experimented with the recipe each holiday season. One year, as she was chopping up the nuts and greasing the cookie sheets, she remembered what Aunt Laverna always said: "Oh, butter's so expensive, I always use margarine. And you don't have to buy the good margarine."

That year, she replaced the butter with margarine. They still weren't as good as her aunt's cookies. But they were closer.

The next Christmas, another recollection: "Oh, pecans are so expensive," her aunt used to say. "I cut that in half."

She cut the pecans in half. Would these be the cookies she always remembered?

"One bite and the memories came flooding back. . . . It was her cookie," Ambrose says.

The cookies are present at every Ambrose family Christmas, though one year no one got to eat any. Well, no one but the dog, Rush, who found the cookies and finished them off before anyone else could.

"He likes them, too," Ambrose says.

**Tips:** Let the cookies cool for about 4 minutes so they won't fall apart when you roll them in the powdered sugar. Make sure to roll the batch twice in the powdered sugar.

**Why baking?** "I like to bake because I like to eat," Ambrose says. "And I like baked goods a lot."

For Ambrose, baking is also a way to connect with family, past and present. "It's something you can do for them," she says.

Baking the Greek Wedding Cookies brings back memories of her aunt and her mother. "When you start (baking) a favorite cake or a favorite cookie . . . you start remembering," she says.

Her daughter, Dawn Ambrose, is continuing the tradition by baking the cookies with her children. They always use margarine and cut the pecans in half.

### >>Easy Greek Wedding Cookies

1 cup margarine  
4 tablespoons sugar  
2 cups flour  
1 teaspoon vanilla  
½ cup chopped pecans  
Confectioners' sugar for rolling

With an electric mixer, cream margarine and sugar. Stir in flour and vanilla. Add the chopped pecans. Refrigerate the dough for 30 minutes.

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Roll dough into 1- to 2-inch balls. Bake until lightly browned, about 10 to 12 minutes. Cool for about 4 minutes, then roll twice in confectioners' sugar.

Makes about 24 cookies.

Sources: Laverna Dykes, Renee Ambrose