

Baker #13 - Cecelia Wogan-Silva

La Familia Peruvian Alfajores

Story:

This is a recipe for the simplest form of the South American traditional cookie. Alfajores are just two buttery shortbread cookies with dulce-de-leche inside, rolled in powdered sugar. Even the round shape is basic. But in our family, they are special. Everyone can tell they are homemade with love – not like anything you could buy in a store. Maybe that's why my relatives practically fight to get to the Alfajores at holidays. My mom and I learned this recipe from my Peruvian Aunt, who explained she needed our help to keep the peace on Christmas Eve. These cookies get devoured instantly, so we always make extra – one batch for holiday festivities and one that we hide for ourselves.

Fun Facts about Alfajores:

Alfajores (said, "Alpha-Hoor-Ez) are legendary across South America, having first come in the 1500s from Spanish Conquistadores. They can be found all year round in many Latin bakeries or Mexican Restaurants. But in our family we make them for special occasions and always at Christmas.

Variations: Alfajores are different based on the country or region they're from:

- Argentina typically rolls the cookie in coconut, not powdered sugar like Peru.
- Others use cornstarch in addition to or instead of flour.
- Alfajores can be made super thick, or wide and flat, depending on local tradition.
- In Peru, there is a famous bakery who creates a whopping double decker Alfajor (singular is said, "Alpha-Hoor").
- Some dip the whole cookie in chocolate or add cinnamon to the Dulce de Leche center. (We're purists so the recipe below is where to start).

Dulce de Leche - This caramel filling is known as Manjar Blanco (said "Mon-Har Blon-ko") in Peru, but many people will be more familiar with the words Dulce de Leche so that's what we're using in the recipe. It's the same stuff – caramelized milk.

This recipe uses the Nestle "La Lechera" canned version that most Walmarts, [Target](#) and major grocery chains carry. (Years ago our family "hid" bags of Manjar Blanco in our suitcases whenever we left Peru. But now you can find it at most major chains.)

Yes, you can make your own dulce /manjar blanco by cooking milk and sugar for 3+ hours. We think canned is just as good and saves the mess/time.

Avoid the squeeze-bottle version you might come across. It has extra ingredients and is more like syrup – way too thin for cookies.

Must be round (in our house, at least). My mom has used the same cookie ring to cut Alfajores in our house for 20 years because in Lima, Peru the Alfajores are always round. I tried to use a cookie cutter with fluted edges once and my Peruvian Dad was adamantly opposed. He said it wasn't "classic". I realized he was right because the fluted edges became too crisp. They also don't roll the outside sugar evenly. So now I stick with a simple, round cutter. (OK, we're sure hearts or squares or cute shapes would be fine.)

Recipe:

Prep and Bake: ~35 mins work time and ~10 cooking

Yield: 48 cookies (4 boxes of 12)

Ingredients	Tools
2 sticks butter (room temp. If you use microwave, avoid liquefying)	Pastry blender
2 sticks margarine (room temp. If you use microwave, avoid liquefying)	Large bowl
4 cups flour	Cookie sheets - won't need spray
4 tsp sugar	Rolling pin
Droplets of water as necessary	1.5" round cookie cutter
2 cans Dulce de Leche (aka Manjar Blanco)	Spatula
Extra flour for rolling	Butter knife
8 oz sifted powdered sugar	Bowl for powdered sugar

Method/Steps

1. Blend shortbread dough (and preheat oven to 325-degrees)

In large bowl using a pastry blender. It's going to seem dry and mealy at first. Keep going & it will turn to dough. Scrape every bit together.

2 sticks butter (room temp. If you use microwave, avoid liquefying)

2 sticks margarine (room temp. If you use microwave, avoid liquefying)

4 cups flour

4 tsp sugar

If absolutely necessary, a few drops of water are ok. Make a giant ball, then use a knife to split into 4 parts, leaving in bowl.

2. Roll & Cut the Cookies

Flour the counter/prep space.

Roll $\frac{1}{4}$ of the dough at a time using a floured rolling pin. (Don't roll all at once to avoid overworking it.) Roll to a thickness of about $\frac{1}{2}$ cm or more. (Not too thin cuz they won't lift/it's hard to get onto cookie sheet. Plus thin ones burn.)

Cut shapes - use round cookie cutter ~1.5" in diameter.

- As you cut, lift each onto cookie sheet. (You kinda pinch the cookie cutter to lift up each cookie from the counter as you cut. Then place on cookie sheet.)
- Avoid making a bunch of round cuts and hoping to pull cookie onto sheet later. It's never worked.
- Place your cuts closely, so you can get the most out of a roll. Less re rolling = lighter crumbly shortbread.
- You should be able to evenly space an inch apart about 24 on a cookie sheet
- Re-roll the leftover dough and repeat cutting shapes until all the dough is gone. Use flour to keep your rolling pin and surface workable.
- Move on to the next $\frac{1}{4}$ part of dough ball. Repeat cutting. By breaking it up into 4 stages, the dough doesn't get reworked too much.

3. Cook and cool.

- Cook about ~10 minutes in 325-degree oven.
- They will look almost white but have golden bottoms/edges. Adjust time as you need to in order to get cooked but not crispy cookies. They might bubble in the center - that's fine.
- Empty cookie trays onto clean surface and cool completely. Like 30 mins at least.

4. Assemble:

Pour a cup of sifted powdered sugar into low, flat bowl or onto plate.

Scoop a teaspoon of Dulce de Leche onto one cookie. Note on ratios: A thin layer is a disappointment with too much butter cookie per bite. Too thick makes the cookie hard to manage. Aim for proportion of dulce de leche that is roughly the same thickness as just one of the cookies. So you end up with a 2:1 “cookie to filling” ratio. Or a perfectly even triple: cookie/filling/cookie

Add second cookie and press just enough so dulce de leche comes to the edges
Use your knife to smear along edge of the sandwich. Don't worry if it looks messy!
Roll the cookie like a wheel on its edges in powdered sugar, and place on serving plate.

Repeat till all the cookies are filled and powdered.

Sift extra powdered sugar on top for taste and snowy looks.

Store in airtight container on counter or fridge.

Hide. :-)

5. EAT! – Enjoy the next day (when sugar has crystallized!) with a hot beverage and a loved one.

Tips:

- Work in two stages – cookie making and then assembly. We usually make the cookies in an afternoon and then assemble after dinner when they are fully cooled.
- The recipe here is already doubled because they go fast!
- I roll out the dough as few times as possible to keep shortbread light, but also to keep all the cookies' about the same thickness.
- Fully cool cookies before assembling or the Dulce de Leche will melt. ● Looks messy when you're making them but powdered sugar at the end fixes everything. ● Tastes even better the next day. The cookie begins to soak up the sugar coating and crystallize, making for a more satisfying sensory experience.
- So good with coffee or tea or anything warm, which melts the butteryness and flavors together.

About making in advance/storage

- Not our favorite: You can make the dough in advance and keep it refrigerated. Just make sure to bring the dough back to room temperature for proper spread when rolling. Otherwise they cook up hard.
- A better way to go for advance prep is to just make/cook/store or freeze all the shortbread cookies. Then assemble with dulce de leche days or even weeks later.

- Yes! You can freeze prepared cookies. We bring prepared cookies from Peru and keep them in our freezer for a couple of months.