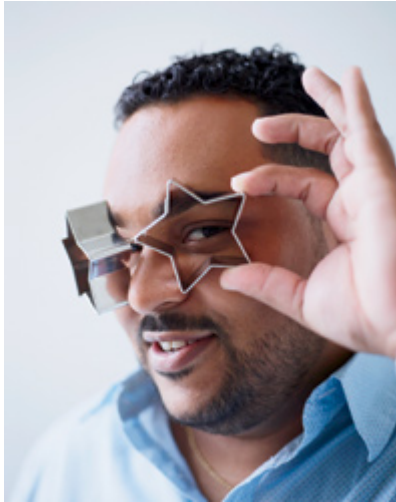


FOOD & WINE

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Kevin Sbraga's Christmas Cookie Recipes

One way to get kicked off TV's *Top Chef*: make dessert. That was the prevailing wisdom, anyway, until Kevin Sbraga proved it wrong. Here, the Season 7 winner shares his best Christmas cookies.

By Kate Krader

I wasn't paying particular attention to Kevin Sbraga for most of *Season 7 of Top Chef*. Frankly, nobody was. Early oddsmakers put his chances of beating the competition in the Emmy-winning reality cooking show at 65 to 1. Several weeks later, in the exhilarating two-part finale that took the show from Washington, DC, to Singapore, I still didn't think he would defeat the three other finalists, especially when it turned out that he'd never before been to Asia or even cooked with a wok. Yet at the end, Sbraga was named champion, with one of the better reactions in *Top Chef* history: Told he was the winner, he replied, "I *am*?" The dish that helped the New Jersey native win was one that's been the downfall of so many *Top Chef* competitors: dessert. The judges loved Sbraga's Singapore Sling 2010: coconut panna cotta topped, appropriately, with a frozen version of the cocktail.

It turns out that Sbraga is something of a dessert whiz. When *Food & Wine* asked him for his favorite Christmas-cookie recipes for our December holiday issue—a curveball challenge, we thought—he gave us some of the best ones we'd ever tasted. In our extensive experience, holiday cookies that look festive and fun don't always taste as great as they look. But Sbraga's were both lovely *and* delicious.

In fact, Sbraga has been surrounded by cookies almost literally since he was born, in Mt. Holly in 1979. His father, Harvey Beachem, was a baker for more than 40 years. As a baby, Sbraga often played in a cradle set up in a corner of the family-owned Harvey's Bakery, where his mother, Maria, also worked. When he got a little older Sbraga had a job there, too, wrapping platters of cookies in fancy paper.

Back then, Sbraga's favorite snack was buttery French *sablé* cookies: These days he sandwiches them with sweet-tangy lemon curd. He also grew up with linzer cookies, which his father made based on the beloved Austrian torte of the same name, with jam filling and a spiced hazelnut crust. (Although Sbraga is African-American and Italian, his father's bakery specialized in traditional European pastries.) Sbraga makes a linzer sandwich cookie, spiking bright raspberry jam with anise and coriander to echo the spices in the dough. The crumbly double-chocolate biscotti dotted with pistachios are based on ones his Italian grandmother made.

In spite of his background, Sbraga doesn't make many desserts outside of the holidays. He leaves that to his wife, Jesmary. She's a pastry instructor at Burlington County Institute of Technology, where they both studied. (That was before Sbraga enrolled in the College of Culinary Arts at Johnson & Wales in North Miami, and before he cooked at the Ritz-Carlton in Naples, Florida, with two other future *Top Chef* winners, Michael Voltaggio and Hung Huynh.) In fact, it was Jesmary's coconut-lemongrass dessert soup that inspired Sbraga's *Top Chef* panna cotta.

This holiday season, Sbraga will focus on the 40-seat restaurant he plans to open in Philadelphia sometime next year, with help from his \$125,000 *Top Chef* prize money. (Until recently, he was executive chef at Rat's Restaurant, at the Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton, New Jersey.) He'll also bake Christmas cookies with his five-year-old daughter, Jenae-Marie. And maybe his new baby, Angelo, will play in a cradle in a kitchen corner. "For as long as I can remember, we've always been drowning in cookies at Christmas," he says. "This year won't be any different."