



Photo: Jeff Adkins

*Editor
in the
Country*



Ann's Mettle Is Tested on Cookie-Cutter Workday

Editor Ann Kaiser gives another "diary report" on a day spent working beside one of our subscribers.

MOLTEN METAL SIZZLES on the tip of the soldering iron as I struggle to attach a tin cookie cutter to its back plate. At this rate, Christmas will be over before I've finished!

My solder "seam" is bumpy and erratic compared to the smooth joints Julie Dawson makes.

At her 1850s farmstead near Galeana, Ohio, I'm helping my workday hostess stock up on handcrafted holiday cookie cutters for her Orchard Canyon Heirlooms business.

Can I get the knack of bending strips of tin into festive shapes? As for soldering, I've never done this before... and I'm not sure I'm cut out for the job...

8 a.m.—Julie and husband Doug have fixed up an old chicken house for a workshop and display area. It smells spicy and has an old-fashioned Christmas tree decorated with cinnamon dough ornaments and the shiny cookie cutters Julie used to make them.

Sitting at a table, we get busy bending 1/2-inch-wide foot-long strips of tin, following patterns outlined on paper as a guide to shape the cutters.

TIN COOKIE CUTTERS Ann crafts with hostess Julie Dawson in her rural Ohio workshop (left) are used to shape the many cinnamon dough ornaments they trim—not with frosting, but with paints (top).

"Try a candy cane first—it's pretty easy," Julie advises. "Bend your tin strip around this spice jar to make the crook."

I pull my strip tight around the jar. The tin is pliable but springs back some when I remove the jar.

"Bend it a little more after you take away the jar so it will hold the curve," she suggests. "I use anything I can find that's the right size to bend around."

"I shape several thousand cookie cutters a year and sell them at shows and by mail order," she says. "In addition to these cutters, which are good for baking, I also craft antiqued versions customers collect for decorations."

"Bending the cutters is something I can do just about anywhere. I take work with me to the cross-country meets, 4-H horse shows and other events our daughters—Meridith, 19, Paige, 13, and Allison, 7—participate in."

While I struggle to get one cane just right, Julie expertly shapes two pretty Christmas tree cutters.

8:30 a.m.—I tackle a star next. She shows me how to fold a tin strip against a flat-nosed pliers to form a sharp angle for the points.

Julie bought her cottage business 3 years ago, I learn. "I've continued the former owner's designs and added some of my own," she says. "I love being my own boss."

8:45 a.m.—While I curve a cute mitten cutter, Julie shapes a little heart





that will be inset within the “hand”. Because the tin strip for the heart is not as wide, it will make an impression in the dough but not cut all the way through.

Besides about 100 stock designs, Julie makes custom-shaped cutters for businesses, schools, livestock breeders and other groups.

9:30 a.m.—Snip! In her utility room, Julie has me trim the ends of cutters we’ve shaped so the tin strips overlap about 1/2 inch.

“We’ll solder the strips together and then solder each cutter to a tin back plate to make it stable and easy to use,” she explains.

My crash course in soldering starts with brushing clear liquid flux over the tin ends where they meet along a mitten cuff. “Flux makes the solder flow,” Julie says.

The solder is in the form of wire. When I touch the electric soldering iron to the end of the wire, it hisses as some of the wire melts into a bead on the tip of the iron.

“Be careful—the tip is 800°,” she cautions.

“Hold the iron like a pen and put the flat tip where the tin pieces meet,” Julie directs. “The solder will seem to fall off the iron as it hits the flux. Then pull the bead of solder along the joint.”

My seam looks rugged, but she says it’s okay. I solder inside and outside the mitten at this joint.

Positioning the mitten on the back plate, I punch a hole at the top of the plate...*snap*...so the cutter can be hung and then create another hole that will be inside the thumb tip. “That hole will make the dough drop out easier,” Julie explains.

I’m now ready to solder the mitten to the back plate. “Lay the iron tip on the plate where the metal meets the cutter shape—wedge it right in there—and



HANDMADE HEIRLOOMS. Julie shows Ann how to bend tin strip (top left) and solder it onto back plate (below). Julie’s tin icicles accent cutters and cookies on display tree (above).





pull the solder along," she adds.

Easier said than done! I hold the mitten in place with a wooden block so I won't accidentally burn my fingers and try to pull the solder to make a seam. I leave a blob of metal... miss a stretch altogether... then deposit another blob.

"This takes practice," she assures.

Perspiring, I plod along clumsily, calling on her to take over at the tight curve between mitt and thumb.

Oh, yes, I have to solder the heart inset, too, and attach a handle to the back plate. It takes me more than a half hour to do what Julie can accomplish in a mere 5 minutes.

10:15 a.m.—I get a *little* better at soldering, letting Julie step in to do the tricky spots.

After I've tackled a few more, she has me trim the back plates, leaving a 1/4 inch of tin around the cutter design and rounding off the corners.

11 a.m.—Back out in the "cookie

ON A ROLL. With cutters ready, Ann rolls out spicy dough (top left) made with cookie ornament mix Julie (shown below with her family) markets. At top right, they antique some cutters with acid solution.

coop", we don rubber gloves to "antique" some cutters, using toothbrushes to apply an acid solution. As I brush on the strong smelly stuff, a shiny tin snowman darkens as it reacts.

"Can't you just soak cutters in the acid?" I wonder.

"No, that results in a blotchy finish," Julie responds. "Brushing creates an even patina. People who like folk art and primitives buy these for decorations, accounting for half of my sales."

A few minutes later, the cutter is charcoal gray and looks like it has been around for 100 years!

Scrub, scrub... I darken a gingerbread angel, a Christmas tree, a pineapple and more, propping each of them on a wooden rack to dry.

1:30 p.m.—After lunch, we go back to the coop to make cookie ornaments. Julie uses these to showcase her designs and the cinnamon spice ornament mix she offers as well.

I mix a big batch of dough, dust a counter with ground cinnamon and roll some to 1/4-inch thickness, as she advises. Julie's cutters work beautifully as I stamp out reindeer, snowmen, log cabins and Santas.

"I dry these in a food dehydrator, but a 250° oven for 20 to 30 minutes also does the job," she says.

Eyeing the large mound of dough that's left, I realize I have a long way to go... and my hands start to ache in anticipation!

3 p.m.—Decorating Christmas cookies always puts me in the holiday spirit! Instead of frosting and sprinkles, we use acrylic paints to adorn already-dried cutouts.

I green up a Christmas tree and trim it with a squiggly red garland. I even attempt eyes, noses and smiles on the gingerbread boys, girls and angels—and

paint the heart indented by the cutters red, of course.


4 p.m.—Julie keeps the ornament mix ingredients secret but adds a favorite edible sugar cookie recipe (see below) on her labels.

"Cookies from this recipe don't rise a lot, so they don't lose shape and detail," she says.

I help her package shiny tin cutters in individual cellophane bags, tying them with a bright ribbon threaded through a label. *Whew*—there are tons to do!

5 p.m.—My time as a tinsmith is wrapping up. Julie gives me my less-than-perfect mitten and several other cutters I've helped make.

With a workday like this one under my belt, I'll be hurrying home to get a head start on my holiday baking!

Editor's Note: Visit Julie's Web site, www.tincookiecutters.com, to see and order her designs. A product/price list (without illustrations) is available by sending a stamped envelope to Orchard Canyon Heirlooms, Inc., 8360 Dustin Rd., Galena OH 43021. 

CREAM CHEESE CUTOUTS

- 1 cup butter or margarine, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 package (3 ounces) cream cheese, softened
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2-1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

FROSTING:

- 3 cups confectioners' sugar
- 1/3 cup butter or margarine, softened
- 2 tablespoons milk
- 1-1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- Food coloring, optional

In a mixing bowl, cream butter and sugar. Add cream cheese and beat until smooth. Beat in egg and vanilla; mix well. Combine flour and salt; gradually add to creamed mixture and mix well. Cover and refrigerate for 1-2 hours or until easy to handle.

On lightly floured surface, roll dough to 1/8-in. thickness. Cut with Christmas cookie cutters dipped in flour. Place 1 in. apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake at 375° for 7-8 minutes or until edges are lightly browned. Cool for 1 minute before removing to wire racks.

In a mixing bowl, beat frosting ingredients until smooth. Add food coloring if desired. Frost the cookies. **Yield:** about 7 dozen cookies.



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