

Wall Street Journal Online: The Gingerbread Housing Bubble

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There's a building boom going on in gingerbread houses.

Making them was once the domain of professional bakers and only the most ambitious home chefs, but in recent years, everyone from mom-and-pop kitchens to stores like Williams-Sonoma has started offering gingerbread-house kits, many of them pre-baked and even preassembled. And gingerbread isn't just for Christmas anymore. There are now kits for Halloween houses, Easter cottages and even gingerbread doghouses complete with Fido and his fire hydrant.

To see if we could really whip up the winter wonderlands in the catalogs, we tested five kits, from Wilton Store's prebaked house (take it out of the box and start building) to Williams-Sonoma's new prefab house (take it out of the box and start decorating).

BUILDING BOOM

See how five gingerbread-house kits stacked up against each other. When a suitcase-size box arrived from Wilton Store, we were intimidated. There were 11 gingerbread pieces, two pastry bags, more than a pound of candy and pages of instructions in the Ultimate Gingerbread House Kit. To our relief, the instructions worked. The house was big enough for the whole family -- children, parents, grandparents -- to work on together. Meanwhile, the finished product inspires house envy among all who see it. An important note: There was enough candy for our decorators to nibble while they worked.

But not everyone wants such a big house -- or such a big project. The Gingerbread Cottage Kit from the HearthSong Web site is about half the size of the Wilton house. Putting the prebaked pieces together took about 15 minutes, and the house was dry in 30 minutes. It comes with candy and frosting mix, but to further spruce it up, we bought the chocolate modeling kit, which included colored chocolate squares and an assortment of whittling tools and molds. The end result was a cute house but not a show-stopper. Next time, we'll try new HearthSong houses like a white-washed Easter cottage with a thatched roof.

Our experience with the Gingerbread House Kit from Sur La Table wasn't so seamless, but not through any fault of the kit. After we laid out the prebaked pieces on the kitchen counter, the dog ate the foundation and half the roof. But before the dog made this into a fixer-upper, we were impressed by the gingerbread base; other kits had plain cardboard bases. It took just minutes to assemble the kit with the premixed frosting, and the house was small but charming.

If you find not just the cooking but also the construction tedious, then Cheryl Albers has the

house for you. Ms. Albers, a computer science graduate student-turned Mom-turned baker, makes prefabricated gingerbread houses that arrive ready to decorate. Her Web site, Gingerbreadtraditions.com, offers seven houses, including one small enough to hang on a Christmas tree.

Our Traditional House 2004 arrived carefully packed in bubble paper. When we realized we had no idea how to make the icicles in a picture, we called the toll-free number. Ms. Albers talked us through it and gave us her cellphone number in case we had any gingerbread emergencies. A bonus: Our test toddler took a bite out of the house's roof and proclaimed it moist and chewy. The other houses were too hard to eat.

This year, Williams-Sonoma launched a fully assembled Gingerbread House Kit. The house is a nice size and is reinforced inside with cardboard. It arrives with puffs of snow on the roof and a red frosting chimney. The kit includes frosting mix but not candy. A spokeswoman says the company wants customers to have the fun of visiting their favorite candy stores and coming up with their own themes. For us, that meant spending \$25 on decorations to make our house a home.

PRODUCT: The Ultimate Gingerbread House Kit; The Wilton Store; wilton.com

PRICE: \$39.99 plus shipping

EASE OF ASSEMBLY: Looked daunting at first, but construction took less than 30 minutes. Allow 4 hours for drying time.

CURB APPEAL: More of a mansion (10 3/4"x9"x11 3/4") than a house. Sure to be the envy of the neighborhood.

BUILDER'S COMMENT: The kit has everything you need to re-create the fairytale picture on the box. Then all you need is time.

PRODUCT: Gingerbread House Kit; Sur La Table; surlatable.com

PRICE: \$29.95 plus shipping

EASE OF ASSEMBLY: Assembly took just minutes using the premixed frosting. The house dried completely in 10 minutes.

CURB APPEAL: Small (6"x6"x6") but charming. Arrives in a festive red and white box -- a good gift. Candy is included.

BUILDER'S COMMENT: Next time, we'll order the larger prebuilt house so there's more to decorate.

PRODUCT: Gingerbread Cottage Kit; HearthSong; hearthsong.com

PRICE: \$24.95 plus shipping

EASE OF ASSEMBLY: Putting prebaked pieces together took 15 minutes. The house was dry and ready to decorate in 30 minutes.

CURB APPEAL: A nice house (7"x5"x6"), We bought a chocolate modeling kit (\$14.95) to spruce it up.

BUILDER'S COMMENT: The Halloween and Easter gingerbread kits look more interesting. We'll try those next year.

PRODUCT: Traditional House 2004; Gingerbread Traditions Inc.;

Gingerbreadtraditions.com

PRICE: \$21.95 plus shipping

EASE OF ASSEMBLY: It's prebuilt, so you can start decorating right away. When we called the toll-free number for help, the owner gave us her cellphone number.

CURB APPEAL: Cozy (4"x6"x6 1/2"), with large cut-out windows and an optional chimney. Our test toddler discovered the gingerbread was tasty, too.

BUILDER'S COMMENT: Next time, we'll try the gingerbread doghouse, complete with gingerbread dogs and fire hydrants.

PRODUCT: Gingerbread House Kit; Williams-Sonoma; williams-sonoma.com

PRICE: \$25.00 plus shipping

EASE OF ASSEMBLY: It's assembled, but decorations aren't included. Our box lacked instructions, but the company sent more.

CURB APPEAL: The best of the prefab houses: it's a nice size (11"x8"x9") and reinforced with corrugated cardboard.

BUILDER'S COMMENT: We spent an additional \$25 on candies, pretzels, sprinkles and Frosted Mini-Wheats to make our house a home.