The day after Thanksgiving, AMPI member Lori Janssen and her sister Joni Francis make their way to the kitchen to begin their annual bake-a-thon. They spend weeks creating dozens of Christmas cookies in all shapes and flavors — holiday treats that have earned a reputation.

What’s their secret to baking great cookies? Butter — and lots of it! The baking sisters estimate they use about 15 pounds of butter to bake and frost their Christmas cookies each year. Like bakers and cooks across the nation, they know butter makes holiday foods better. It’s the reason U.S. butter sales climb significantly during the fourth quarter.

Buttering up the holidays
At holiday time, butter is the common denominator on the dining room table. Year-over-year sales of butter are increasing as cooks buy more for Thanksgiving and Christmas food preparation. In 2013, fourth-quarter sales of butter jumped 59 percent over third-quarter receipts. The next year, that figure was almost 65 percent, according to data compiled by Information Resources Inc.

Nearly 30 percent of AMPI’s total butter sales are made in the last three months of the year, said Matt Senske, AMPI sales manager. Retail orders for quarter-pound sticks of butter skyrocket during the holidays and account for about 40 percent of annual sales.

Though salted butter is the clear preference of consumers, AMPI sales of unsalted quarters have been steadily growing, Senske said. Skilled bakers often favor unsalted butter so they can control the amount of salt and moisture going into their recipes.

While consumers remain loyal to butter, retail sales have begun to feel the affect of record-high markets.

“The historically high prices going into this holiday season have meant retailers aren’t able to offer the discounts once seen for butter,” Senske said. “The markets have been extremely high the last two holiday seasons, and this year it has had some impact on the volume of our orders.”

“No matter how much we prepare for or pack ahead, it’s typically a challenge to keep up with orders during the fourth quarter,” Senske added. “It’s usually nip and tuck at this time of year.”

An all-natural winner
Once regarded as unhealthy, butter is enjoying a renaissance in American kitchens. U.S. butter consumption has reached its highest level in 40 years. Since 2010, domestic butter consumption has risen an average 3.5 percent per year while the U.S. population has grown only .8 percent annually, said Anuja Miner of the American Butter Institute. Butter consumption per person has increased from 4.6 pounds per year in 1995 to 5.5 pounds this year.

The trend is being driven by a shift in consumer preferences. Cooks are abandoning highly processed foods, artificial ingredients and trans fat-laced margarine in favor of all-natural butter. As food policy expert, gardener and author Joan Gussow explains, “As for butter versus margarine, I trust cows more than I trust chemists.”

Cookie veteran Wally Amos, the man behind the original Famous Amos cookie, is also an advocate for the all-natural product. He always insists on butter, not margarine, for quality cookies. Butter adds flavor and texture to baked goods.

This year, the American Butter Institute launched a digital advertising campaign to remind bakers about the value of using real butter in their holiday cookies, cakes and breads. Holiday recipes featuring butter were advertised online at goboldwithbutter.com and via Google, Facebook and YouTube to further drive fourth-quarter butter sales.

Simply good
Lori Janssen has worked alongside her husband Mark on their Gilmore City, Iowa, dairy farm for 34 years. The couple raised their three children on the same farm where Mark grew up. Milk from the Janssen farm has been shipped to an AMPI plant since the early days of the co-op.

The Janssens knows first-hand that the milk their family markets through the cooperative is wholesome. It’s gratifying for Lori to know her family and fellow members contribute the essential raw product for the AMPI butter that ultimately ends up in her cookie dough.

Now-retired AMPI milk truck driver Mark Bermer was a fan of the cookies Lori and Joni baked for him, and helped extend their reputation.

While unloading milk at the AMPI manufacturing plant in Sanborn, Iowa, Bermer shared the cookies with co-workers. Soon the sisters were receiving cookie orders from AMPI employees who wanted to share them with family and friends. And, like the baking sisters, the employees are not shy about sharing the not-so-secret ingredient that makes the cookies taste so good: real butter made from AMPI members’ milk.

AMPI member Lori Janssen of Gilmore City, Iowa, far right, and her sister Joni Francis, enjoy baking cookies together throughout the year and sharing the sweet, buttery goodness with others.