This delectable treat has pleased the European palate for centuries, especially during the Christmas season.

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Gingerbread Galore!

By Sharon Hudgins
Photos by the author

Fancy display of gingerbreads at Lebkuchen Pirker in Mariazell, Austria

'Tis the season when a young elf's fancy turns to thoughts of gingerbread. Although these sweet-spicy cakes and cookies are popular year-round in many countries of Europe, they're particularly associated with the winter holidays. Bakeries from Sweden to Slovakia to Switzerland turn out tons of commercial gingerbread products, often packaged in brightly colored wrappings and tin boxes. And home bakers dig through kitchen drawers and recipe files to find favorite cookie cutters and family recipes for their own Christmas gingerbreads.

Although flatcakes made with honey and spices were baked by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, the gingerbreads of northern Europe probably date only from the Middle Ages, when honey was still the main type of sweetener available locally, and exotic, expensive spices such as cinnamon, black pepper and ginger were increasingly being imported from faraway lands in the East. A taste for gingerbread eventually spread throughout Europe, with certain cities becoming known for their own particular types: Strasbourg and Dijon in France, Torun in Poland, Tula in Russia, Aachen and Nürnberg in Germany, Basel and St. Gallen in Switzerland.

Traditional marzipan-filled Biberli gingerbread from the Appenzell region of Switzerland. The design on the top was imprinted in an old-fashioned mold before baking.

MANY VARIETIES

Gingerbread recipes evolved over time and in diverse places. Various kinds of gingerbread were, and still are, made with different combinations of honey, sugar, flour, eggs, almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, raisins, lemons, candied orange peel, candied citron, rosewater, rum, brandy, black pepper, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, allspice, cardamom, coriander, aniseed and saffron. Although these baked goods are often referred to as "gingerbread" in English, some of them don't contain any ginger at all.

Gingerbread hearts at an open air market in Munich.

The variety of possible ingredients and textures causes some confusion about what "gingerbread" actually is. A cake, a cookie, or a loaf? Hard or soft? Thick or thin? Glazed or unglazed? Decorated with fancy frostings, or with fruits and nuts, or even with expensive gold leaf? At various times in its history, gingerbread has been all of these.

Factory outlet store of Lebkuchen Schmidt, the largest producer of gingerbreads in Nurnberg, Germany

Colorful Lebkuchen tin box from Nurnberg. These boxes often become collector's items.

GERMAN GINGERBREAD

In the Middle Ages, the city of Nürnberg became one of the most famous places for making gingerbreads in Germany, where these seductive sweets have long been known as Lebkuchen (or sometimes Pfefferkuchen, when their spiciness comes from black pepper instead of ginger). Records show that Lebkuchen was being baked in Nürnberg as early as the 14th century. Traditionally, the stiff dough was pressed into highly detailed molds made of wood, metal, or terra cotta, which imprinted intricate designs on the Lebkuchen before it was removed from the molds and baked in a hot oven. Nürnberg Lebkuchen contained such costly ingredients, and was of such high quality, that it was accepted as payment for city taxes and given as

gifts to nobles, princes, and heads of state.

An old wooden gingerbread mold in Alsace. Many European museums have beautiful collections of these antique hand-carved gingerbread molds.

A selection of traditional gingerbreads from Lebkuchen Schmidt, Nürnberg, Germany.

Over time, as the prices of ingredients fell and the demand for Lebkuchen increased, faster production methods became necessary. The elaborate handmade molds were replaced by less detailed, often mass-produced, molds. Simpler decorations—such as nuts, candied fruit, and sugar frostings—were applied to the tops of many cookies. And the shapes were simplified, too, evolving into the basic human, animal, and geometric forms common today.

Alsatian gingerbread hearts, fresh from the oven and ready for decorating in Gertwiller, France.

In the early 1800s, gingerbread houses became popular in Germany after the publication of the Grimm brothers' fairy tale, Hansel and Gretel. And during the 19th century, ornately decorated Lebkuchen hearts also became the rage. Covered with fancy designs and romantic sayings made from colored icing, these large heart-shaped cookies were often exchanged between sweethearts. You can still buy them at almost every German festival and special market, including the Christmas markets held in many German cities throughout December.

Sign at the Alsatian gingerbread museum in Gertwiller.

Display at a LEbkuchen Pirker gingerbread store in Mariazell, Austria.

The Lebkuchen produced in Germany today comes in all sorts of sizes, shapes, flavors, colors and textures: rounds, rectangles, squares, hearts, stars, pretzel forms, St. Nicholas (for Christmas), lucky pigs (for New Year) and rabbits (for Easter). The Lebkuchen dough can be "white" (light colored) or different shades of brown. Some Lebkuchen are also covered with white or chocolate icing, and some are filled with marzipan or jam. Honey Lebkuchen is sweetened only (or primarily) with honey. Oblaten Lebkuchen are cookies with the dough mounded on top of a thin wafer before baking. And delicate, elegant Elisen Lebkuchen are made with at least 25% ground almonds,

An advertisement for Alsatian *pains d'epices* (gingerbread) in Strasbourg, France.

hazelnuts, or walnuts, and no more than 10% flour.

Gingerbread hearts at an open air market in Austria.

GINGERBREADS ACROSS EUROPE

You'll also find similar spicy cookies of different shapes, colors and textures called Printen (in Aachen, Germany), Pfefferkuchen (in Pulsnitz, Germany), Spekulatius (in the German Rhineland), Leckerli (in Basel, Switzerland), Biberli (in the Appenzell region of Switzerland), speculaas Holland, speculoos in Belgium, pepperkaker in Norway, pepparkakor in Sweden, piperkakut in Finland, pebernødder in Denmark, pain d'épices in France, licitar in Croatia, mézeskalács in Hungary, perníky in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, pierniki in Poland and prianiki in Russia. Other towns and regions have their own specific names for the many varieties of gingerbreads produced there.

Traditional gingerbreads from Austria.

Europeans also use gingerbread cookies as ingredients in other dishes. You'll find crumbled gingerbread used as a stuffing for pork and for pasta, as a thickener for sauces, a flavoring for soups, a crunchy texture in salad dressings, and a base for many puddings and desserts. There's even a German-Italian "fusion" dessert called " Nürnberger Tiramisu"! And for people who just can't get enough of that sweet, spicy, Christmasy taste of gingerbread, the Belgians have recently invented a gingery, caramely speculoos spread, similar in texture to Nutella, made from crushed gingerbread cookies.

If I've whetted your appetite for these European gingerbreads, my best suggestion is to travel there and taste them for yourself. You can also mail order many of them from the websites listed below. Costard, the clown in Shakespeare's play, "Love's Labour's Lost," had the right idea when he said, "An' I had but one penny in the world, thou shouldst have it to buy gingerbread."

Nürnberg Lebkuchen information
www.lebkuchen.nuernberg.de/englische_version/index.html

Lebkuchen-Schmidt, Nürnberg
ww2.lebkuchen-schmidt.com/eng_index.php

About the writer
Sharon Hudgins is an award-winning writer with four books and more than 700 articles published worldwide. Her food and travel writing has appeared in National Geographic Traveler, Saveur, Gastronomica, German Life, Russian Life, The World & I, Chile Pepper, Fiery Foods & Barbecue, major newspapers in the United States, and periodicals in Germany, Russia, and the Czech Republic. For several years she was the food columnist for *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper in Europe, and since 1997 has been the food columnist for *German Life* magazine in the United States. A former editor of *Chile Pepper* magazine, she has also worked as a cookbook editor, photographer, filmmaker, university professor, and lecturer on international tours offered by National Geographic Expeditions, Lindblad, Road Scholar, and Silversea Cruises.

Sharon Hudgins has lived in nine countries of Europe and Asia and traveled in 50 countries across the globe. Her European experience includes living in Germany for 15 years, as well as in several European capitals and small towns from northern Scotland to southern Spain to the Greek island of Crete. She is the author of an award-winning cookbook about the regional cuisines of Spain, and her personal memoir, *The Other Side of Russia: A Slice of Life in Siberia and the Russian Far East*, won two national awards for travel and food writing.

Metzger Lebkuchen, Vienna
www.lebkuchenmetzger.at/

Lebkuchen-Pirker, Mariazell, Austria
www.lebkuchen-pirker.at/home/index.php?&lang+eng

Kerner Lebkuchen, Mariazell, Austria
www.lebzelterei-kerner.at/index.htm

Lebkuchen-Gandl, St. Wolfgang, Austria
www.lebkuchen-gandl.com/

Appenzeller Biberli, Switzerland
www.baerli-biber.ch/

Basel Läckerli, Switzerland
www.laeckerli-huus.ch/

French-Alsatian Pain d'Épices
www.paindepices-lips.com
www.fortwenger.fr/

Alte Pfefferkuechlerei (small gingerbread museum in Weissenberg,Germany) www.museum.stadt-weissenberg.de/

Speculoos Spread
www.thenibble.com/zine/archives/speculoos-spread.asp

YouTube video about how to make decorated European gingerbread
www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVX5wiv_oMk

American online sources for ordering European gingerbreads
www.germandeli.com
www.germangrocery.com

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