

# Alsatian *Kugelhopf*

## A Cake for All Seasons

Once upon a time, a potter named *Kugel* lived in the little Alsatian village of Ribeauvillé, in northeastern France. One day, while turning clay on his potter's wheel, he crafted a new kind of ceramic cake mold. Deep and round, with a tube in the center and fluted, curving sides. When inverted, it looked like a tall crown or perhaps a turban.

The evening after *Kugel* took his new mold out of the kiln, three strangers knocked on his door, asking for a place to spend the night. The poor potter didn't have much to offer, but he invited them inside, fed them the only food he had, a modest meal of bread and soup, and spread out bedding on the floor of his tiny cottage.

Unbeknownst to *Kugel*, his mysterious guests were actually the Three Magi, on their way to Cologne after paying homage to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. During the night, while their host was asleep, the three kings baked a special cake in *Kugel*'s new mold, to thank him for his hospitality. The next morning, they slipped away very early, before the potter awakened. Imagine his surprise when he found a beautiful, tall, golden cake on his table—the cake that was destined to become the *gâteau par excellence* of Alsace. Thus the *Kugelhopf* was born.<sup>1</sup>

OR SO THE LEGEND SAYS. Take your pick of other origin myths, too: These turban-shaped cakes were first made by Viennese bakers to celebrate the Habsburg victory over the Ottoman Turks at the gates of Vienna in 1683. Or Polish king Stanisław Leszczyński brought the recipe from Poland to this region of France when he resided there in the early 1700s. Or the Austrian archduchess Marie Antoinette carried the recipe with her from Vienna to France when she married the future French King Louis XVI in 1770. Or the first *Kugelhopf* in France wasn't made until Napoleon's time, when the Austrian ambassador's chef gave the recipe to the famous French pastry chef Carême.

Searching for clues in the early records of Strasbourg's bakers' and pastry-makers' guilds, some culinary historians have deduced that *Kugelhopfs* were already being made in

the Alsatian capital by the sixteenth century. But the oldest *Kugelhopf* cake molds found in Alsace date from only the eighteenth century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century *Kugelhopf* had become so popular that recipes for it were being published in regional cookbooks such as Marguerite Spoerlings' *Ober rheinisches Kochbuch* (1811), which contained several recipes for this kind of cake.

Whatever its origins, no one disputes that *Kugelhopf* is now the iconic cake of Alsace, one of the trinity of classic Alsatian baked goods that includes *Bretzeln* (soft pretzels) and *pain d'épices* (gingerbread; also known as *Lebkuchen* or *Lebküechle*). But in this region of shifting national borders—where French, German, and Alsatian dialect have all been spoken for centuries—linguists are uncertain about the origin of the word itself. Some say that its name probably comes from the German *Kugel*, meaning “ball” (in reference to its round shape), and *hopfen*, meaning “to brew up or rise up under the influence of yeast.” Others think the term might come from German/Alsatian *Gugelhut/ Gugelhüt*, in reference to a type of medieval round hat that members of the Strasbourg Sénat, the governing body of the city, wore at festivals and official functions.

Not everyone agrees on the spelling, either: *Kugelhopf*, *Gougelhof*, *Kouglof*, *Gugelhupf*, *Kougelhoppf*, *Guglhupf*, *Kugelhoff*, *Gougelhoppf*, *Kugelhupf*, *Gugelhoppf*, *Kuglof*, *Gugelhopp*, *Kugelhof*, *Kuglopf*, *Koughloff*, *Kuelopf*, *Kouklouf*, *Köjlopf*, *Kouglopf*, *Koejelhopf*, *Koïlopf*, *Köjhupf*, *Suglhup*. But *kougelhoppf* (in French) or *Kugelhopf* (in Alsatian and German) seem to be the preferred spellings among most Alsatian food writers today.

Crown- or turban-shaped cakes called *Kugelhopf* or *Gugelhoppf* are baked in many other parts of Europe, as well, including Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Luxembourg, and Flanders. Some are made with a light, yeast-raised dough, but others are made with a sweeter cake batter leavened with baking powder or another chemical leavening, which produces a heavier, denser cake more like a pound cake. Marbled *Kugelhopfs* are made from white and choco-



late batters swirled together in the mold before baking. The only thing they all have in common is their shape—and hence, their name.

In Alsace, classic *Kugelhopf* is always a yeast-raised cake, light-textured, pale-colored, subtly flavored, and somewhat dry, studded with raisins, perfumed with lemon zest and *eau-de-vie* (such as Kirsch or Mirabelle), decorated with whole almonds, and garnished with a sifting of confectioners' sugar. Made with butter, milk, and eggs, *Kugelhopf* is often referred to as "Alsatian brioche." Because of its bread-like texture, *Kugelhopf* has sometimes been difficult to classify—is it actually a cake or is it a bread?—but for Alsatians it belongs on the pastry side of the centuries-old, legally mandated division between pastry makers and bread bakers. Today, *Kugelhopfs* line the shelves of almost every *pâtisserie* in Alsace, year round, and are also a standard cake in the repertoire of most home cooks.

The classic shape of *Kugelhopf* is the round, fluted crown, nearly as tall as it is wide, with a vertical hollow in the center extending from the top almost to the bottom. These cakes can be baked in ceramic, copper, tin, cast

Above: *Antique Kugelhopf molds at the Musée Alsacien, Strasbourg, France.*

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iron, or aluminum molds, but most Alsatian cooks favor the earthenware molds that have been handmade for several centuries in the local pottery village of Soufflenheim. Purely functional ceramic molds (considered to be the best for baking *Kugelhopf*) are glazed only on the inside; antique molds of this type have interiors glazed in various shades of brown, green, ocher, ivory, or terra cotta. Many contemporary molds, which double as decorative items in the kitchen, have plain ocher interiors, with the outside glazed in a shade of blue, brown, green, yellow, or sometimes even red or pink, decorated with rustic, hand-painted, multicolored floral motifs. Sizes range from miniature molds only two inches in diameter to family-size molds measuring ten or more inches across the top. With proper care, these earthenware molds become increasingly well seasoned with butter during each use, rendering them practically nonstick and subtly enhancing the flavor of each successive cake.

In addition to the familiar fluted round, ceramic *Kugelhoppf* molds come in a variety of shapes for observing specific religious or secular holidays, celebrating personal or family milestones, and marking official public events, local festivals, and other special occasions. Each shape has one or more symbolic meanings.

A fish (or, more rarely, an eel) is an ancient symbol of fertility, as well as an early Christian symbol. *Kugelhoppfs* are baked in fish-shaped molds for the New Year (to symbolize future fertility and prosperity), April 1st (symbolizing spring-time fertility), Easter (as a symbol of Christ), harvest time (for an abundant harvest), and Christmas (again as a symbol of Christ). Crayfish-shaped molds, which also symbolize fertility and prosperity, are used for wedding *Kugelhoppfs*.

Grape-cluster molds are used for cakes baked at harvest time, in late summer and early autumn, while moon-shaped molds are used for St. Nicolas Day (December 6), and star shapes for Christmas cakes. *Kugelhoppfs* are baked in heart-shaped molds (symbolizing love) for Mother's Day; as tokens of love between sweethearts; and for betrothals, engagement parties, weddings, and family celebrations. Molds shaped like a heart with a crown of thorns are reserved for Lenten cakes, especially those baked for Good Friday.

*Kugelhoppfs* for betrothals, weddings, and baptisms are also made in molds shaped like twin children ("Hansel and Gretel"), referring to the future or current birth of children to continue the family. Molds in the form of a swaddled baby are used for Christmas (symbolizing the Christ Child), weddings (fecundity), and baptisms (the new infant). And toad-shaped molds, rarely seen today, were formerly used for cakes baked at the birth of a child (from the folkloric belief that a toad facilitates the birth of a baby).

Since the *fleur-de-lys* is a symbol of royalty, cakes are baked in stylized lily-shaped molds for Three Kings' Day (Epiphany, January 6) and French national holidays; under the *ancien régime* in France, *fleur-de-lys* cakes were also made for the Kings' birthday. Molds shaped like a rooster (an unofficial symbol of France) are brought out for cakes celebrating national holidays. And when the region of Alsace belonged to Imperial Germany (1871–1919), cakes in the form of a double-headed eagle were customary on the Kaiser's birthday.

Molds shaped like little lambs are especially popular for Easter cakes (symbolizing Christ, the sacrificial lamb) and for springtime cakes in general (symbolizing rebirth in nature, as well as Christ's resurrection). Less common are molds shaped like rabbits (symbols of fertility), which are also used for cakes at Easter and during the spring.

Regardless of their forms, nearly all of these *Kugelhoppf* molds are manufactured as a single unit. But the molds

for making Easter lamb cakes (*agneau pascal*, or *Lämmele/Lammala* in Alsatian dialect) usually consist of two halves, glazed only in the interior, that fit together for baking and are then taken apart to remove the finished cake. These molds produce a three-dimensional miniature effigy of a resting lamb. Garnished with a dusting of confectioners' sugar, these Easter lambs often have "eyes" made of dark raisins or whole cloves, and a colored ribbon with a tiny bell on it tied around their necks. Many of them also carry a small colored-foil banner proclaiming *Joyeuses Pâques* ("Happy Easter") in gold lettering, attached to a little wooden skewer as the banner pole. Beloved by children and adults, these realistic-looking lamb cakes are an essential part of every Easter celebration in Alsace.

Lamb cakes baked in these molds can be made not only from yeast-raised *Kugelhoppf* dough but also from egg-white-leavened biscuit batter or chemically leavened cake batters. Other shapes of ceramic molds can likewise be used for making cakes that are not *Kugelhoppfs*. But *Kugelhoppf* remains the king of cakes in Alsace. A well-seasoned, classic, round *Kugelhoppf* mold is often a mother's gift to her daughter as a new bride, and *Kugelhoppf* molds are lovingly passed down from one generation to the next.

For such a simple cake there are numerous recipes, many of them cherished family heirlooms. Cookbook author Madeleine Kamman, whose grandmother was Alsatian, notes that she inherited twenty-four family recipes for *Kugelhoppf*, some of them dating back more than 150 years. She also recalls Alsatian Christmas breakfasts at which no fewer than six different kinds of *Kugelhoppf* were served.<sup>2</sup>

In Alsace, *Kugelhoppf* cuts across socioeconomic, gender, and religious lines. These cakes are enjoyed equally by men and women, rich and poor, children and adults, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews—although the recipes vary according to the religion, social milieu, financial resources, and personal preferences and skills of the cook. Until the 1940s people would bring their own milk, eggs, butter, and *eau-de-vie* to the baker, along with their own *Kugelhoppf* mold. The baker would provide the flour, sugar, almonds, raisins, and yeast.<sup>3</sup> A wealthy family's *Kugelhoppfs* might contain more eggs and butter than the cakes of someone of lesser means. Or a baker might prefer to use unblanched instead of blanched almonds, or one type of raisins instead of another, or rum or cognac instead of *eau-de-vie*. "Although many of the recipes look similar," says Kamman, "the results are often different, depending on the kind of flour, the amount and quality of the butter, and of course the hand that makes the *Kugelhoppf*."

Throughout the year, in cities and rural areas, *Kugelhoppf* is traditionally served for breakfast, especially

Sunday breakfast, with steaming-hot cups of *café au lait*. (Some Alsatians say that without *Kugelhopf*, it isn't Sunday.) *Kugelhopf* is also eaten in the afternoon with coffee or tea; for dessert after lunch or dinner; and at any time of the day as an accompaniment to a glass of chilled Alsatian Riesling, Muscat, or Gewürztraminer wine, a flute of sparkling Crémant d'Alsace, or a small glass of ice-cold Kirsch (cherry *eau-de-vie*). Restaurateurs dress up slices of *Kugelhopf* with caramel sauce, fruit *coulis*, ice cream, or whipped cream. At home, leftover *Kugelhopf* is sliced, toasted, and slathered with butter and jam, or sprinkled with *eau-de-vie* and layered with fruit for baked puddings.

*Kugelhopf* in its many forms also serves several social and ceremonial functions. In earlier times a bride's mother made special *Kugelhopfs* for important people in the town, from the mayor to the midwife, to ensure their future goodwill toward the new couple. To celebrate weddings and baptisms, rich peasants distributed dozens of small *Kugelhopfs* to everyone in their village. *Kugelhopf* was served at prenuptial dinners and at the wedding feast itself. Afterward, the bride's mother might also take a *Kugelhopf* to everyone who gave a gift to the newlyweds, as a token of thanks from the family.

Another Alsatian custom, dating from the nineteenth century, was to give a *Kugelhopf* to young men on the day they were conscripted into the army. And while the men were away, doing compulsory military service in another part of France, their mothers, wives, or girlfriends would periodically send them a *Kugelhopf* to remind them of home.

*Kugelhopfs* also had their place at official functions, such as the swearing-in of the town's mayor or the opening of a new school. They were—and still are—served as an accompaniment to drinks at *vins d'honneur* and all sorts of receptions. When *Kugelhopf* is served with wine, *eau-de-vie*, cocktails, or other apéritifs, the savory version called *Kugelhopf salé* (“salted” instead of *sucré*, “sweetened”) is sometimes offered. *Kugelhopf salé* is made with less sugar and a bit more salt than the sweet variety, with diced smoked bacon replacing the raisins, and walnuts instead of almonds. This kind of cake is also known as *Kugelhopf au lard* or *Spackkugelhopf* (bacon *Kugelhopf*).

Both the sweet and savory versions are featured at the annual *Kugelhopf* festival in Ribeauvillé, held on the first weekend in June, when *Kugelhopfs* are paraded through the streets to much fanfare. Which brings us full circle back to the place where the legend says it all began. Regardless of its origin, the many shapes, varieties, symbolisms, and uses of *Kugelhopf* make it truly a cake for all seasons. ☉

Alsatian Museums with Collections of Old *Kugelhopf* Molds

- Musée Alsacien, Strasbourg, [www.musees-strasbourg.org](http://www.musees-strasbourg.org)
- Musée Alsacien, Haguenau, [www.ville-haguenau.fr/fr/se-divertir-a-haguenau/culture/musee-alsacien/index.html](http://www.ville-haguenau.fr/fr/se-divertir-a-haguenau/culture/musee-alsacien/index.html)
- Musée du Pain d'Alsace, Sélestat, [www.maisondupain.org](http://www.maisondupain.org)
- Musée du Pain d'Epices et de l'Art Populaire Alsacien, Gertwiller, [www.paindepices-lips.com](http://www.paindepices-lips.com)
- Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, [www.musee-unterlinden.com](http://www.musee-unterlinden.com)

## Alsatian *Kugelhopf*

SERVES 8 TO 10

This cake tastes even better a day after baking, when the flavors have had time to ripen. Be sure to macerate the raisins in liquor the day before you make the cake.

- ¾ cup seedless dark raisins
- 5 tablespoons Kirsch or Cognac
- 4 ½ teaspoons (2 packages) active dry yeast
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 cup lukewarm whole milk
- 4 ½ cups all-purpose flour (divided use)
- ¾ cup unsalted butter, at room temperature
- ¾ cup sugar
- 4 eggs, at room temperature
- ½ teaspoon salt
- Finely grated zest of 1 lemon
- Unsalted butter for the mold, at room temperature
- 15 to 20 blanched whole almonds (equal to the number of grooves in your *Kugelhopf* mold)
- Confectioner's sugar

Macerate the raisins overnight in the Kirsch or Cognac, stirring occasionally.

The next day, dissolve the yeast and 1 teaspoon sugar in the warm milk, in a medium-size bowl. Sprinkle 1 cup of flour into the milk and whisk until the ingredients are well blended. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside in a warm place to rise until the mixture has doubled in bulk, about 30 minutes.

In another medium-size bowl beat together the butter and ¾ cup of sugar until the mixture is very light and fluffy. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Stir in the salt, then the yeast mixture. Add the remaining 3 ½ cups of flour, 1 cup at a time, mixing well after each addition. Knead the dough in the bowl until it is smooth and elastic (at least 15 minutes by hand or 5 minutes with the dough hook of an electric mixer.) The dough is ready when it begins to pull away from the sides of the bowl, but it will still be very soft and sticky. Knead the raisins and grated lemon zest into the dough, along with any liquor not absorbed by the raisins.

Transfer the dough to a large, clean bowl, cover with plastic wrap or a dampened kitchen towel, and let the dough rise in a warm place until it has doubled in size, 1 to 2 hours.

Prepare a 2 ½-quart (10-cup) *Kugelhopf* mold. (Molds measuring 9 to 10 inches across the top usually have a capacity of 2 to 2 ½ quarts.) If using a traditional earthenware *Kugelhopf* mold, be sure that it has

been properly seasoned beforehand. Coat the entire interior and top rim of the mold generously with unsalted butter. Press a whole almond into each of the grooves in the bottom of the mold.

Dust your hands with flour. Punch down the dough and knead it lightly. Then pick up the mass of sticky dough and gently place it into the mold, with the tube poking up through the center. The mold should be about half full of dough. Cover with plastic wrap or a dampened kitchen towel and let sit in a warm place until the dough has risen almost to the top, 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Preheat the oven to 350° F. Bake the *Kugelhopf* on the middle rack for 45 to 50 minutes, or until a skewer inserted into the cake comes out clean. Remove the *Kugelhopf* from the oven and let it cool in the mold, on a wire rack, for 5 minutes. Then invert the *Kugelhopf* onto the rack and carefully remove the mold. Let the *Kugelhopf* cool completely on the rack.

Wrap the cooled cake in plastic and let it rest for 24 hours. Just before serving, sift a coating of confectioner's sugar over the top and sides. (Or mix 1 cup of confectioner's sugar with 2 tablespoons of Kirsch, Cognac, or milk, and drizzle this glaze over the top.)

*Variation:* To make *Kugelhopf salé* (*Kugelhopf au lard*, *Spackkugelhopf*) reduce the sugar to ¼ cup, increase the salt to 1 teaspoon, and omit the raisins, lemon zest, and almonds. In place of the raisins knead in ½ cup of coarsely chopped walnuts and 3 to 4 thick slices of smoked bacon that have been diced, cooked until light brown but not crisp, and drained on paper towels. (Some cooks also add a small onion, finely chopped and sautéed until soft.) Omit the confectioner's sugar on top.

#### NOTES

1. As retold from a handout at the Musée Alsacien, Strasbourg.
2. Phone conversation with Madeleine Kamman, 6 July 2010.
3. Jill Norman, quoted in Robert Fresson, *The Taste of France* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1983), 112.