

Edible Art

Springerle Cookies

WHEN I WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, a favorite cousin gave me an unusual Christmas gift: a small wooden rolling pin with flower and animal designs carved into it. She also included a recipe for German *Springerle* cookies, their tops to be embossed with the designs on the special rolling pin.

I could hardly wait to make a batch of *Springerle* cookies with that exotic-looking utensil. But the results were disappointing. A triumph of form over function, the little white cookies were more pleasing to the eye than to the palate—pretty to look at, but so hard and dry that it was almost impossible to bite into them. And their taste couldn't compare with the other much more flavorful German cookies that my mother always baked at Christmastime.

So my *Springerle* rolling pin became a mere decoration, gathering dust on display in my many kitchens over the years. Only after I moved to Germany did I learn to make *Springerle* cookies correctly and to fully appreciate the taste and texture—as well as the history and symbolism—of these “printed” cookies that are such an important part of the culinary traditions of southern Germany, Alsace, and parts of Bohemia and Switzerland.

Shaped by History

Springerle are anise-flavored cookies, pale ivory or eggshell-white in color, made from a simple dough of flour, sugar, and eggs, leavened, in former times, with hartshorn salt (baker's ammonia, ammonium carbonate) but now more commonly with standard double-acting baking powder. Most are square, rectangular, or circular in shape, although some are cut in the form of hearts, stars, or human or animal figures. All have a picture or design imprinted on the top by a specially carved rolling pin or flat mold (a press or board known as a *Springerle Model*). After the cookies are baked, the images are sometimes enhanced by being painted with edible colors—or with tempera or acrylic paints, if the cookies are to be used only as decorations.

Linguists have suggested several possibilities for the origin of the term *Springerle*, which translates literally as “little

jumper” or “little springer.” Some claim that the name refers to the sacred leaping horse that belonged to Wotan, king of the Nordic gods in the pre-Christian era. Others think the name refers to a popular Renaissance-era motif of a jumping horse or a mounted rider carved into cookie molds dating from that time. Many believe that it simply refers to the fact that the flat cookie dough rises, or springs up, to half again its height during baking, forming a base or “little foot” (*Füssle* or *Füsschen*) with the printed design on the cookie's top (*Köpfle*).

Specially shaped, decorated, or imprinted breads and pastries have had a long history of use in ceremonies and celebrations, with some of oldest known pastry molds dating from 4,500 years ago. Early Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans shaped breads into the forms of plants, animals, and the sun; decorated breads and pastries with ornaments of dough; and stamped images on dough with wooden and ceramic molds.

Historians trace the precursors of image cookies in northern Europe back to the Julfest, a midwinter celebration of pre-Christian Germanic tribes. Julfest ceremonies included the sacrificing of animals to the gods in the hope that such offerings would bring a mild winter and an early spring. Poor people, who could not afford to kill any of their animals, made token sacrifices in the form of animal-shaped dough. Vestiges of these practices survive in Germanic regions from the North Sea and the Baltic Sea southward to the Alps in the baking of shaped-and-stamped cookies such as *Springerle*, *Anisquezli*, *Lebkuchen*, *Speculaas/Spekulatius*, *Frankfurter Brenten*, *Würzburger Marzipan*, *Nürnberger Eierzucker/Nürnberger Marzipan*, and Swiss *Tirggel* and *Leckerli*. Indeed, one often feels a sense of hesitation before biting into any of these imprinted cookies—not only the reluctance to destroy a small work of culinary folk art but also, when the image on the cookie is that of a person or animal, the added sense of performing a symbolic act of cannibalism or the ritual slaughter of another living being. However, in some cultures the ingesting of these symbolic shapes is a positive act, a way of gaining the desirable attributes of the particular human or animal depicted on the cookie, such as the beauty of a fine lady or the strength of a lion.



Making Springerle cookies.

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Schwabian Roots

The cookies known today as *Springerle* are said to have originated at least five centuries ago in the region of Schwabia in southern Germany. Their popularity soon spread to other nearby regions of Europe—westward to Alsace, southward to Switzerland, north and eastward to Bavaria and Bohemia.

White anise-flavored egg-sugar cookies leavened with potassium carbonate are among the oldest types of cookies known in Alsace, dating from the sixteenth century. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, such cookies were being made with designs imprinted on them by flat wooden molds, square or rectangular. And by the end of the nineteenth century, every family in Alsace was said to have its own hand-carved *Springerle* boards or rolling pins, made at home, purchased at seasonal markets, or inherited from ancestors.

In Schwabia, the home of *Springerle*, the baking of these cookies is still a special art. In many households *Springerle* recipes and carved *Springerle* molds are family treasures handed down from one generation to the next. In late November near the start of Advent, groups of Schwabian women traditionally gather at one of their homes for a *Springerle Backabend* (*Springerle* baking evening). They pool their supplies of sugar, eggs, and flour and share the work of weighing and beating the ingredients, then rolling, stamping, and cutting the dough for huge batches of *Springerle* cookies, which are later baked and divided among the participants. Some bakers still perform these tasks with reverence, reflecting the mystical-religious significance that was attached to *Springerle* in former times.

“You must beat the dough with an electric mixer on slow speed for thirty minutes,” said a vendor of wooden

Springerle molds at Munich's open-air Christkindlmarkt held annually during Advent. "In the old days, children were enlisted to do this task by hand. Then you knead the dough into a ball and leave it overnight in a cool, dry place. The next day, roll out the dough, press the designs into it, and cut it into shapes. Then let them dry overnight in a warm room. That's what makes the tops stay white and the proper 'foot' form on the bottom."

Like other popular Germanic Christmas cookies such as *Pfeffernüsse* (Peppernuts) and *Zimtsterne* (Cinnamon Stars), *Springerle* contain no butter—and hence were among the holiday foods that could be eaten by people who observed religious fasting laws that forbade the consumption of butter during Advent. Other recipes for *Springerle* reflect even stricter fasting guidelines, replacing the eggs in the recipe with milk. Although such customs are seldom followed today, *Springerle* can still be eaten in good conscience by dieters since each (two-inch square) contains only thirty calories.

After coming out of the oven, the hard, dry cookies are left in the open air for a few days to soften or put into an airtight container with a piece of bread or half an apple, from which the cookies absorb a bit of moisture. Some recipes recommend that *Springerle* be stored for one week to let the flavors mellow before they are eaten. But most German cooks will tell you that *Springerle* must "ripen" in their container for at least three to four weeks before they are ready to eat. That's why many people bake their Christmas *Springerle* well before the beginning of Advent.

Intricate Molds

The *Springerle* molds used for imprinting the cookies are often works of art themselves, many reflecting the cultural history of the regions where they were made. The earliest surviving wooden molds are flat ones dating from the sixteenth century made of fruit wood (apple, cherry, pear, plum) with intricate designs carved into them. *Springerle* molds have also been made out of other woods (hard and soft), stone, ceramics, metals, plaster, wax, and even thick pieces of leather. In the late Middle Ages *Formensteher*—carvers of cake and cookie molds—had their own craftsmen's guilds. And *Zuckerbäcker*—bakers of confections such as *Springerle*—were often required to pass examinations on cookie-mold carving before they were allowed to practice their trade.

The designs carved into early *Springerle* molds reflected the Christian religious significance of these cookies: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Nativity scenes, the Holy Family, the Madonna and Child, the Christ Child, angels,

fish, Old and New Testament saints, the Last Supper, the symbolic paschal lamb carrying a banner emblazoned with a cross. Animal figures recalled the pre-Christian origins of *Springerle*: sacrificial cattle, sheep, goats, horses, and pigs. Secular motifs gradually gained acceptance, too: story-tale characters, members of royalty, political figures, ladies in fancy dresses, knights on horseback, genre scenes (of family life, sleigh and carriage rides, people at work and play), musicians and musical instruments, trains and ships, exotic or mystical figures (lions, unicorns, mermaids), letters of the alphabet, and the coats of arms of noble families. Symbolic images were also popular: deer (virility), rabbits (fertility), dogs (fidelity), squirrels (happiness), pigs (good luck), hearts (love), keys (success), St. George slaying the dragon (the triumph of good over evil).

A few wooden molds have designs carved on both sides, back and front. Others are carved to produce different sides of a three-dimensional cookie that can be assembled from the separate parts: a hobby horse, a standing stag, a seated lamb, a woven basket, a circus ring, a miniature baroque house, a marriage bed with the newlywed couple in it, a rocking baby cradle with a swaddled baby to put inside. (Many of these molds were originally intended for shaping marzipan and tragacanth confections or decorations, but they can also be used for *Springerle*.) All of these *Springerle* molds also share many characteristics with their close cousins, gingerbread cookie and cake molds from Scandinavia in the north and throughout Central Europe southward to Hungary and parts of the Balkans.

Exhibits of historic cookie molds can be seen in several museums in Germany, France, and Switzerland. Notable collections are on display in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum (Nürnberg), the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum (Munich), the Württembergisches Landesmuseum (Stuttgart), the Deutsches Brotmuseum (Ulm), the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum (Zürich), the Musée Alsacien (Strasbourg), the Musée d'Unterlinden (Colmar), the Musée d'Arts et Traditions Populaires (Marmoutier), and the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires (La Petite Pierre). Many small local city museums in Germany and Switzerland also exhibit old cookie molds that were made and used by artisans and bakers in those regions.

Today's modern *Springerle* molds replicate many of those older designs, along with simpler renditions of birds, butterflies, dogs, cats, hedgehogs, fish, flowers, fruits, snowflakes, bells, Father Christmas/St. Nicholas/Santas, evergreen trees, and signs of the Zodiac. During the fifteen years when I lived in Germany, my own *Springerle* mold collection grew to include three rolling pins and more

than forty wooden boards with single or multiple designs carved on them, no two motifs alike. I purchased most of these new *Springerle* molds at the open-air Christmas markets held throughout Germany every December from small villages to major cities such as Stuttgart and Munich. But I could afford only to look longingly at the beautiful, but astronomically priced, older molds that occasionally turned up in antique shops and at flea markets.

Cookie-mold carving is a dying art, with only a handful of craftsmen in northern Europe and North America still making the traditional carved wooden molds. A few still carve each motif by hand; others use machines to cut part of the design and then add their own finishing touches by hand. Some cookware companies in the United States sell new wooden machine-made mass-produced *Springerle* boards and rolling pins imported from Europe, as well as less expensive, but poorly made, copies from China and Taiwan.

The demand for authentic historical cookie molds is so great, and the supply so limited, that many contemporary collectors often can't afford the premium prices commanded for antique ones. Instead, they settle for reproductions of antique molds cast from the originals made of powdered wood and resin composite stained to look like wood, most of which are copies of molds in private or museum collections. These have the advantage of being aesthetically pleasing, historically accurate reproductions that are also eminently functional, requiring less care than traditional wooden molds. You can use them to make intricate old-fashioned *Springerle* cookies and then hang the molds on the walls as attractive kitchen decorations. Although these replicas are somewhat expensive, too, their availability to anyone willing to pay the price makes them accessible to a much wider range of home bakers and professional pastry chefs who might otherwise not be able to reproduce the older *Springerle* cookie designs in their own kitchens.

Variety and Versatility

In Europe *Springerle* cookies are usually served in the afternoon with coffee or tea or sometimes with a glass of chilled white wine (a German Spätlese, an Auslese from the Rhine, Mosel, or Baden regions, or a Muscat or not-too-dry Riesling from Alsace). *Springerle* are also a traditional part of many Germanic *Bunteteller*, those big platters of homemade Christmas cookies served to family and friends during Advent. Although *Springerle* are now most often associated with the Christmas season, from Advent through Epiphany, the motifs on historical *Springerle* molds indicate that these cookies were baked for religious holidays and secular events

throughout the year, including Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, birthdays, name days, confirmations, betrothals, weddings, baptisms, anniversaries, and harvest festivals.

Springerle molds, originals or reproductions, can be used not only for making these traditional egg-sugar cookies but also for molding marzipan, shortbread, divinity, and certain kinds of spice cookies. In addition, *Springerle* molds are used for making both edible and inedible decorations from cookie dough, wax, ceramic clay, salt dough, pewter, paper clay, and papier-mâché—to embellish cakes, to hang on Christmas trees, to tie on packages as personalized gift tags, and to display year-round as household decorations.

In earlier times *Springerle* cookies, painted or unpainted, were exchanged between lovers; baked to celebrate special occasions; or used to teach reading and writing, tell tales, document political events, picture popular landmarks, depict the latest clothing fashions, and illustrate biblical stories (serving the same didactic function as stained glass windows in churches). Today, some people give large elaborate intricately painted *Springerle* cookies as Christmas cards, a revival of an old German custom that has found a new form in American corporate gift-giving.

My own Christmas tree is adorned with dozens of *Springerle* decorations made from salt dough, terra cotta, porcelain, pewter, red- and brown-colored wax, natural beeswax, and traditional *Springerle* cookie dough. (Some of the edible cookies are now two decades old and still as fresh looking as when I bought them.) And—taking a cue from my cousin so many years ago—I've found that an especially nice gift for someone who likes to bake is a box of homemade *Springerle* cookies, along with a *Springerle* rolling pin or a couple of flat *Springerle* molds and my own recipes for making classic *Springerle* cookies, *Springerle* marzipan confections, and *Springerle* salt-dough ornaments.

Springerle forms have even found their way into present-day American classrooms. I know a woman who uses *Springerle* molds as learning aids in the German-language courses she teaches at a secondary school in Fredericksburg, Texas. Her personal collection includes both handmade wooden molds and resin replicas purchased through mail-order catalogs, at antique shops, and over the Internet. "I've never actually used them for cookies," she admitted. "I use them for cultural activities and to make Christmas ornaments out of paper clay. It's a good way to teach students about German language and history. They date back five hundred years or so, and a lot of them have German words carved in them, so it's interesting to see what they say. Every mold has a different story behind it."

Care and Use of *Springerle* Molds

Wooden Springerle molds should never be put into water.

Newly purchased molds should be rubbed with block oil and left overnight on a wire rack for the oil to soak into the wood. Some recipes say to dust the molds with flour, cornstarch, or confectioners' sugar before using them to stamp the dough. But most *Springerle* bakers know that putting these powders directly into the molds can reduce the sharpness of the designs. Instead, they suggest dusting only the top of the dough before imprinting it, not the molds themselves.

Never rap or bang wooden cookie molds against the counter, because they might crack. After using the molds, brush them out well with a clean dry toothbrush and reoil them lightly before storing them in the cupboard or hanging them on the wall as decorations.

Resin molds are easy to clean with a soft-bristled brush (toothbrush or mushroom brush). They can also be washed with warm water and liquid soap and then dried thoroughly before using again or storing away. Metal and glazed ceramic molds can be treated in the same manner.

Unglazed terra cotta molds and more fragile wax molds should be brushed well with a soft cloth or very soft-bristle brush. Unglazed ceramic molds can be washed in warm water (no soap) if necessary, but be sure to let them dry very well before storage or use.

Any molds displayed for decorative purposes should be dusted thoroughly before being used to stamp cookie dough. ●

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SOURCES OF SPRINGERLE MOLDS

The House-on-the-Hill, PO Box 7003, Villa Park, Illinois 60181 USA. Tel: (630) 279-4455. Fax: (630) 279-5544. E-mail: info@houseonthehill.net. Web site: www.houseonthehill.net (with good information about *Springerle* cookies, molds, and recipes). The largest mail-order source in the United States for resin reproductions of old European *Springerle* molds from private and museum collections. Fascinating, fully illustrated catalog (\$3.00) with hundreds of historical cookie molds.

HOBBI Picture Cookie Molds, Gene and June Wilson, PO Box 25, Belleville, Illinois 62222 USA. Tel: (618) 233-7689. E-mail: genewilson@cookiemold.com. Web site: www.cookiemold.com (with good information about cookies, molds, and recipes and links to other sites). Large selection of carved wooden cookie molds, cookie stamps, and butter stamps. Custom designs also available. Free illustrated 16-page catalog.

D. Dillon Carvings, 850 Meadow Lane, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania 17011 USA. Tel: (717) 761-6895. E-mail: ddillon1@aol.com. Hand-carved traditional wooden cookie molds and shortbread molds. Illustrated price list (\$1.00) refundable with first order.

Springerle molds are also sold at some specialty cookware stores such as Sur La Table. Web site: www.surlatable.com.

You can also make *Springerle* cookies with some kinds of carved wooden butter molds, cheese molds, or bread stamps found in many areas of eastern and southern Europe. Even without special molds, you can make *Springerle* cookies using a crystal wineglass with a deeply cut fancy design on it. Roll out the dough with a standard rolling pin and dust the dough lightly with flour or confectioners' sugar. Roll the glass firmly over it to imprint the design on the surface. Then cut the patterned dough into squares, rectangles, circles, or other shapes with a knife, cookie cutter, or fluted pastry crimper.

Springerle Cookies

The cookie dough must be mixed, rolled, and stamped 12 to 24 hours before baking. *Springerle* should be made on a dry day because high humidity prevents the cookies from drying properly.

INGREDIENTS

4 large eggs, at room temperature

¼ teaspoon anise oil or 1 tablespoon anise liqueur (optional)

4 cups confectioners' sugar (sifted, then measured by spooning gently into a cup and leveling off the top with a knife)

1 lemon peel, grated

4 cups bleached all-purpose flour (sifted, then measured by spooning gently into a cup and leveling off the top with a knife)

1 teaspoon baking powder

2 tablespoons whole anise seeds

Beat eggs in a large bowl with an electric mixer on high speed for 10 minutes, until eggs are very pale-colored and thick. Reduce mixer speed to medium. Add (optional) anise oil or anise liqueur. Gradually add confectioners' sugar, 2 tablespoons at a time, beating continuously. After all the sugar has been added, beat on high speed for 10 minutes longer. Stir in grated lemon peel.

Sift flour and baking powder together into another bowl. Gradually stir flour into the egg mixture, ½ cup at a time, mixing with a large wooden spoon until the dough is smooth. Transfer dough to a floured pastry board and knead by hand for 5 minutes, until dough is soft and smooth and doesn't stick to your hands. Wrap dough securely in plastic wrap and refrigerate 2 to 3 hours.

Lightly butter 2 large baking sheets. Put anise seeds into a small plastic bag and crush them lightly with a rolling pin. Sprinkle the crushed anise seeds evenly over the baking sheets.

Lightly dust a pastry board with flour or confectioners' sugar. Break off one-fourth of the chilled dough, leaving the remainder tightly wrapped in plastic (at room temperature). Working quickly, because the dough dries rapidly, roll out the dough with a standard rolling pin to a thickness of $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Dust top of dough lightly with flour, cornstarch, or confectioners' sugar.

If using flat molds (*Springerle* boards), press them firmly into the dough to stamp the designs on the dough. If using a *Springerle* rolling pin, roll it only once—firmly—across the sheet of dough. With a sharp knife, pizza cutter, or fluted pastry cutter, cut the imprinted dough into individual cookies, each with a separate design in the middle. (If you plan to use the cookies as Christmas tree ornaments or gift tags, punch a hole in the top of each with a skewer or matchstick. After baking, thread a piece of ribbon or yarn through the hole.)

Use a spatula to transfer the *Springerle* cookies to the baking sheets, placing cookies $\frac{1}{2}$ inch apart. Roll, stamp, and cut the remaining dough, rerolling any dough scraps, until all the dough has been used. Let unbaked cookies sit in the open air, uncovered, in a warm room (away from children and pets) for 12 to 24 hours to dry thoroughly.

Preheat oven to 300°F. Bake cookies on the middle rack of the oven, 1 sheet at a time, for 12 to 15 minutes. Watch carefully—don't let them overbake. They should be white on the top and pale golden on the bottom. Immediately, remove *Springerle* cookies from the baking sheets and transfer them to wire racks to cool for at least 1 hour. Brush remaining anise seeds off the baking sheets into an airtight container for storing the *Springerle*.

When *Springerle* have cooled completely, put them into the container with half an unpeeled apple (cut side up) or a slice of bread set on top of the cookies to make the *Springerle* soften while their flavor is developing. Cover the container tightly. Leave the cookies in the container for at least 1 week (and up to 4 weeks), changing the apple or bread every few days to prevent mold from forming.

After their flavor has ripened, *Springerle* can be eaten or stored for longer periods in the freezer. Stack them in a plastic freezer container with a piece of wax paper between each layer of cookies.

Serve *Springerle* cookies with coffee, tea, or a glass of chilled, not-too-dry German or Alsatian white wine.

Yield: Approximately 60 (2-inch square) *Springerle* cookies. (Yield will vary, depending on size of cookie molds used.)

Note: *Springerle* cookies can be left totally white, or the designs on them can be painted with edible coloring materials. If you don't intend to eat the cookies, the designs can be painted with tempera or acrylic paints.

Marzipan *Springerle* Confections

Rich, sweet, unbaked confections that look like baked *Springerle* cookies.

INGREDIENTS

1 pound almond paste
1 jar (7 ounce) marshmallow creme
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup light corn syrup
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon almond extract
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon anise oil or 1 tablespoon anise liqueur
1 lemon peel, grated
6 cups confectioners' sugar (sifted before measuring)
Additional confectioners' sugar (for dusting)

Crumble almond paste into a large bowl. Add marshmallow creme, corn syrup, almond extract, anise oil or anise liqueur, and lemon peel. Mix with a large fork or potato masher until well blended.

Add confectioners' sugar, 1 cup at a time, kneading by hand until all ingredients are well mixed and a soft dough forms. (The dough will be very sticky at first.) Form dough into a ball, cover securely with plastic wrap, and refrigerate 2 to 3 hours.

Line 2 large baking sheets with wax paper, and lightly sprinkle with confectioners' sugar. Dust a pastry board with confectioners' sugar. Break off one-fourth of the marzipan dough and then roll and cut it according to the directions for *Springerle* cookies (using only confectioners' sugar to dust the pastry board and the top of the dough).

Use a spatula to transfer marzipan *Springerle* to the baking sheets. Let the confections dry uncovered at room temperature for 12 hours or overnight. Then carefully transfer the marzipan (top side up) to wire racks so that the bottoms can dry for another 12 hours. Store lightly stacked in a shallow tightly covered container.

Yield: 60 to 70 (2-inch square) confections.