

Nuremberger Gingerbread: Deliciousness on a Wafer

Christmas time in Franconia is inextricably linked with the delicious tasting original Nuremberg “oblaten” (wafer) lebkuchen. This spicy baked good is already more than 600 years old and is loved by young and old. It was most likely monks who began to bake honey cakes here in the 11th century. They placed the dough on a wafer to stop it from sticking to the baking tray. These honey cakes were not the first in history. In the ancient world, predecessors of gingerbread were already baked by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. They were not only eaten, but also carried into battle as a talisman or placed in the graves of the pharaohs.

Painkilling Cloves

Why is Nuremberg the home of world-famous gingerbread? That is thanks to its very convenient location on the crossroads of the ancient spice and trade routes. Because Nuremberg was one of the most important trading centers in the Middle Ages, exotic spices such as cinnamon, cloves, cardamon, nutmeg and exotic almonds could be easily acquired. A positive effect on health was attributed to them. Cloves, for example, are strong painkillers, reduce inflammation, a sedative, a disinfectant, relieve cramps and stimulate the appetite. Cinnamon supposedly did not only aid digestion, but also encourage circulation, blood flow, appetite and the burning of fat.

Although lebkuchen contain many healthy ingredients their name has nothing to do with the word life. One presumes that the word developed from the Latin word for flatbread (libum). Because sugar was a luxury good and Nuremberg and the surrounding area ideal for beekeeping, one used – as the older name indicates – honey as a sweetener.

The honey was produced in the forests surrounding the city, called the “Lorenzer Reichswald”. This was at that time a forested landscape with pines, hazelnut bushes, linden trees, heather, lingonberries and wild blueberries. The region was known as the “Holy Roman Empire’s bee garden”. As early as the 12th century, guilds took over the production of gingerbread; the first written mention of a Nuremberg “Lebküchner” is in a document from 1395.

It was almost 250 years later, in 1643, that a “sworen” Nuremberg gingerbread baking craft with 14 members was founded. The recipe was so secret, that no gingerbread baker was allowed to leave the city. Only someone who was born or married into a family of gingerbread bakers could become a “Lebzeltner” – as this craft was called.

Refined Medicine

The city council recommended that one eat gingerbread at every festive occasion, such as Christmas, baptisms or weddings. One could eat them even during Lent, because gingerbread was considered to be medicine. An especially fine type is the “Elisenlebkuchen”. According to legend, this gingerbread has its name from Elisabeth, the daughter of a Nuremberg gingerbread baker. The story says that the Nuremberg Lebküchner loved his daughter very much and she meant everything to him as his wife had already died of disease. One day his daughter became very ill. No doctor could help her and the gingerbread baker was desperate for an answer. In his hour of need, he thought about a special cure. As a gingerbread baker, he knew the value of exotic spices and created a very special gingerbread for his Elisabeth. He didn't use any flour and only the very highest-quality ingredients. And Elisabeth did regain her strength and was healthy again. Even today, Elisenlebkuchen may only contain a maximum of ten percent flour – cinnamon, vanilla, cloves, allspice, nutmeg, ginger and cardamom produce the typical gingerbread aroma. Passed down from generation to generation, secret recipes for Nuremberg gingerbread are still used today. Since 1996, the label “Nuremberg Lebkuchen” is a “protected geographical designation” recognized across Europe.

Bake your Own Gingerbread

If this has made you long for gingerbread, you can bake your own using this recipe from the 16th century:

1 pound sugar

½ Seidl (cup) or a 1/8erlein (an old unit of measurement) honey

4 Loth (an old unit of measurement) Zimet (cinnamon)

1 ½ Muskatrumpf (nutmeg)

2 Loth ginger

1 Loth Caramumlein (cardamon)

½ Quentlein (an old unit of measurement) pepper

1 Diethäuflein (an old unit of measurement) flour — gives 5 Loth

Exciting and interesting facts about this Nuremberg specialty can be learned during a tour “From Lebkuchen and Moods, Love and Lust”. Together with a “Lebküchlerin”, the tour explores most beautiful places in the St. Sebald side of the Old Town, which were also important for gingerbread bakers.

One of the most important companies for Nuremberg’s gingerbread production is “Lebkuchen Schmidt”, founded in 1927. At Christmas time each year, the “Hexenhaus” of Lebkuchen Schmidt is a popular photo subject among the many booths at the Nuremberg Christkindlesmarkt. Here, a gingerbread baker makes honey cakes each day.

If you would like to try to create a Nuremberg gingerbread yourself, you have the opportunity to take part in a baking class from the Cookionista Cooking School and make one of the traditional delicacies yourself.