

## Nuremberg Gingerbread: Lots of Flavor on a Wafer

Christmas time in Franconia is inseparably linked to the delicious tasting and wonderfully aromatic original Nuremberg gingerbread, called "Lebkuchen" in German. This sweet and spicy baked good has been around for more than 600 years and is loved by old and young alike.

It was most likely monks that began to bake these honey-based cakes in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. They placed the dough on wafers so that it wouldn't stick to the baking tray. The monks were said to have a preference for the hearty taste of heavily spiced gingerbread whereas nuns liked the taste of "sweetened bread" (panis mellitus). These honey cakes were not the first: In ancient times, the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all baked a precursor of gingerbread. These were not just eaten, but worn as a talisman in battle or placed as a burial gift in the graves of the Egyptian pharaohs.

### Pain-killing Cloves

Nuremberg's fame and tradition as the home of gingerbread is due to its convenient location at the intersection of historical spice and trade routes. Because the Free Imperial City was an important trading center, exotic spices such as cinnamon, cloves, cardamom and nutmeg and almonds from far-off places could easily be obtained. These were attributed with positive effects on the health. Cloves, for example, were seen as a powerful pain killer, anti-inflammatory and tranquilizer and were used to relieve cramps, boost the appetite and as a disinfectant. Cinnamon was thought to stimulate not only the digestion, but also the circulation, blood flow, appetite and the burning of fat.

Even when "Lebkuchen" contain many healthy ingredients, the name in German has nothing to do with the word "Leben" ("Life"). It is assumed that the word comes from the Latin word for a round loaf of bread: "libum". Because sugar was a luxury product, and the area surrounding Nuremberg had favorable conditions for bee-keeping, one used honey as a sweetener – hence the name honey-cakes.

The honey was produced in Nuremberg's "Reichswald", which at the time was a forest landscape with pine trees, hazelnuts, linden trees, heather and blooming lingonberry and huckleberry bushes. The region was known as the "Holy Roman Empire's Bee Garden". As early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, guilds began to bake gingerbread; the first written mention of a Nuremberg "Lebküchner" – the local name for a gingerbread baker – dates from 1395.

It was almost 250 years later, in 1643, that a special "sworn" Nuremberg gingerbread craft was founded – with 14 members at that time. The recipe was so secret that no gingerbread baker was allowed to leave the city. A "Lebzeltner" – the name of these artisans – could only be born as part of or marry into a gingerbread-baking family.

### **A Wonderful Remedy**

The consumption of gingerbread was recommended by the city council for every festive occasion: Christmas, baptisms or weddings, for example. They were even allowed during Lent: After all, gingerbread was considered to be a medicine ... but not everyone could afford such a pleasurable cure.

One of the most delicious and exclusive gingerbreads today is the "Elisenlebkuchen". A legend exists about its name: It is said to come from Elisabeth, the daughter of a Nuremberg gingerbread baker. The story says that this baker had a daughter who he loved very much. She meant the world to him, because his wife had already died of disease. One day his beloved daughter also fell ill.

No doctor could give him advice and the gingerbread baker was close to despair. In great distress he thought of a miraculous cure. As a "Lebküchner" he knew the value of exotic spices, so he baked Elisabeth a very special gingerbread. He used no flour

and only the very best ingredients. And Elisabeth did indeed regain her strength and became healthy again.

Whether the legend is true and this gingerbread was named after Elizabeth doesn't really matter: What matters is the taste. "Elisenlebkuchen" are a delight. Today, they contain no more than 10% flour and the spices cinnamon, vanilla, cloves, coriander, allspice, nutmeg, ginger and cardamom create a special gingerbread aroma. The secret recipes for this Nuremberg specialty have been passed down from generation to generation and are still used today.

Nuremberg gingerbread is not only famous worldwide, it is also protected: Since 1996, the name "Nuremberg Lebkuchen" is recognized by the European Union as a "Protected Geographical Indication".

### **Want to Bake Your Own Gingerbread?**

If all this information has whet your appetite for gingerbread, you can try your hand at a gingerbread recipe from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Here it is in the original German and in (an attempt at) translation:

1 Pfund Zucker	[1 pound sugar]
½ Seidlein oder 1/8erlein Honig	[½ Seidlein honey; 1 Seidlein = ca. 500 ml]
4 Loth Zimet	[4 Loth cinnamon; 1 Loth = ca. 18 grams]
1 ½ Muskatrimpf	[1 ½ freshly ground nutmegs]
2 Loth Ingwer	[2 Loth ginger]
1 Loth Caramumlein	[1 Loth cardamom]
½ Quentlein Pfeffer	[½ Quentlein pepper; 1 Quentlein = 1/5 Loth]
1 Diethäuflein Mehl	[1 Diethäuflein flour; 1 Diethäuflein = 2 Mass]
— ergibt 5 Loth	[ — gives 5 Loth]

If you want to know more interesting facts about Nuremberg gingerbread, you can take the city tour "[Of Gingerbread: Whims, Love and Merrymaking](#)", where you can visit the most beautiful places in the Old Town that have a tie to gingerbread – with a gingerbread baker herself!

One of the most important companies producing gingerbread in Nuremberg is "Lebkuchen Schmidt", founded in 1927. Each year during the Christmas holiday

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season, the “Hexenhaus” – Witch’s House – from Lebkuchen Schmidt is a favorite photo motif at the Nuremberg Christkindlesmarkt. Here, a gingerbread baker makes fresh honey cakes every day, while Schmidt Lebkuchen of all types and flavors are offered for sales. Those who would like to try to bake their own traditional and delicious Nuremberg gingerbread can give it a try at a Lebkuchen baking course at the Cookionista cooking school.