



Lebkuchen

Lebkuchen, or gingerbread as it is known in the United States, is a delicious treat served throughout the year in Germany. Just before the 1st Advent, the stores and bakeries begin to fill with many different varieties of *Lebkuchen*. Sometimes the *Lebkuchen* is shaped like logs and covered with chocolate or a light sugar glaze. Other types, like the typical Nuremberger *Lebkuchen*, are filled with nuts, candied fruits and many spices, while others are baked on thin wafers, or "Oblaten." There are cookies shaped into little people, St. Niklaus, stars or animals. Of course, there is also the *Hexenhaus*, or "witch's house," made famous in the Grimm Brother's retelling of the "Hansel and Gretel" fairy tale.



At other times of the year, *Lebkuchen* is found mostly at fairs or carnivals around the country, but especially in the southern areas. Shaped into large hearts, these *Lebkuchen* are suspended from ribbons and decorated with white and colored icing, bearing phrases like "*Ich liebe Dich*," "*Küss mich!*" or "*Komm mit mir!*" They are probably the forerunner of American-style Valentines. The tradition of wearing *Lebkuchen* may date back to ancient Egyptian times, when people wore honey cakes – the forerunner of gingerbread – into battle as a talisman. Some were even buried with Egyptian kings, who considered honey to be a gift of the gods, a substance imbued with magic, healing and life-enhancing qualities.

The term *Lebkuchen* probably stems from the Latin word "libum," which means loaf. Another theory suggests the word comes from an old German word "lebbe" which meant sweet. The manufacture of *Lebkuchen* appears to have spread throughout Western Europe at the end of the eleventh century, possibly introduced by Crusaders returning from wars in the eastern Mediterranean. Monks and nuns were among the earliest to make quantities of the spiced flat cakes, which could be kept for long periods of time. Of all the countries in Europe, Germany is the one with the longest and strongest tradition of flat, shaped gingerbreads.

Nuremberg is often described as the "*Lebkuchen* capital" of the world. Located at an important junction of the ancient trade and spice routes, which carried sacks of spices from the East via Venice and Genoa, Nuremberg was in an ideal location. Flour and butter were prevalent everywhere, but most Europeans did



not have ready access to spices like cinnamon, ginger and cloves, which were imported from the Middle East and other distant locales. Moreover, The huge imperial forest around Nuremberg, then known as the Holy Roman Emperor's Apiary, supplied large quantities of honey, a key ingredient in German-style gingerbread. Honey was the most important sweetener of the time, since East Indian sugar was rare and expensive.

Nuremberger *Lebkuchen* was not baked in the home, but was the preserve of an exclusive Guild of master bakers, the *Lebkuchler*. There is documentation dating as far back as 1395 of a Nuremberg bakery specializing in *Lebkuchen*. These days, even if you live far from Germany, you can order *Lebkuchen* online, directly from the Nuremberg manufacturers, and it will be shipped to you across the oceans. And if you get the chance to visit Nuremberg, there is even a display in the local museum dedicated to this delicious treat.



Of course, many European immigrants brought their recipes with them when they emigrated to the United States, including those for Lebkuchen. Americans have been baking gingerbread for many years, and it has become a holiday favorite. American recipes usually call for fewer spices than those types made in Germany and other European countries. In New England, gingerbread was made using maple syrup, while in the South, it was commonly made with molasses.

Nuremberger Lebkuchen

3 eggs
200 grams of sugar
1 tsp. vanilla extract
75 grams citronat
lemon rind, grated
¼ tsp ground cloves
¼ tsp allspice
¼ tsp. cardamom
1 tsp cinnamon
200 grams ground almonds
250 grams flour
1 tsp baking powder
thin baking wafers

Cream eggs, sugar and vanilla. Add chopped citronat, almonds, and spices, and then stir in flour, baking powder until well combined. Put spoonful of dough onto each baking wafer and bake at 325 degrees for about 15 minutes. Cool completely and then glaze.



American-Style Gingerbread

4 ½ cups flour
1 Tbsp. cinnamon
2 tsp. ground ginger
¼ tsp. ground cloves
1 ¼ tsp ground baking soda
½ cup butter, softened
½ cup packed brown sugar
2 large eggs
¾ cup molasses
Tubes of frosting for decoration

Sift the flour, spices and baking soda in a medium-sized bowl and set aside. Blend the butter and brown sugar in a food processor. Add the eggs, one at a time, and then the molasses. Slowly add the flour mixture, stirring after each addition. Refrigerate the dough for at least three hours. Roll it out and cut out shapes with cookie cutters. Bake on greased cookie sheets at 350 degrees for about 10 minutes. Makes about 25 small gingerbread hearts.

