

# The History of Gingerbread

Gingerbread has been baked in Europe since the eleventh century. In some places, it was a soft, delicately spiced cake; in others, a crisp, flat cookie, and in others, warm, thick, dark squares of "bread," sometimes served with a pitcher of lemon sauce or whipped cream. It was sometimes light, sometimes dark, sometimes sweet, sometimes spicy, but it was almost always cut into shapes such as men, women, stars or animals, and colorfully decorated or stamped with a mold and dusted with white sugar.

In Medieval England gingerbread meant simply "preserved ginger" and was an adaptation of the Old French *gingebras*, derived from the Latin name of the spice, *Zingibar*. It was only in the fifteenth century that the term came to be applied to a kind of cake made with treacle, an uncrystallized syrup drained from raw sugar during the refining process, and flavored with ginger. Ginger was also discovered to have a preservative effect when added to pastries and bread, and this probably led to the development of recipes for ginger cakes, cookies, and flavored breads.

From its very beginning gingerbread has been a fairground delicacy. Many fairs became known as "gingerbread fairs" and gingerbread items took on the alternative name in England of "fairings" which had the generic meaning of a gift given at, or brought from, a fair. Certain shapes were associated with different seasons: buttons and flowers were found at Easter fairs, and animals and birds were a feature in autumn. There is also more than one village tradition in England requiring unmarried women to eat gingerbread "husbands" at the fair if they are to stand a good chance of meeting a real husband.

Of all the countries in Europe, Germany is the one with the longest tradition of flat, shaped gingerbreads. At every autumn fair in Germany, and in the surrounding lands where the Germanic influence is strong, there are rows of stalls filled with hundreds of gingerbread hearts, decorated with white and colored icing and tied with ribbons.

During the nineteenth century, gingerbread was modernized. When the Grimm brothers collected volumes of German fairy tales they found one about Hansel and Gretel, two children who, abandoned in the woods by penniless parents, discovered a house made of bread, cake and candies.

At Christmas, gingerbread makes its most impressive appearance. The German practice of making *lebkuchen* houses never caught on in Britain in the same way as it did in North America, and it is here still that the most extraordinary creations are found.

Gingerbread making in North America has its origins in the traditions of the many settlers from all parts of Northern Europe who brought with them family recipes and customs. By the nineteenth century, America had been baking gingerbread for decades.

American recipes usually called for fewer spices than their European counterparts, but often make use of ingredients that were only available regionally. Maple syrup gingerbreads were made in New England, and in the South sorghum molasses was used. Regional variations began occurring as more people arrived from Europe. In Pennsylvania, the influence of German cooking was great and many traditional Germany gingerbreads reappeared in this area, especially at Christmas time.

Nowhere in the world is there a greater collection of gingerbread recipes than in America —there are so many variations in taste, form and presentation. With the vast choice of ingredients, baking aids and decorative items the imaginative cook can create the most spectacular gingerbread houses and centerpieces ever.

<http://www.brachs.wilton.com/history.asp>

## Types of Ginger

**Fresh** - "Fresh" is something of a misnomer as even the newly harvested root is dried slightly in the sun before packing for sale. At its peak, in January and February the pale golden sweet flesh is low in fiber and medium hot. The "hand" should be plump, firm and not too fibrous. The taste is mild and less "spicy" or "hot" than that of the ground spice. To use, fresh ginger is peeled for use in baked goods but left unpeeled if young and moist and used in savory dishes, i.e. Chinese stir-fries such as spicy three-pepper sesame beef. The root may be pickled in vinegar, canned, crystallized or preserved in syrup. Fresh rhizomes are best refrigerated, wrapped in paper towels, in tightly closed plastic bags, where they will keep for several weeks.

**Dried** - This is the unskinned rhizome which is washed and dried in the sun.

**Ground or powdered** - This is ground from gingerroot. It is used in sweet preparations such as cookies, cakes and puddings. It is best to buy small amounts of good quality ground ginger, as the volatile essential oil responsible for the flavor is easily lost in the air. Ground should never be substituted in recipes calling for fresh.