

Traditional Christmas Foods

(further information available on the website)

Buche de Noel

Buche de Noel is one of many traditional cakes baked at Christmas. As the name suggests, it is of French origin. The name of this recipe literally translates as "Christmas log," referring to the traditional Yule log burned centuries past. The ingredients suggest the cake is most likely a 19th century creation. That's when thinly rolled sponge cakes filled with jam or cream and covered with buttercream icing begin to show up in European cook books. Marzipan and meringue, typically employed for decorative purposes, date to the Medieval Ages and the 17th century respectively.

"[In France] where the buche de Noel, a roll of light sponge cake, is covered in chocolate or coffee buttercream textured to resemble bark. The conceit is carried further by mounding the cream over small pieces of cake stuck to the main roll, to represent trimmed branches. The ends of the roll and the cut faces of the branches are finished with vanilla cream, imitating pale newly cut wood, and the whole is decorated with leaves made from icing, or meringue mushrooms."

---Oxford Companion to Food, Alan Davidson, [Oxford University Press:Oxford] 1999 (p. 184)

Christmas cookies

Cakes of all shapes and sizes (including smaller items such as cookies) have been part of festive holiday rituals long before Christmas. Ancient cooks prepared sweet baked goods to mark significant occasions. Many of these recipes and ingredients (cinnamon, ginger, black pepper, almonds, dried fruits etc.) were introduced to Europe in the Middle Ages. They were highly prized and quickly incorporated into European baked goods. Christmas cookies, as we know them today, trace their roots to these Medieval European recipes. Dutch and German settlers introduced cookie cutters, decorative molds, and festive holiday decorations to America. German lebkuchen (gingerbread) was probably the first cake/cookie traditionally associated with Christmas. Sugar cookie type recipes descended from English traditions.

[1963]

"Merry Christmas Cookies

1/3 cup shortening

1/3 cup sugar

1 egg

2/3 cup hone

1 tsp. lemon flavoring

2 3/4 cups Gold Medal Flour

1 tsp. soda

1 tsp. salt

Mix shortening, sugar, egg, honey, and flavoring thoroughly. Measure flour by dipping method or by sifting. Stir together flour, soda, salt; blen in. Chill dough. Heat oven to 375 degrees F. (quick mod.). Roll dough out 1/4" thick. Cut into desired shapes (right). Place 1" apart on lightly greased baking sheet. bake 8 to 10 min., or until no imprint remains when touched lightly. When cool, ice and decorate if desired. makes about 5 doz. 2 1/2" cookies."

---Betty Crodker's Cooky Book, General Mills, facsimile 1963 edition [Hungry

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Minds:New York] 2002 (p. 30)

Christmas birds: peacocks, swans, geese & turkeys

Food historians tell us the practice of serving large, stuffed fowl for Christmas, like many other Christian holiday food traditions, was borrowed from earlier cultural practices. Peacocks, swans, geese and turkeys all fit this bill. The larger the bird, the more festive the presence. "New World" turkeys were introduced to Europe in the 16th century. For many years, these "exotic" turkey birds only graced the tables of the wealthy. Working-class English Victorian families, like the Cratchits in Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, belonged to Goose Clubs. In America, turkey (wild and plentiful) was a natural choice for the Christmas feast

Fruitcake

While the practice of making cakes with dried fruits, honey and nuts may be traced back to ancient times, food historians generally agree that fruitcake (as we know it today) dates back to the Middle ages.

"Fruit cake...a British specialty...The fruit cake as known today cannot date back much beyond the Middle Ages. It was only in the 13th century that dried fruits began to arrive in Britain, from Portugal and the east Mediterranean. Lightly fruited breads were probably more common than anything resembling the modern fruit cake during the Middle Ages. Early versions of the rich fruit cake, such as Scottish Black Bun dating from the Middle Ages, were luxuries for special occasions. Fruit cakes have been used for celebrations since at least the early 18th century when bride cakes and plumb cakes, descended from enriched bread recipes, became cookery standards. The relationship between fruit breads and fruit cakes is obvious in early recipes, such as those given by Eliza Smith [1753] which include yeast...

Making a rich fruit cake in the 18th century was a major undertaking. The ingredients had to be carefully prepared. Fruit was washed, dried, and stoned [taking the pits out] if necessary; sugar, cut from loaves, had to be pounded and sieved; butter washed in water and rinsed in rosewater. Eggs were beaten for a long time, half an hour being commonly directed. Yeast, or barm from fermenting beer, had to be coaxed to life. Finally, the cook had to cope with the temperamental wood-fired baking ovens of that time. No wonder these cakes acquired such mystique..."

---*Oxford Companion to Food*, Alan Davidson [Oxford University Press:Oxford] 1999 (p. 321-322)

Gingerbread

Why do we call it gingerbread?

"The cakelike consistency of gingerbread bears little resemblance to bread, so it comes as no surprise that gingerbread has no etymological connection with bread. It was originally, in the thirteenth century, gingerbras, a word borrowed from Old French which meant 'preserved ginger'. But by the mid-fourteenth century,...-bread had begun to replace -bras, and it was only a matter of time before sense followed form. One of the earliest known recipes for it, in the early fifteenth-century cookery

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book *Good Cookery*, directs that it be made with breadcrumbs boiled in honey with ginger and other spices. This is the lineal ancestor of the modern cakelike gingerbread in which treacle has replaced honey."

---*An A-Z of Food & Drink*, John Ayto [Oxford University Press:Oxford] 2002 (p. 142)

About gingerbread shapes

"Gingerbread was ...ornamented by impressing designs within wooden moulds. The moulds were sometimes very large and elaborate and beautifully carved. In England, such confections were bought at fairs and, together with other sweet treats, were known under the collective name of 'fairings'. The habit of shaping gingerbread figures of men and pigs, especially for Bonfire Night (5 November) survives in Britain."

---*Oxford Companion to Food*, Alan Davidson [Oxford University Press:Oxford] 2nd edition, 2006 (p. 339)

ABOUT GINGERBREAD HOUSES

"The tradition of baking the sweetly decorated houses began in Germany after the Brothers Grimm published their collection of German fairy tales in the early 1800s. Among the tales was the story of Hansel and Gretel, children left to starve in the forest, who came upon a house made of bread and sugar decorations. The hungry children feasted on its sweet shingles. After the fairy tale was published, German bakers began baking houses of *lebkuchen* --spicy cakes often containing ginger -- and employed artists and craftsmen to decorate them. The houses became particularly popular during Christmas, a tradition that crossed the ocean with German immigrants. Pennsylvania, where many settled, remains a stronghold for the tradition. It is believed gingerbread was first baked in Europe at the end of the 11th century, when returning crusaders brought the bread and the spicy root back from the Middle East. Ginger wasn't merely flavourful, it had properties that helped preserve the bread. Not long after it arrived, bakers began to cut the bread into shapes and decorate them with sugar. Gingerbread baking became recognised as a profession. In the 17th century, only professional gingerbread bakers were allowed to bake the spicy treat in Germany and France. Rules relaxed during Christmas and Easter, when anyone was permitted to bake it. Nuremberg, Germany, became known as the "Gingerbread Capital of the World" in the 1600s when the guild employed master bakers and artisans to create intricate works of art from gingerbread, sometimes using gold leaf to decorate the houses."

"HOLIDAY TRADITION WITH SPICY HISTORY," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 9, 2001, METRO, Pg.N-9

Mincemeat and mince pies

People have been mincing (chopping into tiny pieces) meat and other foods since ancient times. Hash is a related food. Minced meats accomplished many things. It

- Utilized leftover meat
- Stretched the protein supply
- Permitted meat to be incorporated into other dishes, as in mincemeat pie.

According to the food historians, mincemeat pie dates back to Medieval times. At that time, this recipe did, indeed, include meat. It also often contained dried fruits, sugar,

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and spices, as was the tradition of the day. The distinction between mincemeat and mince was drawn in the mid-nineteenth century when meat began disappearing from the recipe, leaving the fruit, nut, sugar, spice, and suet product we know today.

"Mince pie in Britain, is a miniature round pie, filled with mincemeat: typically a mixture of dried fruits, chopped nuts and apples, suet, spices, and lemon juice, vinegar, or brandy. Although the filling is called mincemeat, it rarely contains meat nowadays. In North America the pie may be larger, to serve several people. The large size is an innovation, for the original forms were almost always small. The earliest type was a small medieval pastry called a chewette, which contained chopped meat of liver, or fish on fast days, mixed with chopped hard-boiled egg and ginger. This might be baked or fried. It became usual to enrich the filling with dried fruit and other sweet ingredients. Already by the 16th century minced or shred pies, as they were then known, had become a Christmas specialty, which they still are. The beef was sometimes partly or wholly replaced by suet from the mid-17th century onwards, and meat had effectively disappeared from mincemeat' on both sides of the Atlantic in the 19th century."

---*Oxford Companion to Food*, Alan Davidson [Oxford University Press:Oxford] 1999 (p. 507)

[NOTE: here is a recipe for medieval chawettys (chewettes)]

Christmas pudding (aka plum pudding)

How old is the tradition?

"The plum pudding's association with Christmas takes us back to medieval England and the Roman Catholic Church's decree that the 'pudding should be made on the twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity, that it be prepared with thirteen ingredients to represent Christ and the twelve apostles, and that that every family member stir it in turn from east to west to honor the Magi and their supposed journey in that direction.'... Banned by the Puritans in the 1660s for its rich ingredients, the pudding and its customs came back into popularity during the reign of George I. Known sometimes as the Pudding King, George I requested that plum pudding be served as part of his royal feast when he celebrated his first Christmas in England after arriving from Hanover to take the throne in 1714. By 1740, a recipe for 'plum porridge' appeared in *Christmas Entertainments*. In the Victorian era, Christmas annuals, magazines, and cookbooks celebrated the sanctity of family as much as the sanctity of Jesus' birth, and the tradition of all family members stirring the pudding was often referenced...Poorer families made the richest version of plum pudding that they could afford...Even workhouse inmates anticipated a plum pudding on Christmas Day."

---*Food and Cooking in Victorian England: A History*, Andrea Broomfield [Praeger:Westport CT] 2007 (p. 150-151)

What is the classic recipe?

Christmas Plum Pudding.-- The plum pudding is a national dish, and is despised by foreign nations because they never can make it fit to eat. In almost every family there is a recipe for it, which has been handed down from mother to daughter through two or three generations, and which never has been and never will be equalled, much less surpassed, by any other...It is usually, before sending it to table, to make a little hole in the top and fill it with brandy, then light it, and serve it in a blaze. In olden time

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a sprig of arbutus, with a red berry on it, was stuck in the middle, and a twig of variegated holly, with berries, placed on each side. This was done to keep away witches...If well made, Christmas plum pudding will be good for twelve months."
---*Cassell's Dictionary of Cookery with Numerous Illustrations* [Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co.: London] 1875 (p. 137)

When to make the Christmas pudding?

Stir-Up Day is the name traditionally given to the day on which Christmas puddings are made in England.

"In England some people still refer to the Sunday before the beginning of Advent as "Stir-Up Sunday"...In past times the words "stir up"...reminded people to begin preparing their Christmas puddings...Children chanted a rhymed verse on that day that mixed the words of the collect with requests for special Christmas fare...Thus, the preparation of the Christmas pudding eventually became associated with this day. Folk beliefs advised each member to take a turn stirring the pudding, and ace that was believed to confer good luck. Another custom encouraged stirrers to move the spoon in clockwise motion, close their eyes, and make a wish."

---*Encyclopedia of Christmas and New Year's Celebrations*, Tanya Gulevich, 2nd edition [Omnigraphics: Detroit] 2003 (p. 741)

What about the charms?

The tradition of inserting inedible trinkets into holiday foods is ancient. It descends from pagan rituals for good luck and fortune. The bean inserted into Twelfth Night cake is one such example.

"Silver charms were also very popular in the past, the traditional shapes being a thimble (for spinsterhood), a ring (for marriage), a coin (for wealth), a miniature horeshoe (for good luck) as well as other items like a boot, a bell, a wishbone, and a button. The significance of these is not so certain now but had meaning for the unlucky or lucky finder. The boot was for travel, the ring for an impending marriage, the wishbone for the granting of a wish, the thimble was seen as bad luck predicting spinsterhood whilst the bachelor's button was lucky for a man. Silver sixpences and threepenny bits were also put in puddings, the finders having good fortune. Silver coins continued to be placed in puddings long after the little charms became lost, but after World War II coins were made of copper and brass alloys which reacted during the cooking process so the tradition of placing little surprises to be found became rare."

---Tradition of Christmas Charms/Lisa Woods

Australian traditions

"Though it might be hot on Christmas day, and some Australians have been known to have Christmas dinner on the beach, there are few who would allow Christmas to pass without hot Christmas pudding. All Christmas puddings are variations of what the English call Plum Pudding, although there are no plums in the mixture. Christmas pudding is a special favourite of both old and young...The kids can hardly contain themselves, because Christmas pudding is always served with small coins hidden inside! (Only silver coins are used, which in Australia are 5, 10, and 20 cent pieces, though the 20 cent pieces are a bit large for this.) Also, in the olden days when coins were pure silver (or close to it) the coins were cooked right in the pudding. This is no

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longer a good idea because the alloys in the coins will leave a nasty taste! Boil the coins separately, then just before serving the pudding, order everyone out of the kitchen, and wedge the coins into the pudding. With a little care, one can hide the coins so they cannot be seen too easily--although the kids are pretty hard to fool. There are a lot of different traditions in families in regard to what to hide in the pudding. We know of one strange family that hid a bone button in the pudding. The person who got it was said to have a poor year next year! So much for good will to all men!"

---*Good Food from Australia*, Betsy Newman and Graeme Newman [Hippocrene Books:New York] 1997 (p. 200)

MEDIEVAL ENGLISH CHRISTMAS FOODS & CUSTOMS

"At Christmas it was frequently the custom for each [peasant] tenant to give to the lord a hen (partly as payment for being allowed to keep poultry), or sometimes grain which was brewed into ale...At Christmas also the lord was expected to give his tenants a meal, for example, bread, cheese, pottage and two dishes of meat. The tenant might be directed to bring his own plate, mug and napkin if he wished there to be a cloth on the table, and a faggot of brushwood to cook his food, unless he wished to have it raw. Sometimes the custom said explicitly that the lord had to give a Christmas meal because the tenant had given him the food. In at least one instance the value of the food to be provided by the lord was to be the same value as that given by the tenant. The role of the lord in this case appears to have been merely to organize the village Christmas dinner. The value of the dinner was not always so finely balanced as this however: sometimes the lord gained, sometimes the tenant. These customs were maintained for several centuries, lasting in some cases after the end of the manorial system when compulsory work had been commuted into the paying of rent."

---*Food and Feast in Medieval England*, P.W. Hammond [Wren's Park:Gloucestershire] 1993 (p. 36)

"The Christmas holiday lasted only a few half-days for most people, because the usual daily farm and other labourers' work and household chores went on, and not all employers gave much time off. But the courtly folk had ample leisure to display their new headgear at one party after another over nearly a fortnight of intermittent feasting, and to enjoy the colourful, scented delights of top-class cuisine; even if their lowly rank entitled them on full-scale royal occasions to only two or three of the courses, and to a limited choice of dishes (squires, pages, local burgesses and so on were allowed only one course.) There were sometimes entertainments to watch while waiting, and the entremets or subtleties to admire, especially if their labels were read aloud. The boar's head brought in by carol singers at the Twelfth Night feast was a popular entremet, and so was the peacock, proudly displayed regnant and bedecked on its platters...Entertainment was the main part of any feast, especially a great one; and at the end, when the alms baskets were carried out to the poor and the last Twelfth Night toast was drunk, it was to be hoped that one and all could say, 'That was a good feast. The year ahead will go well!'"

--- *The Medieval Cookbook*, Maggie Black [Thames and Hudson:London] 1992 (p. 112)

[NOTE: This book offers the following modernized recipes in for Christmas: Broiled

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Venison, Pepper Sauce for Veal or Venison, Pork Roast with Spiced Wine, A Grete Pye (savory beef, eggs, dates etc.), Piment (alcoholic beverage, Pine Nut Candy, and Lombard Slices (hard-cooked eggs, honey & spices).

MEDIEVAL ITALIAN CHRISTMAS FOOD AND CUSTOMS

"The distinction between normal days and feast day can be noted in every kitchen...feast days were observed in different ways and with varying degrees of frequency. For certain religious holidays, the menu was ritualized. Lasagne at Christmas...when Messire Sozzo Bandinelli assembled a brilliant court at Siena to celebrate his son Francesco's accession to knighthood on Christmas Day 1326, the festivities were to last the whole preceding week, with tournaments, exchanges of gifts, and banquets. The record contains the menus of three meat banquets (...with 600 on Christmas Day), and one for a day of abstinence (120 guests on Wednesday, Christmas Eve). Days of penitence did not require forswearing banquets; it was enough to replace meat with fish. Moreover, as in other literary texts, the chronicler mentions only the dishes reflecting festivity, abundance, and knightly courtesy--in a word, the meat and fish dishes--from among all the foods appearing on the banquet tables. At Siena in that December of 1326, the number of courses, as they appear in the chronicler's simplified version, varied from three to five (on the great day itself). At all the meat banquets, boiled veal, roast capon, and game meats were served; for the Christmas feast the vast quantity and variety of game are described in detail. Each day's menu is distinguished by a particular dish: ravioli and ambrogino di polli...for the Tuesday, blancmange for Christmas Day; pastelli on the Thursday. The banquets always ended with candied pears served with treggea (sugared almonds), and were always preceded and followed by confetti: sugarcoated whole spices. The meatless Christmas Eve menu was no less gala, with four courses. First, following the confetti, came marinated tench and plates of chickpeas to the table, then roast eels, and finally a compote with treggea, followed by the unvarying candied pears and confetti."

---*The Medieval Kitchen: Recipes from France and Italy*, Odile Redon et al [Univeristy of Chicago Press:Chicago] 1998 (p. 6-7)