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German Holiday Cookies: Bredenbeck's Bakery Keeps Tradition Alive



Philadelphia (Chestnut Hill), PA—For many people, thoughts of Christmas bring about fond memories: twinkling lights, holiday carols, presents, and—of course—heaping platters of fresh-baked cookies made using family recipes. These memories are a little different for Karen H. Rohde, owner of Bredenbeck's Bakery. For Rohde, who lived atop her family's bakery for most of her childhood, Christmas meant working in the shop, baking thousands of German cookies and treats for the people of Philadelphia.

"My job was to roll the cookies in powdered sugar," recalls Rohde, who has owned Bredenbeck's since 1983. "Since I was just little, I had to stand on top of an icing barrel to see the counter. The cookies would often get lost in the mound of powdered sugar on the counter, so I would make a game of dropping them in, and then trying to find them."

Bredenbeck's Bakery began making the German holiday cookies and treats for Philadelphians in 1889, when the bakery was owned by Frederick Robert Bredenbeck, an immigrant from Bavaria. When the bakery was turned over to its longtime employees—Rohde's grandfather and father, Walter and Otto Haug—they continued making the treats every year. The German cookie baking would begin in early November, since many of the recipes they used needed several weeks to reach peak flavor.

They baked thousands of cookies: Pfeffernusse, spice cookies made with candied fruit and confectionary sugar; Cinnamon Stars, moist, chewy cookies made with almond paste, cinnamon and royal icing; Springerle,

anise-flavored cookies hand-pressed with original German molds featuring delicate designs; and Filbert Bars, made with hazelnut flour and royal icing.

Other treats included traditional Stollen, yeast bread filled with raisins, nuts and sherry-soaked dried fruit, dipped in hot butter and coated in powdered sugar; and Schnecken, chocolate, cinnamon walnut or crumb treats, topped with confectionary sugar.

And they flew off the shelves. “My mother used to hide our family Christmas cookies from my father, because if he found them, he would sell them in the shop,” laughs Rohde. “I can remember hearing my mother complain one year that she couldn’t have a Springerle on Christmas Day because my father had sold the stash she had hidden in the closet.”

Today, Bredenbeck’s has moved from the Northern Liberties section of Philadelphia to Chestnut Hill, a quaint section of the city dotted with Victorian homes and charming shops. But the traditions remain the same. Each winter, the bakers use the same time-honored recipes and techniques to produce “millions and millions” of German cookies. “I think I age an extra five years each winter,” she laughs.

And Bredenbeck’s doesn’t just bake the cookies to sell in their store. Bakeries that specialize in German treats have become more difficult to find, so Bredenbeck’s has shipped nationwide since 1985.

“Even before the Internet was big, I saw a future in shipping our treats,” Rohde remembers. “Our first brochure was done on a typewriter!” Now, Bredenbeck’s has a following of customers who send the goodies to loved ones each year. “I think it’s so cool that our Stollen starts here and ends up all the way in Alaska,” she says.

“The process of making and shipping fresh cookies and treats is time-consuming, which is why a lot of bakeries don’t do it,” says Rohde. “But I continue to make them out of tradition and love. It’s my way of saying, ‘Hey Dad, hey Pop-Pop: this is the legacy I’m going to leave.’”

Bredenbeck’s invites you to make your own German cookies using their recipes. Or, let Bredenbeck’s do the baking for you. These hard-to-find treats are baked and shipped right away, so your friends and family will enjoy them fresh for the holidays. Visit www.bredenbecks.com/online-store to order.

A Philadelphia tradition since 1889, Bredenbeck’s Bakery creates its delicious cookies, cakes, pies and pastries from scratch, using the finest all-natural ingredients. Located in the heart of Philadelphia’s Chestnut Hill, Bredenbeck’s is famous for its delicious butter cookies, fancy miniatures and gourmet wedding cakes, all baked on premises. Visit www.bredenbecks.com, call us at 215-247-7374, or stop on by to taste for yourself! Our historic shop is located at 8126 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19118.

Springerle Cookies



Patience is key! These cookies take two days to create, but their crunchy outside and chewy inside are well worth the trouble.

You'll need:

- 4 large eggs
- 3 cups flour
- 4 ¼ cups powdered sugar
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated lemon zest
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ to 1 teaspoon anise extract
- Anise seed

In a large mixer bowl, beat eggs at high speed until thick and lemon-colored. Continue beating while adding sugar slowly; add flour, baking powder, lemon zest and anise extract. Beat together completely. On a well-floured board, roll out some of the dough with a plain rolling pin to about one-half-inch thickness; lightly flour Springerle rolling pin and roll it firmly across dough to impress patterns—try to keep dough about one-half-inch thick.

Cut cookies apart between patterns. Place cookies one-half-inch apart on ungreased cookie sheets, and allow them to dry uncovered overnight (12 hours).

When ready to bake, preheat oven to 250-300 degrees and place cookies one-half-inch apart on greased cookie sheets. Bake 25-30 minutes until firm but still white. Place on wire racks to cool. Store in tightly covered container with anise seeds. Flavor develops fully over about two weeks.

Cinnamon Stars

This is Bredenbeck's Bakery's most popular cookie! Moist, chewy, and delicious!

You'll need:

- 1 ½ cups (about 8 oz.) hazelnuts or blanched almonds, finely ground
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¾ tsp lemon zest, grated
- ¼ cup egg whites (about 2 large)

- Pinch of salt
- 1 ½ cups confectioner's sugar
- About ½ cup additional confectioner's sugar for rolling

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper or aluminum foil. Combine the nuts, cinnamon, and zest. Beat the egg whites at high speed until foamy, about 30 seconds. Add the salt, increase the speed to medium-high and beat until soft peaks form, one to two minutes. Gradually add the confectioner's sugar and beat until stiff and glossy, five to eight minutes. Reserve about 1/3 cup of the meringue and fold the nut mixture into the remaining meringue.

Place a large sheet of waxed paper on a flat surface, and cover with additional confectioner's sugar. Place the nut mixture on the sugar, lightly sprinkle with more confectioner's sugar, top with a second piece of waxed paper, and roll out one-quarter-inch thick. Remove the top piece of waxed paper. Using a cookie cutter dipped in water, cut into two-inch star shapes, or use a knife to cut into diamonds. Re-roll and cut any scraps. Place on the prepared baking sheet.

Bake until set, 10 to 12 minutes. Spread the reserved meringue over the top of the cookies and bake until the tops are lightly colored, about five minutes. Transfer to a rack and let cool. Store in an airtight container for up to three weeks. Makes about 36 two-inch cookies.

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