

# Gingerbread, gingerbread, bake me a man (or a house, or a cookie or...)

Story by Andrew Hind  
Photos by Ted Brown

To warm up the whole house and fill the air with delicious yuletide scents, there's nothing better than spending an afternoon making gingerbread. In a season of traditions, there are few more timeless and cherished.

"There are different types of gingerbread, but they are all a part of Christmas traditions," says Heather Brownridge, owner of Heather's Bakery in Georgetown. "I love Christmas and I love gingerbread cookies; we bake so many of them, and from the end of November we start rolling out gingerbread homes as well— another special Christmas tradition."

"Its unique flavour," continues Brownridge, "comes from its use of spices, including ginger and cinnamon."

Without these spices, which are native to the Middle East rather than Europe, gingerbread would never have become a Christmas tradition.

Ginger seems to have reached Europe by the 11th Century, brought back by those who traded in the Middle East and by soldiers who fought the Crusades in the Holy Land. It



quickly became a valuable trade item: it was rare, had numerous medicinal uses, and was prized as a preservative and as flavouring for the dull foods that typified the Medieval diet.

Ginger was expensive to use, so it was only available to those with money, specifically the nobility and the clergy. Monks began experimenting with ginger in their recipes and gingerbread is generally accredited to them. The monks carved elaborate likenesses of religious symbols and saints into wood and poured the dough into these wooden moulds for baking. The result was a cake, called lebkuchen, thus the term gingerbread.

Typically, these gingerbread cakes were served at Christmas to honour God.

Eventually, the upper classes caught on to the idea of gingerbread to celebrate the holy season, but their cakes were often less religious in design.

The centre of the ginger trade was Nuremberg, Germany which became famous for its gingerbread cakes and cookies baked by a special guild. The guild was formed in 1643 as a means of quality-control and as a way to limit competition in making the lebkuchen gingerbread. The quality of the Nuremberg guild's gingerbread was so high that it was even used as currency



Heather Brownridge of Heather's Bakery in Georgetown puts the finishing touches on a tray of gingerbread men. The treats are very popular during the holiday season as are gingerbread houses. (above).



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