

for paying city taxes. The lebkuchen was also considered a gift worthy of heads of state and royalty.

As time went by, traveling became easier and shipping methods improved. As a consequence, the price of ginger and other spices from the east dropped, which made them available to a larger segment of the population. For the first time, the masses began to enjoy gingerbread, but it wasn't until the early 1800s that gingerbread began to take the form of cookies rather than a cake. At first they appeared in a variety of shapes and forms, but cookie cutters shaped as boys—supposedly inspired by the tale of Hansel and Gretel—began to appear, and it wasn't long before the gingerbread boy was the norm rather than the exception.

Later, settlers brought the tradition of making gingerbread cookies to North America, and they put their own stamp on it. Here, gingerbread cookies were often cut into shapes suitable for use as ornaments and then hung from Christmas trees. After Christmas, children would pluck the ornaments from their perches and eat them, a special treat that had tempted them for weeks.

Gingerbread houses, which Germans call Hexenhausle, or 'witches' houses', appeared later in the 19th century. Made from large slabs of lebkuchen

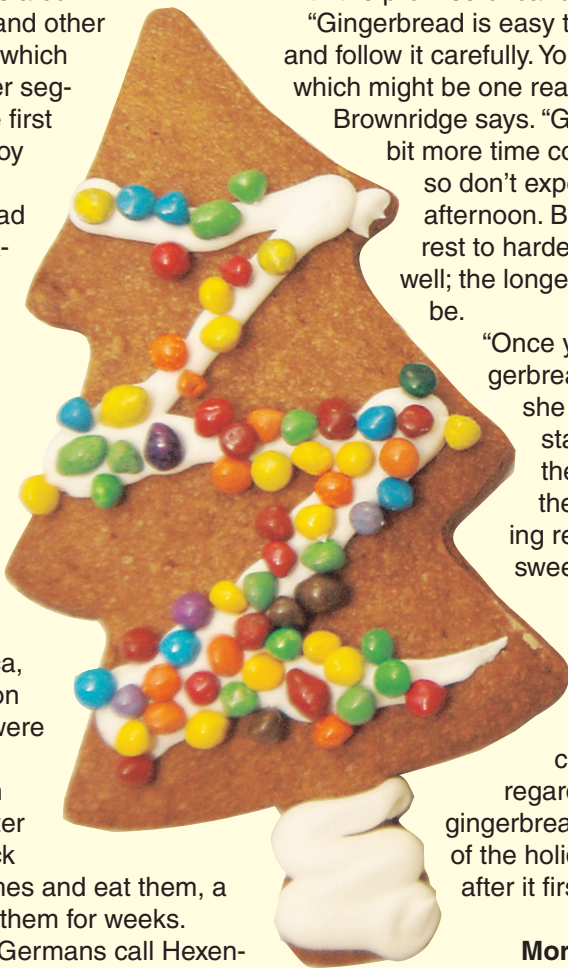
cake and decorated with sweets, they were apparently inspired by the home of the evil hag in Hansel and Gretel, who lured children into her clutches with the promise of candies.

"Gingerbread is easy to make, just find a recipe and follow it carefully. You really can't go wrong, which might be one reason why they're popular," Brownridge says. "Gingerbread houses are a bit more time consuming. You can't rush it, so don't expect to have it done in one afternoon. Bake the dough, and let it rest to harden. Make sure it really bakes well; the longer it bakes the harder it will be.

"Once you start building the gingerbread house, do it in steps," she continues. "Build it in stages: build a few walls, then let it rest, and then add the roof. Let the entire building rest before decorating with sweets."

There are numerous kinds of gingerbread—it can be soft or hard, dark or light, heavily spiced or mild, made into cookies or cakes, frosted or plain. But regardless of the form they take, gingerbread remains a cherished part of the holiday season many centuries after it first appeared.

More treats and recipes on page 20



A gingerbread Christmas tree (inset left) is a popular treat available at Heather's Bakery during the holiday season. (Above) One of the many gingerbread houses that were sold during Trinity United Church's annual Gingerbread Treats for the Holidays event held earlier this month.



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