


cover story


Fairfax baker taps into Germany's Christmas traditions



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FAIRFAX - Deep in the Franklin County woods, approaching dusk on a snowy mid-December afternoon, Heike Meyer assembled thick, heavy dough to make a German Christmas specialty, a fruit-filled bread called stollen.

The snow-dusted spruce trees visible outside through the windows and the soft, warm smell of bread baking in the oven inside made the space feel like Santa's Bake-shop. That makes sense, considering how Germany, Meyer's native land, has contributed so much to the American concept of Christmas, from the Christmas tree to carols such as "O Tannenbaum" and some of the very baked goods Meyer concocts at Brotbakery, her classroom and kitchen in Fairfax.

Meyer, born in Berlin and raised in Bremen in northwestern Germany, loves the holiday heritage of her country, especially edibles such as stollen and a spiced cake called lebkuchen. She loves sharing that history, too, as she does with classes at Brotbakery and off-site sessions such as one she led Sunday in Burlington.

"It's just really nice to have a tradition that you can come back to every season. There's something about traditions and food that are just wonderful," Meyer said as loaves of stollen baked in her oven last week. "Food tradi-



Heike Meyer makes stollen, a traditional German Christmas treat, at Brotbakery in Fairfax. PHOTOS BY GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS

tions around the world, they just connect people, especially around the winter time."

Most of the year, Meyer bakes traditional German sourdough breads at Brotbakery. ("Brot" is the German word for "bread.") A couple of months before Christmas, she starts preparing holiday goods that were such a part of her childhood and those of her fellow Germans.

"Growing up, there was always stollen and lebkuchen at Christmas," said her husband, Jens Meyer.

The Meyers moved from Germany to New York City for Jens Meyer's engineering business. The couple visited Vermont on cross-country ski trips and fell in love with the state before moving to their 15-acre wooded retreat in Fairfax.

"We really liked Vermont. It had something that resonated with us," Heike Meyer said. "It's our little paradise."

Meyer notes on the Brotbakery website that she developed her first pastry recipe, "an apple cake that was barely edible," at age 5. She studied with bakers in Europe and the United States, and when the couple moved to Vermont she managed the tiny Westford Farmers Market. The market needed bread, and that's when she started her micro-bakery that's more about classes than production. (Her loaves are available mostly through City Market in Burlington, which presented the class Meyer taught in Burlington on Sunday.)

Stollen, according to Meyer, is best when it has time to sit and develop its flavor, which is why she starts preparing the bread around Thanksgiving.

"The problem with a good stollen is it's really hard to make," Meyer said, noting that it takes years of practice in Germany to be considered a stollen master. "It cannot be too warm, otherwise it will collapse, and it can't be too



cold, otherwise the yeast won't rise. It's really a delicate balance."

Stollen, she said, consists mostly of "butter, butter, and butter, and more butter." The bread also includes flour and candied fruit, and was dispensed as a Christmastime reward to peasants by German rulers centuries ago. The bread is topped with powdered sugar to resemble fallen snow, and Meyer said the rounded, peaked shape evokes baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes.

"It's very, very ingrained in the tradition of Germany," she said. "I have it only at Christmas, I enjoy it fully, then I look forward to it for 10 months."

At the class she led Sunday at the McClure Multigenerational Center in the Old North End of Burlington, Meyer handed out pieces of stollen. She had the class of 20 or so students, almost all of them women, sample lebkuchen, a cake with a hint of spice that's similar to a thick, chewy graham cracker.

She brought a batch of lebkuchen dough to the class.

"Just for kicks try to knead it with your hands. You'll be thankful you have a really good mixer," Meyer told the students, referring to the dough that's made with honey and rye flour. "I barely touched it and my hands are already really, really sticky."

Lebkuchen is soft and chewy out of the oven; left out on a plate it will harden. Those who want it to stay soft should place the lebkuchen in a cookie tin, but Meyer said some prefer it hard and dip it in coffee or tea. Lebkuchen is often dipped or coated in chocolate, according

to Meyer, and sometimes topped with almonds. She starts making Christmastime lebkuchen in late summer because the dough can ferment from two weeks to three months.

Meyer introduced the class to a third German holiday specialty, zimtsterne, cinnamon-almond cookies usually cut into star shapes. She took zimtsterne dough out of the refrigerator and asked students to cut it into shapes with plastic cups. After baking the cookies for less than half an hour, Meyer took them out of the oven and shared them with the students. The zimtsterne cookies were soft and nutty, accented with a lemon-almond frosting some students slathered on top.

One of the students, Natania Carter, said she regularly takes City Market's cooking and baking classes. "I'm always interested in new things to do in my kitchen. German baking would be that for me," said Carter, who lives near the McClure Multigenerational Center. "I'm probably going to hold off on the one (lebkuchen) that involved fermenting rye and honey, but everything else I'll try out."

The class ended with students mingling while sampling bites of stollen, lebkuchen and zimtsterne. That social aspect is at least as important to Meyer as the baked goods themselves.

"This is really what I love doing," she said, "which is connecting people through food."

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For more information

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ORIGINAL GERMAN BUTTER STOLLEN

Courtesy of Heike Meyer makes two stollen

1 package dried yeast

1 ¼ cups lukewarm milk

Pinch of salt

3 ½ cups all-purpose flour

1 cup butter at room temperature

Zest from one lemon

Pinch of cardamom

1 cup candied citrus mix

2 cups dried currants, soaked and drained; raisins; or a mix

¾ cup chopped almonds

½ cup powdered sugar for dusting

¼ cup melted butter for brushing

In medium-sized bowl, dissolve yeast in lukewarm milk. Add sugar and salt to the bowl and stir to dissolve. Add about half of the flour and stir well to form a shaggy dough with no dry flour pieces visible. Let dough rest for about 15 minutes.

Place yeast dough in the mixer with dough hook attached and add flour, butter, zest and cardamom. Mix on lowest speed for 6-8 minutes. Once dough is completely mixed switch to medium speed and mix for another minute. Let the dough rest for 20-30 minutes at room temperature.

Preheat oven to 400 F.

Add fruit and almonds to the dough and mix on lowest speed, just to combine. Let dough rise in a warm place for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Be careful not to over-proof.

Put parchment paper on a baking sheet. Preheat oven to 400 F. Take dough out, knead briefly and divide into 2 stollen breads: Form each stollen bread into rectangular shape, approximately 2-3 inches in height. With the longer side facing you, flatten half of the stollen to 1 inch and fold the thicker side over, to the middle. Proof once more for about 20 minutes; check if the stollen looks puffed up and nicely risen, then put in the fridge so the stollen can set, approximately 30 minutes.

Put the stollen in the hot oven and lower the heat to 375 F. Bake for about 50 minutes to 1 hour. Check to see if the stollen gets too dark after 45 minutes. You may need to lower the temperature.

Take stollen out of the oven and brush with melted butter while still hot. Let cool on a rack and dust with powdered sugar or cane sugar. Once completely cool, wrap loosely in parchment paper and store in a dry, cool place (ideally 40-50 F.). Stollen should cure for at least 1 week before cutting it, so it can develop flavor. The stollen will also get moister over time. Slice from the middle and put the two halves back together so the stollen won't dry out.

Let your slices come to room temperature before enjoying them with a cup of coffee or tea on a cold winter day – yum!



MONICA DONOVAN/FOR THE FREE PRESS

Vermont baker Heike Meyer shows students how to roll and cut out dough during a German holiday baking class at the McClure Multigenerational Center in Burlington.

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