

# Holiday Cookies: A Long Tradition

## A Brief History of Holiday Cookies

In **Medieval** times sugar and spices were precious **commodities**, so people used them to make small treats suitable to give guests. It became common to offer these treats as gifts during **solstice** celebrations. When Christmas celebrations became popular, this traditional gift continued. Common medieval era spices are still used in today's cookies including cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and molasses.

Cooks for Queen Elizabeth the 1st of England are believed to be the first to shape gingerbread men. They molded gingerbread cookie dough into the shapes and decorated them to resemble members of the Queen's court or honored guest at royal dinners. Originally shaped by hand, molds were created to speed up the process as the shaped cookies became more popular. This produced a more uniform cookie shape.



Gingerbread Cookie Mold

These cookie molds were soon replaced by cutouts created by tinsmiths in the 1600's. Cut outs, now called cookie cutters, were more affordable and helped bring gingerbread men to the general population. These cut outs were brought to the colonies in what would become the United States.

## Global Trends and Regional Favorites

By the 1500's Christmas cookies had become wildly popular in Europe. German families baked Lebkuchen and buttery Spritz. People in Sweden enjoyed Papparkakor which is a spicy ginger and black pepper cookie. In Norway they enjoyed a lemon and cardamom wafer known as Krumkake. Europeans brought these traditions to the U.S. with the first pilgrims, but other group contributed to today's traditions as well. Countries in Africa introduced the world to benne (sesame) seeds and peanuts which they used in confections like brittle or thin biscuit wafer like cookies.

While Native Americans made a version of power bars to help sustain them through the cold winter months. Combining dried fruit, seeds and nuts with mashed camas roots,



local area tribes made cakes and breads. These were undoubtable enjoyed around the longhouse warmed by fire during the long cold winter nights. It feels safe to assume a family or band would have a favorite flavor, a specific fruit or nut, they would have made into cakes that were saved for special occasions or circumstances and shared as part of a celebration.



German Lebkuchen

What smorgasbord of Christmas cookies would be complete without the Latin American contribution of Chocolate? Ingredients from all over the world, spices, butter, seeds, nuts, berries, and fruits have been used to create our Christmas favorites.

### Family Traditions

Without grocery stores or corner markets, pioneer families had to utilize what they could make and store through the winter months. Finding ways to provide special treats during the winter months became a challenge that industrious pioneers solved much like early European families. Dried spices and naturals and easy to store sweeteners like apples and honey were accessible year round. These became the ingredients used to make the small sweets that helped celebrate the holidays.

Today recipes can be found in abundance on the internet or in your grandma's well used recipe book. Find the dirtiest page in the cookie section, that page will contain your grandma's favorite cookie recipe. Consider making your favorite cookie, or trying new recepies and discover a new favorite to share with friends and family.

### Discussion Points

1. What were the first cookie cutter shapes?
2. What is your favorite winter treat or cookie and why? Do you have any family traditions around cookies or treats?

### Vocabulary

Commodities: a raw material or primary agricultural product that can be bought and sold

Medieval Era: also called the Middle Ages, Medieval times runs roughly from the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (400 – 1400)

Solstice: Day with the longest and shortest amount of daylight hours of each year, determined by the angle of the sun to the equator, Summer Solstice, around June 21, is the longest day of the year, Winter Solstice, about December 22 is the shortest day of the year