

Thank Brothers Grimm For Holiday Gingerbread Houses

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Christmas celebrations include preparation of a number of “traditional” foods. But how did those foods become “traditional?” Many Christian holiday food traditions are adapted from earlier cultural practices. Here’s a quick look at the history of a few holiday favorites.

Serving turkey as the centerpiece of Christmas dinner first began in the 16th century in Europe, where it was considered an “exotic” bird enjoyed mainly by the wealthy. Working-class families in Britain feasted on geese, which were “fattened” by Christmas. Turkey was enjoyed by early American settlers at Thanksgiving, as it was native to the New World and more plentiful than geese. In much of the Western world today, turkey has replaced goose as the traditional Christmas feast.

Oranges given at Christmas trace their roots back to the giving of fresh fruit gifts for major celebrations in ancient times. The perishable nature of the fruit made it expensive and, thus, a reflection of the giver’s wealth and status. Prior to rapid transportation and reliable refrigeration, fresh citrus fruits were not available to the average person. As time progressed, fresh fruit out of season, including oranges in North America, was rare, making it an ideal Christmas gift. Although citrus fruit is readily available and inexpensive today, it continues to be a popular gift, especially to those who live outside the Sunshine State.

Our modern Christmas cookies evolved from Medieval European recipes. German and Dutch settlers introduced cookie cutters, decorative molds, and festive holiday decorations to America. Gingerbread, from Germany, is believed to be the first cake/cookie traditionally associated with Christmas. The Dutch brought the first Christmas cookies to America in the early 1600s. Swedish cookies featured spicy ginger and black pepper, while Norwegian treats included thin lemon and cardamom-scented wafers. Sugar cookie-type recipes come from English traditions and animal crackers originally were used as edible ornaments. Today, a vast variety of shapes and flavors are served in Europe and America.

Gingerbread houses first appeared in Germany in the early 1800s after the Brothers Grimm published their collection of German fairy tales. Most notable was the tale of Hansel and Gretel, who, left to starve in the forest, found a house made of bread and sugar decorations and feasted on its sweet shingles. After the fairy tale was published, German bakers began baking houses of lebkuchen, spicy bread seasoned with ginger, and hired artists to decorate them. The houses were especially popular at Christmas and the tradition was brought to America by German immigrants. Today, gingerbread houses continue as a prominent tradition in Pennsylvania, inhabited by many German descendants.

The modern fruitcake hails from Britain, with its first appearance around the Middle Ages as a fruited bread. Dried fruit, sugar, eggs, and yeast were carefully prepared to yield a rich fruitcake. Because of the labor-intensive effort to prepare it, fruitcake was reserved for special occasions.

Enjoy the scents and flavors of these and other centuries-old Christmas traditions!

Source: <http://www.foodtimeline.org/christmasfood.html>

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