

Family stories and a recipe link one German American with her past and stir a desire to get to the heart of the genealogical matter.

# Grandmother's Springerle Cookies

BY LISA KIM HARRIS

EVERY CHRISTMAS SEASON I make several batches of springerle cookies, from my grandmother's handed-down recipe, and give them as gifts. To my family, these hard anise-seed cookies, embossed with a raised design, are known as "Grandmother's Cookies." Each time I press one of her three wooden molds into silky-textured dough, I think of my grandmother doing the same, as well as her mother, and her mother's mother. It is as if my soul travels through time and communicates with my female forebears. Our hands have touched the same piece of wood—carvings passed from one cook to another—and over a century they have produced a symbol of love and family.

About the size of a billfold, the molds tell me where I come from. They are made from a light-colored wood, probably pear, and each contains pictures that conjure up an "Old World" image—dainty swans paddling through still mountain lakes; stone castles strategically built on a bluff; plump apples, pears, currants, and a cluster of cherries, ready for harvest; antlered stags bounding through fields; a carousel slowly turning to tinkling festival tunes.

As I re-create her recipe, I imagine her in her kitchen, a smiling matronly woman with gray hair piled high on her head, standing among her well-used pots and pans. She presses the molds into the rolled-out dough, leaning into them, so they leave a perfect scene behind. Her cookies are difficult to make. The dough must be supple enough to take the mold's imprint: too dry, and there will be no picture of a flower basket or leaping trout; too wet and the dough will stick to the cherry clusters and the sailing ship's riggings. After imprinting, she would cut the dough into rectangles and set it out to dry overnight. The next day, she would painstakingly remove each cookie with the blade of a sharp knife, the back wet with water, and place the cookie on a baking sheet sprinkled with anise seed. Again, the conditions must be just so: dough that is too moist will stick to the rolling surface, dough that is

*Left: Although the origins may be a mystery for most people, heirloom items like the author's Springerle molds can sometimes serve as the only tangible link to an unknown collection of ancestors. Inset: As with many ancestral recipes, the author's Springerle recipe centers around a treat for the holidays.*





too dry will crumble and break, and the stag's antlers mangled and the carnival carousel's flag snapped in two. After almost three decades of baking results, I have concluded that a perfect cookie either requires a certain alignment of the moon and the stars, or my Grandmother's special touch.

Springerle cookies are German, specifically from Swabia, and date to medieval times. They were given at festive occasions: births, weddings, and holidays. In my family tradition, they were only made at Christmas. However, my grandmother was not German. She was British, born in Dorset County. So where did the recipe and molds come from?

At first glance, she probably either borrowed the recipe from a friend or clipped it from a magazine. And the molds I inherited, along with the words "these have been in the family for years," were probably purchased from a mail-order catalog—so much for family tradition.

I had so wanted to believe that the recipe had been passed down from generations of family cooks that I investigated further. While her recipe might not divulge my grandmother's secret about how to replicate perfect cookies, I suspected it might render more information on my heritage. Through old church ledgers I searched for a Germanic wanderer who left behind a cookie legacy in Dorset.

I did not have far to look. My grandmother's father-in-law was of German descent. Both of my great-great-grandparents were born in Germany, both in the southwestern region, both in what was then the grand Duchy of Baden, in the heart of Swabia and springerle cookie country.

On a recent trip to the region, I found similar cookie molds in a museum. Many were made with elaborate carvings, and would produce a far fancier cookie than my molds. However, one was simple, made from a similar type wood as mine, and approximately the same size. Looking at the cookie mold in its case, I knew I had followed the right track in my family history quest.

In all probability my Grandmother's Cookies were my grandfather's grandmother's cookies—I had been baking a cookie whose recipe spanned five generations. As for the pear-wood molds, who knows? Perhaps they were Fredrika Schneider's, my German great-

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2 eggs

1-¼ cups sugar

1 grated lemon rind

1 tsp. plus extra anise seed

1 tsp. anise extract

2-¼ cups cake flour

½ tsp. baking powder

1 tsp. salt

Springerle molds (sold in specialty shops or through the internet)

Beat eggs until thick and lemon-colored. Add sugar gradually, then beat with a handheld electric mixer for 10 minutes (the duration of beating is important). Add flavorings (lemon rind, anise seed, anise extract), stir in to blend. In separate bowl, combine dry ingredients (cake flour, baking powder, salt). Add dry ingredients to the egg/sugar mixture very slowly. Beat by hand until a silky texture results.

Gather dough in ball. It should be slightly sticky. Flour rolling sheet and rolling pin. Roll dough to 1/4-inch thickness. Immediately impose designs onto dough. Repeat until all the rolled dough has been impressed. Cut along edges of stamped cookies with a sharp knife (but do not remove). Make sure all cookies' edges are cut; otherwise they will break when it is time to remove them from the rolling sheet.

Cover sheet with impressed dough with light cloth or paper towel. Let stand in a cool place for 24 hours.

Following day: Preheat oven to 300°. Grease cookie sheet with butter. Sprinkle buttered cookie sheet with anise seeds.

With back of a sharp knife, carefully remove one cookie at a time from the rolling pan. Wet finger with water. Wet back of cookie with wet finger. Place onto prepared cookie sheet, embossed side up. Place cookies 1 inch apart.

Bake for 25 to 30 minutes, until firm on top, and slightly golden around edges. Do not overcook.

Let cool. Remove from sheets. Store in tight container at room temperature for several weeks before serving. Cookie should be hard; best eaten when dunked in coffee or other liquid.

grandmother, born almost two hundred years ago. She would have passed them down to her son, who gave them to his son's wife (my grandmother), who handed them to my mother, who entrusted them to me. And, one day I will pass them to my grandchildren, who will continue to make Grandmother's Cookies—a creamy-white rectangular treat embossed with scenes from a faraway land, a continued symbol of love and family. **OL**