

Cakes for Three Kings: Originally made to celebrate epiphany on January 6, many historical cakes and puddings are now being served during the whole holiday season

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Abstract:

The people of France have traditionally created and collected pastry tarts known as 'galettes des rois' during the Epiphany season as a tribute to the Three Kings who visited the baby Jesus.

Full Text:

In January, every pastry shop in Paris devotes its window to puff pastry tarts, decorated with simple patterns cut in the dough and a gold strip reading Bonne Annae--Happy New Year. Rows of tiny trinkets stand nearby: perhaps a set of shoes, or fancy hats, or even cartoon characters. Advertisements exhort customers to collect them all, and when you see the multitudes who buy a tart, you can believe that many are engaged in just that project. But why does every purchaser get a cardboard crown? And where do the trinkets fit in?

Raymond Ost, chef of Sandrine's Bistro on Holyoke Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has the answers. "It's called galette des rois (kings' cake or tart), and we eat it at Epiphany to celebrate the three kings who visited the baby Jesus," he explains. "It has an almond filling in which we bury a little fave. Fave means 'bean' because centuries ago that is what was used. Later, a bean-sized baby Jesus replaced them. Now it may be a baby or any little figure," says Ost, showing tiny porcelain dolls, which he hides inside the galettes he bakes for his customers.

"The galette is brought to the table with the crown on top for the person who gets the slice with the fave," he explains. "But there must be no favoritism! So a child hides under the table while the galette is cut. The child calls the name of the person who should get each slice. The one who gets the fave is king for the day, and everyone has to be nice to him."

When Ost was growing up in Strasbourg, galettes des rois appeared only on Epiphany--January 6--when families met to celebrate. Today, the galette is a New Year treat, available throughout January. But while this tart is unique to northern France, the Epiphany custom of hiding a tiny treasure inside a cake or pudding is both widespread and ancient. Finding the treasure reenacts the Epiphany. Literally, the word means "appearance" and the religious Feast of the Epiphany

celebrates the discovery of Jesus' divinity. Not surprisingly, it was a major religious holiday in medieval and Renaissance Europe, but it was never solemn.

Indeed, it was the most rambunctious day of the festive season. Kings of the bean--those who got the fave--reigned over the revels, leading the drinking, dancing, and japing, sometimes even punishing those who did not join in. These customs predate Christianity, going back to Saturnalia, the wild Roman celebration of Saturn, god of agriculture and their mythical king. Since justice hallmarked his reign, nobody had slaves, thus at Saturnalia slaves were treated as freemen and feasted with their masters. Lots were cast for the magister bibendi--the lord of the drinks--and for a king of the feast. Chance often favored a slave, making him a temporary master of the festivities.

This December holiday was followed by the Calends of January, a New Year's celebration where lavish hospitality was again the rule. These customs survived, dovetailing into the winter festivities of other peoples of the Roman Empire to assert the pleasures of life and the hope for the return of light at the darkest time of year.

As Christianity throve in Europe, this spirit of hope expressed in joyous feasting infused the days honoring the birth of Jesus and the gift-bearing kings. By the Middle Ages, the twelve days of Christmas and especially the last day, Epiphany (called Twelfth Day in England), were rich in tradition. Real kings often wore their full regalia, while the bean discovered inside a cake determined the king for the day. Some cakes also had a pea for the queen, and in Renaissance England there was a clove for the knave and a forked stick for a cuckold, too.

The rewards of being a temporary monarch could be grand. Edward II of England gave a silver ewer and basin to the king of the bean in 1316, and in France Marguerite de Beauvilliers received six gold pieces for her work as queen of the pea in 1377.

Not surprisingly, grabbing desirable pieces of cake was commonplace, and along with other excesses of the season, it persuaded the Puritan victors in England's Civil War to abolish Christmas in 1647. When festivities resumed in the 1660s, the diarist Samuel Pepys adopted the new fashion of using paper cutouts for the king and his court, so his splendid cake would not be ruined. The custom of hiding a surprise migrated to Christmas pudding. Traditionally, a silver coin was tucked into its spicy depths to bring good fortune to the one who found it. Today, England has no pure silver coins, so a coin wrapped in wax paper or a silver charm does the job.

Epiphany traditions also moved to Christmas in some other countries, too. Iceland follows the custom, common also in other parts of Scandinavia, of making a special rice pudding concealing a single almond whose finder wins a prize. In Greece and other Orthodox countries, a coin is baked inside vasilopita, a bread named after Saint Vasil, whose day is celebrated on January 1. At the stroke of midnight at New Year, the head of the household breaks the bread and distributes pieces to the family. The person who gets the coin can expect luck all year.

In other countries, king cakes still appear on January 6, though they differ regionally. While galettes des rois star in northern France, in the southwest a sweet yeast cake called tortillon takes their place. The dough may be made into one large cake or several small tortillons, only one of which has a fave.

Spain has roscon des reyes, which means "big doughnut of the kings" because it has a hole in the center. Josa Guerra, a New York marketing specialist, fondly explains the custom in his native Canary Islands. "On Noche des Reyes, or Kings' Night, children go to bed early, believing that the kings will come bringing them gifts. But when you are older you wander round Vegueta, the old part of Las Palmas," he says. "People stay out late--until three or four in the morning. In a funny way they are challenging the kings, sort of saying, 'Even though I can now stay up late, you still have to find a way to bring your gifts.' "

The next day, families eat a late lunch. Roscon des reyes, enriched with nuts and citrus zest and topped with candied fruit, is the dessert. "Everyone hopes to get the baby hidden inside because it will bring them luck," says Guerra.

Neighboring Portugal has a crown-shaped cake decorated with jewellike candied fruits. Called bolo-rei, it has a little gift as well as a bean. In this case, the person who gets the bean is not so lucky. The following year he must buy or make a bolo-rei and invite everyone to share it.

In the United States, the tradition thrives in New Orleans, where king cake, a cinnamon-flavored oval braid, appears around January 6, which is called Little Christmas locally. During the weeks from then until Mardi Gras, it is a party fixture. [For more New Orleans Christmas observances, see "Joyeux No'l," page 192.]

Iva Bergeron, a New Orleans culinary arts teacher, explains, "You'll have a king cake in the office every Friday. The one who gets the baby buys the cake for the next week." She also notes that the tradition is developing. "It used to be that king cake was always frosted with sugar in Mardi Gras colors: purple for justice, gold for power, and green for faith. Now you get all sorts of toppings."

David Haydel, a New Orleans baker, has pioneered many new versions of the old favorite. His toppings include blueberry, lemon, apple, German chocolate, chocolate rum, and cream cheese--without or without strawberries. Each cake includes a porcelain Mardi Gras figure as well as the baby. Haydel expects to make eighty thousand cakes this year. "After Mardi Gras, people here stop eating them until next year," he says. "But New Orleans attracts lots of conventions. Often they have a party with a Mardi Gras theme, and they always want a king cake. Then folks in other parts of the country mail order them, so now we make king cake all year."

Haydel's Bakery in New Orleans has a mail order service at (800) 442- 1342. If you live in Massachusetts, Raymond Ost of Sandrine's will bake galettes des rois to order. You can also bake these treats at home. None is difficult, and they are delicious with tea or coffee any time of year.

Claire Hopley is a food writer and historian who lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Galette des rois

Galettes are decorated with lines, sometimes swirled, sometimes geometric, sometimes shaped like stalks of wheat.

4 Tbsp. butter at room temperature

1/3 cup sugar

2/3 cup coarsely ground almonds

1/4 tsp. vanilla extract

1/4 tsp. (or a little more to taste) almond extract

1 Tbsp. dark rum

2 eggs

1 Tbsp. milk

1 pound puff pastry, either store-bought or homemade

1 trinket, either porcelain or silver, or a dried bean

In a mixing bowl or food processor, combine the butter and sugar. Mix in the ground almonds, vanilla and almond extracts, and the rum. Beat one of the eggs and stir it into the almond mixture. Put this in the freezer for about 5 minutes, or until it's soft and handleable.

While the mixture is chilling, divide the puff pastry in two. Put one portion in the refrigerator to stay cold. Roll out the other portion on a floured board and shape into a 12-inch circle. Place it on a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper or greased and dusted with flour. Place this in the fridge while you roll out the remaining pastry into a 12-inch circle.

To assemble the galette, preheat the oven to 450°F. Beat the remaining egg with the tablespoon of milk. Place the almond mixture in the center of the pastry circle on the cookie sheet, leaving a border of 1 1/2 inches all round. Put the trinket or bean in the mixture. Brush the border with cold water.

Likewise, dampen a 1 1/2-inch border round the other circle. Pinch the edges together to make a complete seal. Brush the surface with the egg mixture and return it to the fridge for 10 minutes. Remove and brush it again. With a sharp, pointed knife, make a pattern of lines on the egg-washed top, taking care not to cut through to the filling. Put the galette near the top of the oven for 10 minutes, then check.

If it has puffed up, reduce the oven temperature to 400°F and bake until it is deep golden brown--about 20 minutes. If it has not puffed, leave at the higher temperature for a little longer. Air trapped between the layers of pastry makes the galette feel light for its size when it is done. If it seems to be getting too dark before the galette reaches this stage, cover the surface with foil. Makes 8--10 servings.

Roscon des reyes

You can make one large or two smaller cakes with this dough. The finished cakes freeze well.

1 package active dry yeast

1/2 cup warm milk

about 4 cups all-purpose flour

3/4 cup sugar

5 eggs

1/2 tsp. salt

2 Tbsp. dark rum

2 tsp. orange-flower water

1 tsp. orange or tangerine zest
1 tsp. lemon zest
1/2 cup butter, softened
1/2 cup slivered or flaked almonds
1/2 cup assorted candied fruits or crystallized cherries
1 Tbsp. pearl sugar or crushed sugar lumps
porcelain baby Jesus or a dried bean

In a mixing bowl or the bowl of an electric mixer, blend the yeast, milk, half a cup of flour, and a teaspoon of the sugar. Cover and leave in a warm place for about 45 minutes, or until bubbly. Beat 4 eggs and stir them into the mixture along with the salt, rum, orange flower water, the orange and lemon zests, and a cup of the flour. Mix until smooth. Cut the butter into five portions and add them one at a time, blending each in before adding the next. Mix in the remaining flour in two additions, then knead until you have a dough that does not stick to your hands. Grease a bowl; roll the dough in it. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and a towel and leave in a warm spot for an hour.

Knock the dough down and form into one or two balls. To make into a ring, push your fingers into the middle and work the dough outwards. (Alternately, put the dough in a greased ring pan.) Place the rings on a greased baking sheet. Stick in the trinket. Loosely crumple a piece of foil and put it in the holes so they don't close up as the cake rises.

Cover and let rise until almost doubled in bulk--about an hour. Preheat the oven to 375°F. Beat the remaining egg and brush the surface of the cake with it. Scatter the almonds and arrange the crystallized fruits or cherries on top. Sprinkle with the pearl sugar or the crushed sugar lumps. Bake until the cake is golden and sounds hollow when rapped-- about 25--30 minutes for 2 small loaves, 35 minutes for 1 large loaf. Serves 12.

Tortillon

The dough for this cake from Bordeaux is similar to brioche.

2/3 cup warm milk
1 package active dry yeast
2 1/2 cups unbleached flour

6 Tbsp. butter, softened
2 Tbsp. sugar
3 eggs plus one yolk
1/2 tsp. salt
2 tsp. orange-flower water (or substitute vanilla extract)
grated zest of an orange or lemon
3/4 cup chopped peel for fruitcakes
20--24 crystallized cherries or drained maraschino cherries
1/3 cup apricot jam
a bean, porcelain Jesus, or other trinket

In a medium bowl, mix the warm milk and the yeast, then stir in half a cup of flour. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside for 15--20 minutes. In the bowl of a food processor, combine the butter and sugar, pulsing them first and then processing into a smooth mixture. Scrape the bowl down often.

Add an egg and process until it is blended in. Repeat with a second egg. Now add the salt, orange-flower water, orange or lemon zest, the remaining egg, and half a cup of flour. Process until the mixture is smooth, scraping down the bowl as necessary. Mix in the yeast mixture and another half cup of flour. Add the remaining flour and process again to make a soft and stretchy dough.

Sprinkle a work surface with flour and transfer the dough to it, patting it out flat. Scatter about half the peel on it and fold it over a couple of times. Lift it up and let it stretch down from your hands then fold again. Do this 2--3 times, until the peel is distributed, then add the rest of the peel and repeat the process. Grease a bowl with butter and put the dough in it. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise for an hour, or until doubled.

Knock the dough down and knead briefly until it is smooth. Divide into 4 pieces. Form them into doughnut shapes with large holes in the center. Place on a baking sheet covered with parchment paper or greased and dusted with flour. Cover with plastic wrap, and let rise until doubled again--about an hour. Preheat the oven to 375°F. Beat the egg yolk with a teaspoon of water and brush the cakes. Bake them for 20--25 minutes or until golden. Cool on a wire rack. Turn one of the cakes over and remove a piece of the peel. Insert the trinket in this spot. Heat the apricot

jam in a small pan with a tablespoon of water. Brush the cakes with the jam. Decorate with the crystallized cherries. Serves 12.

New orleans king cake

This recipe is for a traditional king cake topped with purple, green, and gold sugar.

1 package active dry yeast

3 Tbsp. brown sugar

2/3 cup warm milk

1/2 tsp. salt

1/2 tsp. cinnamon

6 Tbsp. softened butter

1 egg, beaten

2 1/2--3 cups all-purpose flour

a pecan half, a bean, or a porcelain baby

For the frosting:

2 Tbsp. lemon juice

1 tsp. vanilla extract

about 1 cup confectioners' sugar

purple, yellow, and green sprinkles or sugar crystals

In a small bowl, mix the yeast and sugar with half a cup of warm water. Set it aside for 10 minutes and then, in the bowl of a food processor or electric mixer, combine it with the warm milk, salt, cinnamon, butter, egg, and 1 cup of flour. Mix for 4--5 minutes, or until it looks pale and stretchy. Cover with plastic and set in a warm spot for an hour.

Next, stir the dough and beat in the remaining flour half a cup at a time until it is handleable but elastic. Knead or mix for 5 minutes. Hide the pecan or baby in it. Cover again and let rise until doubled in bulk. Divide the dough in three and make each piece into a 24-inch rope. Braid them together, then form into an oval ring and place on greased baking sheet.

Cover and let rise until doubled in bulk--about 45 minutes. Preheat the oven to 350°F and bake the cake for 20 minutes, or until it sounds hollow when rapped. Cool it completely.

To make the frosting, mix the lemon juice and vanilla in a bowl. Sift in the confectioners' sugar a little at a time, stirring to make a smooth mixture. When it is a thick pouring consistency, drizzle it over the cake. Sprinkle with bands of colored sprinkles or sugar. Serves 10-12.

J-lagrautur

(Icelandic Rice Pudding)

Other Scandinavians make similar rice puddings. Swedes serve it on Christmas Eve. Their tradition is that the person who gets the almond will be married within the year. Finns believe that the almond brings a year's good luck.

1 cup water

pinch salt

3/4 cup white rice

3 cups milk

1 cup light cream

3/4 cup raisins

3/4 cup sugar

1 whole blanched almond

cinnamon sugar, fruit syrup, or jam for serving

Boil the water with a pinch of salt and stir in the rice. Simmer for 10 minutes, then add the milk and light cream. Simmer very slowly for 45 minutes over the lowest possible heat, or bake at 325°F. While it is cooking, soak the raisins in half a cup of water. Drain them and stir them into the pudding along with the sugar. Continue cooking for another 15 minutes. Add the blanched almond, stir, then serve. Offer the cinnamon sugar, fruit syrup, or jam at the table. Serves 6.

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