

"For centuries men have kept an appointment with Christmas. Christmas means fellowship, feasting, giving and receiving, a time of good cheer, home"

W.J. Tucker

Welcome to Vintage Americana, exploring and restoring rural American culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is Episode 40: Christmas baking in the Great White North. I touched a little bit last week on the place of baking in our holiday traditions. I think we all do GET the idea that food is one of the transmitters of culture. Even if your relationship with your immediate family is a little fraught - you can often look past that at things that have been handed down from further back.

And then there is the plain fact that most traditions don't get handed down in purest form. They change, shift, and alter based on the conditions of the present. As they must, and as we must.

Watch any Food Network holiday-themed baking competition. Stay with it for enough episodes, and sooner or later the contestants will be asked to "update" a classic dessert. Or you'll see a contestant modify a beloved Christmas treat from their own tradition into something the judges may not have had before.

Which is why most Christmas baked goods in America are riffs on their original counterparts. Although I think this can be a little geographic in nature. Urban areas or places with a high concentration of more recent immigrants will often hew more closely to the authentic thing.

Rural communities, and those who trace their arrival here back a little further, often will have something that shares a name with the baked good that inspired it but may be very different in practice. There is a continuum from very authentic to something that would make a visitor from the country of origin ask, "What is that?" Much like what we've done to pizza, somewhat to the horror of the Italians.

We take the things we are given from the preceding generation - and then we bend, flex, and meld to suit our new circumstances.

So let's talk a little about baking traditions from the Great White North. I'm a native of Michigan, although I've moved around it here and there over the years. A lot of the state was settled by people from the Northern part of Europe - the Dutch, the Germans, the

Finns, the Danes, the Swedes, the Norwegians. And my husband, who comes from northern Illinois, had the same experience. Many of those cultures share some base flavors, when it comes to baking. Lots of almond, cinnamon, bright sour red fruits like cherries and loganberries, cardamom, and heavy use of sour cream or variants of it. Darker flours like rye, barley, oat, and buckwheat also turn up quite frequently - because these are things that sometimes grow better in cold climates.

Treasured recipes were brought over, and often special pans were handed down from generation to generation. These things helped maintain tradition - and bind the community together. And, sometimes things were just not available on this side of the pond, so improvisations happened.

Today, I'm going to take you along on a bit of a journey as I prep for my Christmas baking. Remember what I said about binding a community together? I'm going to share some recipes from community cookbooks, where women in these communities could trade these treasured recipes with each other.

I'll talk about some of the traditions that my family preserved - and some we didn't, but I've recovered since moving back into an area with a higher Dutch population. And share some of my adventures in getting my grubby little mitts on the appropriate ingredients and baking gear I needed to resurrect traditional foods that I didn't have direct experience with.

And, yes, most if not all of this will probably have a strong Northern European flavor. Because that's my cultural tradition, and the tradition of the small towns and rural communities I grew up in and around. If that's not your tradition, that's great, too. Maybe you'll find something new you want to bake - and drop me a note to let me know what specific recipes you might want to see on the blog. Or maybe you'll find some strategies for investigating and getting the right ingredients, recipes, and tools to rediscover your own traditions.

The very first thing I pull together every year is my recipe collection. I have certain things I must make. And I like to try out new things, as well. Hey, I'm as big a sucker as anybody else for the glossy magazines in the supermarket check-out lane that are all cookie recipes.

Source number one, for me, is the little box I keep all my recipe cards on. This is where I

have my recipe for great-Grandma Klooster's sugar cookies, great-Grandma Ghastin's Cry Baby Cookies, Aunt Jenny's Banket, and Mom's recipe for gingerbread - a cake, not a cookie type. And, of course, I will sometimes add in some of the cookies that became American classics - peanut butter blossoms, gingersnaps, and so on.

The second place I look is my collection of vintage cookbooks. I have a deep-seated love for community cookbooks. You've probably got some, too. It was common throughout most of the 20th century for different organizations to collect recipe submissions from their members and families and then sell them in the community as a fundraiser. Church cookbooks, school cookbooks, charity organizations, and cultural groups all compiled their own books. Some of the earlier versions will even have adds for local businesses.

If you live in a place that has a shared cultural origin - places like Holland, Michigan, or Frankemuth, or Norway, IL, just to name a few - you'll likely find that those community cookbooks have more than a few of those treasured holiday recipes. Aunt Jenny's banket, for instance, is also in the Barnard Grange cookbook.

When you're looking for a specific culture's recipes, look for the organizations related to that culture. The Sons of Norway groups in many towns put out cookbooks with excellent, handed down recipes for kringle and kranskake. I tend to look for these mostly on Etsy - or cadge them from friends who live in areas where there ARE these organizations.

Otherwise, you'll find these books in all the usual places. Thrift stores are an excellent spot to look. There is one in Holland that, on my last visit, had an entire 3 x 3 bookcase full of nothing BUT community cookbooks. I had a ball going through them to find some that had unique recipes. I have enough of a collection, at this point, that I tend to prefer books that are either pre-1960 or published by a group I have some personal connection to. I have one from the church we used to attend, and another from the school my children went to.

Don't forget to ask friends and family if they have any they'd like to pass on. Lots of people hold onto them, mostly because they don't know what else to do. And then they end up in those thrift stores. A lot of people would be more than happy to pass those on to someone interested.

If you've got a friend or friends who like to go thrifting or antiqueing, make sure to brief them on what you're looking for, too. More eyes mean more chances at finding the best goodies.

One of my most recent acquisitions is actually a Frisian Baking Book. A fair proportion of my family tree traces back into Friesland, Gelderland, Drenthe, and Overijssel. SO I do the occasional web search for related food culture. And I regularly visit the website of the magazine dedicated to those northern provinces, called Noorderland. There are usually some interesting recipes. Lately, there were a couple recipes and an article on that new book. Available in Fryske and Dutch (but not English), it became my new obsession.

Getting book titles from overseas can be a challenge, especially when there is no English version. That means that Good ol' regular Amazon doesn't stock it. And the Dutch bookstores that DO stock it don't ship to the US. Believe me, I tried!

Things were starting to look rather bleak. Or at least like I'd have to go to ask one of my acquaintances to see if a family member in the Netherlands would be willing to get a copy and drop it in the mail to me. This is a trick I can use because I know quite a few first generation immigrants. In fact, that's how I got my dogs. Which is a whole 'nother story. And that's often not an option.

You MIGHT be able to use the power of Social Media to reach out to someone in the country that has the book you want. This does require a certain degree of trust on both sides, even if you PayPal the money. But it's an idea.

In this case, Amazon.de turned out to be the solution. This is the German subsidiary, which has a separate login. Though, to my surprise and delight, I found that my address and other account information were all ported over from the US site. One thing to keep in mind - not all of my payment methods were acceptable to Amazon.de. They don't appear able to accept debit or credit cards drawn on Credit Unions, for example. And prepaid credit cards were somewhat hit or miss. Amazon gift cards are also specific to the currency and site of origin. So an American Amazon gift card can't be used on Amazon.de.

Finally, though, my cookbook is on its way.

There are also modern cookbooks available that offer recipes for classic baked goods. You don't even want to know how many are in my collection. The Great Scandinavian Baking Book is a go-to. It doesn't have pictures, but it's got a wide range of recipes with information about their use and some history as well.

Once you've assembled your recipes, it's time to read through them and make a list of ingredients you'll need. These are going to fall into one of several categories:

1. Pantry staples. Flour. Sugar. Milk. Eggs. That sort of thing. No problem. Just make sure you've got enough to do all the baking you want to do.
2. Old-fashioned items that aren't available anymore, or regional ingredients that you don't have on hand. A lot of Dutch recipes, for whatever reason, use self-rising flour. This isn't something that's popular in the Midwest, so I generally don't have it. But I can improvise, and it's not hard to find instructions online to make that switch. Then there are things like the "soured cream" in my Kringla recipe. It doesn't mean cultured sour cream. It means cream that has been allowed to go sour. The difference in viscosity really will affect your outcome. But these, too, can be substituted out. For each cup of soured cream, put a Tablespoon of white vinegar in a measuring cup, then add cream until you get a cup. I even have an old recipe for poppyseed bread that calls for a box of toasted coconut pudding mix. Something that just isn't made anymore. I haven't quite worked out how to deal with that, yet.
3. Ingredients that aren't common in the US, but are necessary to the success of the baked good. This can be things like ginger syrup, speculaas spice, hartshorn, light buckwheat flour, lignonberry preserves, or certain types of sugar. Some you can make - ginger syrup. Some you can substitute - most sugars have an equivalent, if you know what you're going for. Some it's just better to have on hand if you can. This is another instance in which visiting the internet can be helpful. Especially if you find a little online boutique that specializes in imports from the country where that ingredient is found. Or a specialty baking website. If you have access to one, a good specialty grocer can carry some of the items you need, as well. Believe it or not, Holland, Michigan, does NOT have such a store that I've ever found. You can get the oddball Dutch candy or cookie, but not much more than that. However, the larger city of Grand Rapids DOES have a shop that's usually well stocked with goodies. I'm planning a shopping trip this week.
4. Things you just don't like or don't want to use. I freely admit that I hate raisins.

Just nope. And I'm not too fond of the technicolor candied fruits you can buy for fruitcakes, either. So, my kerststol will have dried cherries and blueberries instead. My poffert will have apples. I don't like coconut, either, so I tend to just leave it out. There isn't any use in being "authentic" if your family won't eat the end result. Don't be afraid to substitute. You can bet Grandma did!

One thing I've found over the years is that using homegrown ingredient, where I can, makes for a better, richer product than I was used to. Which only makes sense, but does tend to alter your result. Don't be afraid, though, to use those duck eggs, that jersey cream, or your home-dried cherries.

In fact, one young lady of my acquaintance was in the food program at the local community college. She brought a dozen duck eggs to her pastry instructor one week. The next week he (tongue in cheek) commented that if she could keep him supplied with those, it might be reflected in her grade. Even pastry pros like the upgrade of non-centralized food system ingredients. Using those ingredients both tastes better AND is probably closer to the that traditional baked good. I'm sure Great Grandma Klooster regularly used the cream from the herd of Guernsies her sons milked.

So - recipes. Check. Ingredients. Check. Pans?

Why IS it that so many traditional Christmas baked goods require a specific pan? I have no idea. But, everything from aebleskivers and poffertjes to krumkake and pizzelles can really only be made with the right equipment. If you've got an heirloom Kugelhopf or aebleskiver pan, handed down from Great Grandma - treasure it. If you don't, my advice would be a three step plan. First, if you have older female relatives, ask them. Maybe one of them has such a pan in the back of a cupboard, gathering dust. And they might just be delighted to pass it on to someone who wants to use it!

Second, try antique and thrift stores, again. Or eBay or Etsy. Often you'll find that the original items are just made better and will perform in a superior fashion. Cast iron, for instance, often distributes heat better than aluminum. And, again, a lot of people are NOT preserving some of these treasures. Which means you might get something of a bargain. It is a bit of an adventure. Most of the time, when I go out to troll my favorite antique stores for something specific, I don't find it. In spite of being a pretty regular patron of most of them, and even having a good idea which booths at which shops are my best bet.

Today, however, I wandered into a shop I'd never visited, on a whim. And found the German steamed pudding tin (with lid!) that I was looking for just inside the door. That never happens. But now I'm all set to make that Gronigen Poffert, as soon as my new book shows up.

One side note - if you can get some advice on selection from someone who regularly makes whatever you want to make, that will help you sort through the options. For instance, when I was looking for that aebleskiver pan, a friend was helpful in getting the RIGHT pan. She somewhat bemusedly shared that her grandmother-in-law had gifted her with both all the old family recipes AND the pan that had come over with her from the Old World. Because she was the only one who'd express interest in learning the old recipes and making the traditional goodies. She even sent me a link for the same brand of pan that was for sale on eBay. I should have it in my paws this weekend. In spite of commentary from a friend, who pointed out,

"You know, Alton Brown says the only unitasker in your kitchen should be the fire extinguisher."

To which I responded, "Then we won't even talk about the krumkake iron."

Yes, specialty pans are something else to store for the other 11 months out of the year when you aren't using it. Although I'm likely to use the aebleskiver pan year-round. And some of the more complex bread or cake pans can return to glory at Easter for more celebration baked goods. The storage issue can also work in your favor - it's why you might find you know someone who has one, and is willing to give it up.

As a last resort, look around for modern reproductions. For certain things you can pretty reasonably find one. Nordicware makes a classic kugelhopf pan. Rosette irons are pretty easy to find. But, remember that sometimes the modernized version will fail because the new one has been altered in ways that make it less effective. Much like the nonstick tube pan I bought when I was first married - it was the only one I could find. If you've made an Angel Food cake, you'll know that it NEEDS to be able to hang onto the sides in order to rise. And that it must be cooled upside down to prevent it from collapsing. Which caused my first attempt to immediately fall out of my nonstick pan.

The next time I made an Angel Food cake, I made a trip to the local thrift store to get a vintage NOT nonstick tube pan.

I've got a couple of other suggestions for you.

Survey the family. See what your spouse, your kids, your siblings, your parents consider their quintessential Christmas treat. Edit your list accordingly.

Then look at it again. It really depends on how you do Christmas. But I try to have a selection of cookies and bars that can travel, so I've got easy things to take when visiting. Or even take a few to work. I also like to have something based on an enriched bread. Whether that's kerststol, Frisian sugar bread, or some cinnamon rolls, it makes festive breakfasts on the weekend an easy way to keep things feeling like a special time of year. And then some sort of coffee cake or pastry, to bring out for unexpected guests. This is an extension of the lost art of "visiting". And related to the Swedish practice of Fika - coffee and a sweet snack break. Don't be afraid to take a moment for a hot beverage and a sweet snack.

In other words, distribute your efforts so that it's not ALL cookies. And not ALL Christmas breads. Nibbling is the name of the game.

One more thing I'd like to see return as a regular thing. Holiday candies. Hear me out. We've gotten WAY to used to red, green, and white M&Ms or 90 flavors of holiday chocolate kisses. But homemade candies used to be a big deal at Christmas. Seafoam. Opera creams. Divinity. Fudge. Caramels. Potato candy. Peppermint bark. Peanut brittle. Turtles. Cordial cherries. Taffy. Buckeyes.

Many homemade candies were less about recipes that were carried over by immigrants than they were about midcentury rural culture. You'll find recipes for them in those same vintage community cookbooks. Or, believe it or not - Pinterest. Which has a deep and wide catalog of mid-20th century vintage recipes.

I know that last week I went on and on about the quiet of Advent. And all this baking sounds like a contradiction. Except that I find baking soothing. Especially when I'm making something that says "Christmas" to me. With Christmas music playing in the background. If I really have my way, at least one of my baking days will involve softly falling snow all day long.

It's also about that other country virtue I talked about a few episodes back. Hospitality.

In this case, it's hospitality for your family, as well as guests. Trust me, offering French toast made with some Challah and using leftover eggnog in the custard will put your kids in a better frame of mind to go visit Uncle Glenn and Aunt Donna.

Try, too, not to get so locked into your baking plans that you chase your kids out of the kitchen and into their rooms. Once you've gone to the trouble to find, maintain, or add to your baking traditions, you'll want to pass them down. If your kids associate stollen with "Mom is stressed," they'll be less likely to want to make it themselves.

Raise kids who will want those pans you hunted through every thrift store and antique mall to find. Heck, raise kids who will want to go BACK out and hunt down another so they can each have one.

You might even end up with kids who want to help with the whole hunt. Talking to relatives about traditions and recipes, looking for the right sorts of pans, shopping for ingredients. Exploring Christmas traditions is - well, a tradition! You'll find lots of opportunities at museums or local historical sites. And most kids like nothing better than exploring their OWN cultural traditions. Turn them loose on it.

So now you know a little bit about my Christmas baking. I'll share more on the blog, at [brambleberry meadow.com](http://brambleberry meadow.com) soon, too. Check back frequently to see what goodies from the new book I manage to translate and make. Take pictures of your baked goods, or handed down recipes, post them to instagram and tag me! And if you're enjoying the podcast, screenshot and share that, too!

In the meantime, I have a list of things I still need to pick up - ginger syrup, buckwheat flour, some special sugars - and a date with my husband to go into town and get them. And then some time to settle in and bake!

Are you coming?