

# CLASSIC

## Holiday Spice

Pfeffernuss cookies signify Christmas in Germany—and beyond

BY MARIA SPECK

**A**T MY FAMILY'S HOME IN Munich, an overflowing cookie plate was a highlight during the festive weeks of Advent, and my Greek mother, transplanted to Germany, outdid herself year after year. Buttery cutouts of stars and hearts, sugar-dusted vanilla crescents, and chewy coconut macaroons all made for a wonderful *deutsche Weihnachts* (German Christmas). But one time-honored favorite was always missing: the plump and intensely flavorful pfeffernüsse, found in virtually every home in Germany at Christmastime except ours. Mom, try as she might to assimilate, just couldn't bring herself to like them. I was 11, visiting a friend, when I had my first taste of the tiny, dark rounds enveloped in a silvery glaze and emphatically flavored with cardamom, cinnamon, and cloves. It was love

at first bite. Now, when the chilly nights of autumn give way to winter, I start to long for the cookies' spicy warmth.

Pfeffernüsse (the word is the plural of *Pfeffernuss*) are a special type of lebkuchen, or German gingerbread. The making of gingerbread is a hallowed process in Germany, where the methods have been refined over centuries. It's a tradition that has always been taken seriously. As early as 1643, strict rules authorized only certain bakers to sell gingerbread. Some Scandinavian countries also claim the cookies as their own. The Danish call them pebernødder, in Norway they're known as pepperkaker, and in Sweden they're called pepparkakor or pepparkakor.

*Pfeffernuss* translates literally as "pepper nut". The name refers to the cookies' nutlike size and shape and to the *Pfefferländer*, the spice-rich countries of the East that supplied the more exotic ingredients for the cookies. In addition to cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and a pinch of white or black pepper, traditional recipes call for honey and whole wheat flour, which impart sweetness and a subtle nuttiness, respectively, as well as almonds and lemon peel. As with other types of gingerbread, the recipe for pfeffernüsse can be adjusted for making confections that are either soft and chewy or hard and crunchy. Either way, Christmastime isn't complete without them. No offense, Mom. 🍪

### RECIPE

**Pfeffernüsse**  
(German Spice Cookies)  
MAKES 30 DOZEN

These deliciously fragrant cookies provide a delightful rush of warm spices—and holiday cheer—when bitten into. For the best results, start with whole spices and grind them yourself.

- 1/2 cup honey
- 1/3 cup unsulfured molasses
- 2 tbsp. butter
- 2 eggs, at room temperature
- 2 cups whole wheat pastry flour (see page 99)
- 1/2 cup candied lemon peel, finely chopped
- 1/3 cup almonds, finely ground
- 3/4 tsp. freshly ground cinnamon
- 3/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 3/4 tsp. freshly ground cloves
- 3/4 tsp. freshly ground cardamom
- 1/2 tsp. baking powder
- 2 tsp. vegetable oil
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar, sifted
- 1-2 tbsp. light rum

**1.** Put honey, molasses, and butter into a small pot and cook over medium-low heat, stirring constantly, until hot, 2-3 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool. Add eggs and whisk to combine. Put flour, half the lemon peel, almonds, cinnamon, pepper, cloves, cardamom, and baking powder into a large bowl and stir to combine. Add honey mixture and beat with a wooden spoon until well combined, to form a dough. Cover surface of dough with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 8 hours or overnight.

**2.** Preheat oven to 350°. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper and set aside. Lightly oil your palms with some of the oil. Form dough into 36 balls, each about 1" wide (the dough will be very sticky, so keep your hands lightly oiled while working). Divide dough balls between baking sheets, keeping them spaced 1" apart. Bake until slightly cracked on top and just firm to the touch, about 15 minutes. Transfer cookies to a wire rack and let cool slightly.

**3.** Meanwhile, whisk together confectioners' sugar, rum, and 5 tsp. hot water to make a smooth glaze. While cookies are still warm, use a pastry brush to coat each one with a layer of glaze. While the surfaces of the cookies are still moist with glaze, garnish each top with pieces of the remaining lemon peel. Set cookies aside to let cool completely. Eat right away or store in an airtight container, layered between sheets of waxed paper, for up to one week.

