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Ottawa Journal: the origins of Christmas cookies

For many, Christmas just isn't complete without Christmas cookies. It's a beloved tradition that's enjoyed season after season with countless varieties ranging from gingerbread to shortbread to thumbprint cookies. The act of baking these delicious works of art is often a Christmas tradition in itself for many families. When we're preparing and eating our favourite treats, it's interesting to know the origins of Christmas cookies actually dates back many centuries.

It's been said the origins of modern Christmas cookies can be traced back to Medieval Europe. This is when modern ingredients, such as cinnamon, ginger, black pepper, almonds, and dried fruit were first brought to the West. Together, with other ingredients, such as lard, sugar, and butter, would've been deemed as precious commodity items. Therefore, using them would be reserved for the most special of holidays or occasions, which developed into considerable baking efforts by Medieval households to be ready for Christmas. Furthermore, the cookies, unlike other baked goods, could quite handily be distributed to neighbours and friends as gifts, which is something we still do today.

According to some sources, the origins of one of the most common and favourite Christmas cookies, gingerbread, goes back as far as the Crusades. During this time, it was made from breadcrumbs that were boiled with honey and was heavily spiced. The batter was pressed into wooden cookie boards with religious designs carved into them, and then dried. Over time, religious designs were used less and more modern ingredients were incorporated into the gingerbread recipes. The ?gingerbread man? as we know it today was first introduced by Queen Elizabeth I who gave her favourite visitors gingerbread likenesses of themselves.

It has been said that by the 16th century, Christmas cookies were popular all across Europe with regional specialties appearing, such as: lebkuchen in Germany, krumkake in Norway, and pepparkakor in Sweden. It has also been said that Alsatians hung oblaten (thin, decorated communion wafers) on their trees.

According to several sources, Christmas cookies were brought to the United States (U.S.) in the 17th century by Dutch and German immigrants and they introduced cookie cutters and festive molds to the country. By the 20th century, when importation laws had changed, cookie cutters were imported and became readily available in the U.S. The resulting stylized cookie shapes they produced were then hung on Christmas trees. It was about this time that Christmas cookie recipes began to appear in cookbooks to make use of the cookie cutters.

It has also been said that the tradition of placing cookies out for Santa emerged in the 1930s, during the Great Depression. This, of course, was to help Santa keep his energy up during his long night. According to historians, this tradition which continues today, was started by parents during that very difficult time to teach children about generosity.

Christmas cookies have come a long ways since their Medieval origins. However, their popularity remains the same. We each have our favourite kind and special memories associated with them. They're another wonderful tradition during the season of giving. I would like to take this opportunity to wish you and your loved ones a very Merry Christmas and much peace and joy through the season!

By David Tilson. M.P.