

A Taste of the Town

Nice and spicy, ginger adds a special zing to everything

“If I had but one penny in the world, thou shouldst have it to buy gingerbread.”

-William Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, Act 5, Scene 1

By Lauryn E. Sasso

I’ll be the first to admit that I have a spice addiction. Whenever I get the urge to bake, which is fairly often, I’m almost always drawn to recipes that put the spotlight on such aromatic elements as cinnamon, cloves, and this month’s featured flavoring – ginger. There’s something incredibly enticing about smelling their scents wafting from a warm oven – they make you want to drift into the kitchen and linger until the baking is done, hopeful that you might get a morsel of whatever delightful concoction is being prepared. These spices are big, bold and their flavors leave a lasting impression. Ginger, in particular, has a slight edge of sharpness and spicy heat that balances a recipe’s sugar quotient and brings a more sophisticated tone to sweets and cookies.

Ginger, along with cinnamon and cloves, has also become nearly synonymous with autumn – especially in New England – where the oncoming crispness in the air seems to call for tangy, tantalizing warmth in one’s baked goods. There is simply something about ginger that suits the season of changing leaves and hastening sunsets. Perhaps it is ginger’s depth of flavor and its ability to be used in both sweet and savory dishes that make it ideally suited to a time of year when everything seems to be in transition. Or perhaps there’s no rationale for why ginger is so evocative of the fall – it might just be one of the culinary world’s absolute truths, and who am I to argue with that?

This month, *A Taste of the Town* is stuffed to bursting with delicious ginger-based recipes, thanks to Smithfield residents Maggie Botelho and Michele Krakowski. Maggie, who has lived in Smithfield for the past 16 years, offered two recipes – one for Ginger Sparkle Cookies and another for her mother’s famous Gingerbread. Michele, who has called Smithfield home since 2002, also generously contributed two recipes – one for a Lemon Ginger Cake and another for Ginger Snaps. Both women are longtime volunteers at the Smith-Appleby House Museum on Stillwater Road and are deeply involved in the museum’s upcoming Gingerbread Cookie Baking Day on Saturday, October 15th.

The pair has also been instrumental in creating and running a baking class at the Smith-Appleby House, which inspired Gingerbread Cookie Baking Day. Botelho, who has volunteered at the museum for the past decade, noted that “Today’s busy mothers don’t always have the time to teach their daughters some of these homey arts. Our classes at the museum are intended to bring moms or grandmoms and their daughters



or granddaughters together to share an experience of creating something. With the fire in the hearth crackling, and little hands mixing and rolling dough, decorating and baking, they will leave with more than just some cookies, an apron, and a recipe book; they will leave with a very special memory.”

Krakowski, who, until 2003, had worked in the food service industry for many years, described herself as having a “passion for the kitchen,” and met Botelho at a previous Smith-Appleby event, the Colonial Dinner. As Krakowski put it, “we have been joined at the hip [ever] since.” She added that the goal of the baking day in October is to “teach the art of making gingerbread cookies.” But in addition to creating sweet treats that they can take home and enjoy, the participants will also be making gingerbread ornaments for the museum’s December Open House, which has a Gingerbread Christmas theme and will feature visits from Santa and Mrs. Claus.

It’s easy to see from the range of recipes that both women shared with me, as well as the planned ornament-making, that ginger can be utilized in a wide range of culinary pursuits. In addition to cookies, breads, and ornaments, ginger can also be candied, used as a beverage flavoring (for tea, soft drinks, and both alcoholic and non-alcoholic varieties of beer, amongst others), dipped in chocolate, pickled, and used in several savory dishes – particularly in South Asian cuisine where it is often found as a complement to seafood or goat. It also has medical applications – the benefits of ginger on conditions such as arthritis, anxiety, and diabetic cataracts have all been studied, though the research has been inconclusive thus far – and is a common home remedy against nausea.

Ginger has a long and storied culinary and cultural history. It was first cultivated in South Asia, but quickly spread across the globe. As food historian and writer Cynthia Bertelsen describes it, “in ancient Bengal, in a time out of mind, people discovered

a hot spicy yellow root – related to turmeric and galangal – and called it *sringavera*, meaning ‘horned root’ in Sanskrit. Ginger, a rhizome plant almost twin to bamboo and easy to grow, quickly spread throughout Asia. The Chinese and Japanese soon learned to pair ginger with fish, because ginger eliminated fishy odors. As a cure for seasickness, ginger had no equal and early Chinese sailors swore by it.

By 100 AD, the Romans and Greeks used ginger in huge quantities in their cooking. Homesick Roman legionnaires camped in Britannia and Gaul demanded ginger (and got it) to spice up their less-than-fresh food. Thus, ginger took hold in Europe, where it dominated the art of cooking throughout the Middle Ages.” Bertelsen goes on to detail how the piquant spice grew in popularity in Europe and traveled to North America with the first settlers, where, while still quite popular, over time it lost some of its prevalence in savory dishes and became more well known as an ingredient in baked goods – particularly at the holidays – until more recently, when contemporary American cooks took a greater interest in world cuisine.

Truly, ginger is a world-wide culinary star. But for all its inclusion on the savory side of the menu, it is perhaps most beloved in sweets such as gingerbread. It is believed that gingerbread was first introduced in Europe just before the year 1,000, by an Armenian monk named Gregory of Nicopolis, who brought his knowledge of how to cook this delicacy with him and taught what he knew to priests living near the town of Bondaroy in Northern France. Prior to the 13th century, gingerbread had been introduced to Germany – and records show that nuns at the Vadstena Abbey in Sweden were baking gingerbread by the mid-1440’s for use as a digestive aid. Some sources indicate that the earliest appearance of gingerbread biscuits/cookies (rather than the loaf or cake form of the sweet) was in the 16th century, and quite possibly had royal origins. In an article for *Americana* magazine, Karen S. Edwards notes that “the first gingerbread man is credited to the court of Queen Elizabeth I, who favored important visitors...with charming gingerbread likenesses of themselves.”

There is a significant difference between the thinner, harder gingerbread that is used to make gingerbread men and houses, and the thicker, chewier variety found in gingersnaps and similar types of cookies. Both of these are, yet again, different from the cake form of gingerbread. But all types of gingerbread have long histories in a variety of cultures. German Lebkuchen, a type of honey-sweetened cookie or cake, featuring nuts, candied fruits, and many spices, including ginger, is thought to have been made as early as the late 13th century in Ulm, and by a century later, in Nuremburg. The latter city is now the best known exporter of the sweet creation in the world. Lebkuchen is usually soft, though there is a harder version which is often shaped into hearts and sold at festivals and fairs. This type is also used for making gingerbread houses.

The Netherlands and Belgium are known for a soft gingerbread called Peperkoek or Ontbijtkoek – it’s a popular breakfast dish and is more like a kind of bread, served in thick slices with butter. Croatian gingerbread is known as Licitar and traditionally is made in the shape of a heart and given away as

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a gift. Poland is known for its Toruński Piernik, a traditional gingerbread that has been made in the Polish city of Toruń since the Middle Ages. This particular type of gingerbread is so well known and beloved that it has become the focus of poems and proverbs. It also became a favorite of the composer Frédéric Chopin, who tasted it in 1825 when he visited the city as a 15 year old. In honor of his ongoing love of the confection, the country's largest gingerbread bakery, the Kopernik Confectionary Company, created a heart-shaped gingerbread named "Scherzo" in Chopin's honor. The Scherzo was wrapped in labels printed with Chopin's likeness. This company has a history dating back to 1760 and is still in existence today.

But the popularity of gingerbread is not limited to Europe. Linda Campbell Franklin relates in *300 Years of Kitchen Collectibles* that "for Christmas over a hundred years ago, Pennsylvania German children in Lancaster County helped cut out and decorate foot-high cookies to stand in the front of windows of their stone or brick houses. These cookie people--often gingerbread men and women iced with rows of buttons and big smiles--were a cheerful sight to snow-cold passersby." This early American tradition did certainly have its roots in Europe though, as is reflected in the similarity of this practice to a Norwegian and Swedish custom in which ginger-flavored biscuits are used as window decorations. In Norway and Sweden, the biscuits are usually a bit thicker than the average gingerbread cookie and are often glazed and decorated with candy, very similarly to the style of gingerbread houses.

Speaking of those elaborate gingerbread houses, it is widely thought that the story of *Hansel and Gretel* was responsible for making them popular in Germany, and from there they quickly became a favorite confection around the world. There is some dispute, however, as to whether they were created because of the Brothers Grimm fairytale or if they were being made prior to the writing of the story and the Grimms simply drew upon an existing tradition.

A 2001 article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* mentions that "the tradition of baking the sweetly decorated houses began in Germany after the Brothers Grimm published their collection of German fairy tales in the early 1800s. Among the tales was the story of *Hansel and Gretel*, children left to starve in the forest, who came upon a house made of bread and sugar decorations. The hungry children feasted on its sweet shingles. After the fairy tale was published, German bakers began baking houses of lebkuchen --spicy cakes often containing ginger -- and employed artists and craftsmen to decorate them. The houses became particularly popular during Christmas, a tradition that crossed the ocean with German immigrants. Pennsylvania, where many settled, remains a stronghold for the tradition." Though the article cites the early gingerbread houses as being made out of Lebkuchen, it should be noted that it was likely the harder form of the sweet, as the softer form would have been too spongy.

Making gingerbread houses is a fun pastime for families, but it is often pursued competitively now as well. Several cities in Europe also currently hold large scale gingerbread house festivals. For the past 20 years, the city of Bergen, in Norway,

has created an entire miniature city of gingerbread houses each year before Christmas. Supposedly the largest such exhibit in the world, the houses sit on display for the public during the holiday season, and children under 12 are welcomed to make their own houses and contribute them for free. This miniature city was unfortunately vandalized in 2009 just prior to its scheduled opening – the entire display had been destroyed, but in a show of true holiday spirit, the citizens of Bergen were able to create new houses and repair the exhibit just before Christmas.

While the fanciful shapes of gingerbread men and the ornately decorated gingerbread houses are perhaps the most iconic gingerbread treats, there are also traditions focused on the softer, gingerbread cake. These cakes are descendants of the early Lebkuchen, although they are most often made with molasses or treacle instead of honey. In England, this cake is particularly dense and made with treacle. Sometimes these cakes include more savory ingredients such as mustard and pepper to give them a bit more zing, but they can also be made with raisins, nuts, and apples mixed into the batter. The English traditionally eat them on Bonfire Night (i.e. Guy Fawkes Night). Sometimes it is served with a warm lemon sauce, though in these instances the batter typically does not contain nuts or raisins.

Maggie Botelho’s gingerbread recipe follows in the footsteps of these traditional moist cakes, and was handed down to her from her mother. She remembers that her mother “ran a bake shop for many years, out of our old log house in Canada. Our dining room became the shop, and the kitchen equipped with two 40 inch gas stoves became the center of the baking operation. It was not unusual for us to sit down for dinner, with the promise of pie for dessert, only to hear the shop door open, and my mother returning to remove the pie for sale. The gingerbread recipe was one she made regularly. The bread is very dark, and moist, and filled with all the wonderful spices that conspire to meet the definition of gingerbread. My mother would serve it in thick slices, and cover it with a hot caramel sauce.” Maggie also said that it was the memory of this gingerbread that helped to inspire the class she and Michele are leading at the Smith-Appleby House, as well as the Gingerbread Cookie Baking Day.

She and Michele both expressed a great fondness for passing traditional recipes and baking techniques along to others. As Maggie put it, “it is my privilege along with Michele to help share our love for keeping some of these old traditions alive.” The Gingerbread Cookie Baking Day in October is so popular that it has already sold out, but if you’re still craving the delectable treat, try out some of these recipes on your own – and be sure to make it back to the Smith-Appleby House on December 4th for the Gingerbread Christmas. It will surely add some spice to your holiday season!

Prize Gingerbread from the Log House Bakeshop – Contributed by Maggie Botelho

- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 cup margarine
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup molasses

- 3 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 2 teaspoons ginger
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup boiling water (added last)

Prepare 2 loaf pans (4” x 8” x 2 ½ “) by lining with wax paper. The paper will stick to the sides if the pans are lightly sprayed with cooking spray.

In a large bowl, cream the brown sugar, margarine and eggs. Add all the remaining ingredients, with the cup of boiling water being added last, and mix together until just combined. Bake at 325 degrees for 55 – 60 minutes. The bread should feel firm to the touch.

Maggie Botelho’s Ginger Sparkle Cookies

- 1 ½ cup butter or margarine
- 2 cups brown sugar
- ½ cup molasses
- 2 eggs
- 4 cups flour

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4 teaspoons baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons ginger
2 teaspoons cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground cloves
Sugar and sprinkles (optional)

Cream sugar and margarine in a medium bowl, add molasses, and eggs. Blend all dry ingredients (except decorative sugar and sprinkles) in a second medium size bowl, then add to sugar/egg mixture. Mix until just combined. Drop in small spoonfuls into a bowl of sugar, shake to form into balls. Bake at 375 degrees 8 - 10 minutes. Do not grease pans. Shorter cooking time results in a softer cookie, more time yields a cookie with more snap. Makes 5 ½ dozen cookies.

Michele Krakowski's Lemon Ginger Cake

For the Cake

1 ¼ C all purpose flour
½ C sugar
½ C firmly packed brown sugar
1 ½ tsp baking powder
1 tsp ground ginger
The grated peel of one whole lemon
¼ C sour cream
¼ C milk
1 egg
¼ C melted butter

For the Glaze

1 C powdered sugar
2 Tbsp melted butter
2 Tbsp lemon juice/enough to make the glaze spreadable

Preheat oven to 375°. Lightly grease and flour an 8 inch

square baking pan. In a large bowl mix together the flour, sugars, baking powder, ginger, and lemon peel, and set aside. In a small bowl, whisk together the sour cream, milk, and egg, then add the melted butter and whisk again. Add the wet mixture to the dry and stir well. Bake for 25-30 min or until toothpick comes out clean. To make the glaze, mix all the ingredients together and stir until it is a spreadable consistency. Cool the cake completely before glazing. Spread the glaze evenly over the entire cake. **Note:** For a slightly different citrus flavor variation, you can substitute orange peel and juice.

Ginger Snaps – Contributed by Michele Krakowski, taken from *The Rogue's Roost Cookbook*

¾ C shortening
1 C brown sugar
4 Tbsp dark molasses
1 beaten egg
2 C flour
1 tsp baking soda
1 1/2 tsp ground cloves
1 tsp ground ginger
1 tsp cinnamon

Preheat oven 350°. Lightly grease cookie sheets. Cream together the shortening and brown sugar. Gradually mix the molasses, egg, flour, baking soda, cloves, ginger, and cinnamon into the creamed mixture. Form the dough into a ball and wrap tightly with plastic wrap. Chill dough for at least two hours, overnight if possible. About an hour before baking, let dough rest on counter. Drop by teaspoonfuls onto greased cookie sheets. Bake for 10-15 minutes. Cool cookies on sheets for 5 minutes, then move to wire racks to finish cooling. **Yields approx 4 dozen.**

Article Sources

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There is certainly no shortage of food-related holidays in November – in addition to Thanksgiving, the autumnal month also sees us celebrate National Doughnut Appreciation Day on the 5th and National Homemade Bread Day on the 17th. Next month, A Taste of the Town will honor both, so if you have a recipe for a favorite homemade doughnut or bread – send it, along with a brief anecdote about the recipe, by October 15 to: P.O. Box 481, Greenville, R.I. 02828 or email it to: Smithfieldmag@spi.necoxmail.com