

Herbs Make Scents



THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA
VOLUME XLIII, NUMBER 12

SOUTH TEXAS UNIT
DECEMBER 2020

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Dec. 2020 Calendar

All in-person **Day and Evening Meetings** are cancelled until further notice!!!!

Dec 2, Wed. at 6:30 pm

Board Meeting – Julie will send board members Zoom information

Dec 16, Wed. at 7:00 pm

Pearls for the Pandemic – “Herbal Treats with a Savory Twist – Zoom – Share your Favorites in our Virtual Herbal Cookie Exchange,” For more information see page 3.

Dec 21, Mon. at 7:00 pm

Winter Solstice with Julie – Members Only – Look for information in your email

Jan. 2021 Calendar

Jan 20, Wed. at 7:00 pm

Future programming is still under construction

*Newsletter deadline: the 25th of every month
(January editor Linda Alderman)*



PEARLS FOR THE PANDEMIC

~ SHARE YOUR PEARLS OF HERBAL WISDOM ~

December 16 Herbal Treats with a Sweet or Savory Twist -
Zoom-Share your Favorites in our
Virtual Herbal Cookie Exchange

Happy Birthday!

12/26 – Donna Fay Hilliard



Chairman's Corner

The winter holidays are a time to reflect on all we have. A year turned upside down may make it tough to see the bright side. Despite **ten** long months of the pandemic, I can't help but be grateful for all the time I have spent in my garden, especially last spring and now since the weather is cooler. Before the virus kept me home, my gardening consisted mostly of buying plants, sticking them into the ground and giving them water and maybe even some fertilizer. By being forced to stay home more, I have become better at **paying attention** to the plants themselves, taking the time to really figure out what they might need. Maybe this is another form of "**Slow Gardening**". Just **sitting and being** in the garden has made my work more intentional. I am a better pruner, harvester, and seed starter because of Covid. I might not have developed these skills left to my own devices, and I learn them now, kicking and screaming some days. When we are forced to change old habits, usually good things happen, and I am grateful for that too.

We had **ten** people attend the field trip to Bhakti Urban Farm. **Hari Das** was a wonderful guide through the gardens, explaining the philosophy of the group, how they garden, and answering all of our questions. It is a beautiful piece of property, and a great example of how the reciprocal relationship between plants and animals can provide sustainable farming methods in an urban setting. Interacting with the three resident **Brahman** cows was one of the highlights for me. Here are some photos, of that experience. Many thanks go to **Karen Cottingham**, for making the arrangements.



At left, Benée Curtis makes a real connection. At right, Benée finds joy!

We also have **ten** new members! **Thank you** to **Karen Cottingham** and **Bobby Jucker** for providing the incentive of delicious baked goods from Three Brothers Bakery that swayed many people on the fence to take the leap and join us. I also think that our outstanding programming during the pandemic contributed to our success in attracting new people. You can read about some of our new members in this month's **Member Spotlight**.

In October many of us were able to consult with Master Gardener **Rebecca Larkin** about herb growing at the McGovern Centennial Family Garden. We (including Rebecca) were all looking forward to some sort of ongoing work to improve herb growing in the gardens, however, the Hermann Park Conservancy said "no" to Rebecca's request for us to work in the garden. They want only Master Gardeners working there. This is very disappointing and frankly not very logical, but Rebecca holds out hope that things will change, and that she will be able to bring up the idea at a future time.

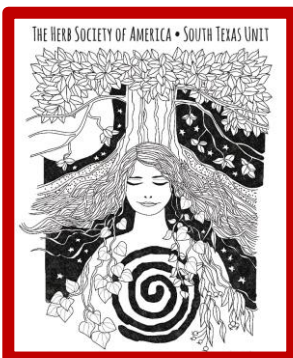


If you have been shopping online more recently (aren't we all?), I bet you have used Amazon. HSA-STU is now a registered charity of Amazon Smile. I registered for Amazon Smile and have made a whopping \$1.71 for the South Texas Unit already!!! It's really easy! Initially, you just get into Amazon Smile site instead of the regular Amazon site. Select Herb Society of America-South Texas Unit as your charity. After that, use the Amazon Smile platform to make purchases. At that point in the process, things look just like the regular Amazon site. If you already have an account, all your information is automatically there, and ordering is just like you are used to shopping on Amazon. Read through the instructions provided in this issue and consider doing your holiday shopping on Amazon Smile and make a bit of money for us!

We have been gifted all of **Lucia Bettler's** collection of herbal magazines and slides chronicling her many years as a member of The Herb Society of America. Thank you **Janet Ruffin** and **Mary Sacilowski** for making that happen. **Janice Stuff** has volunteered to take a look at the slides to see what is there. **Beth Murphy** is taking a look at the magazines. She hopes to fill in some missing issues in the Herb Companion collection of issues that originally came from Madalene Hill. Beth also had the great idea to start a lending library of herbal wisdom. Sounds wonderful, but the logistics may be tricky.

Since we are unable to gather in person to celebrate Christmas, I would like to host a **Zoom Get-Together for members only on Monday, December 21, the Winter Solstice**. Be ready to informally chat with other STU members at 6 pm that day. I plan to make a cup of herbal tea, light a candle to welcome the returning light, and enjoy my fellow "herbies." I will send the details out to members soon.

Have a magical and safe Christmas!!!
Julie



BACK TO OUR ROOTS

Hope your garden is flourishing and you are still able to harvest and dry herbs for teas and blends. If things with the vaccine go well, there is a chance we will be able to make products to sell at a spring event. So, keep it up ladies!

Citrus is coming in. Dried orange and lemon peels are a healthy and delicious addition to many herbal teas and salt blends. Here are some instructions for processing the peels. I typically let them dry naturally after using the vegetable peeler to get the rind or zest off. This usually takes 3-4 days. The rinds will be brittle enough to crush up to put in teas and other herbal goodies.

<https://www.thespruceeats.com/make-dried-orange-or-lemon-peel-2017657>

I just started chamomile from seed. I have never tried this before. If you have any experience growing chamomile, let me know. Chamomile makes a wonderful relaxing tea and is also useful in salves, creams and spritzers for the skin. If all goes well, I will have plants to share.



SAVE THE DATE: December 16, 2020
JOIN THE SOUTH TEXAS UNIT
OF THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA

For Our Next "Care and Share" Episode

HERBAL TREATS WITH A SWEET OR SAVORY TWIST -
ZOOM-SHARE YOUR FAVORITES IN OUR VIRTUAL HERBAL
COOKIE EXCHANGE



For a sophisticated twist to your holiday baking,
check out the following savory recipes:

<https://www.eatwell101.com/almond-parmesan-shortbreads-recipe>

<https://thecafesucrefarine.com/copycat-rosemary-pecan-raincoast-crackers/>

<https://www.bearnakedfood.com/2015/12/25/savory-crispy-cheese-cookies/>

<https://www.designsponge.com/2010/12/in-the-kitchen-with-leah-verweys-savory-cookies.html>



Introducing Some of Our Newest Members!



Laura Mullen
Houston, TX

I love basil - it brightens every dish, and there are so many varieties. I use it in everything! I currently have 10 different kinds growing, including Genovese, spicy globe, lettuce leaf, dark opal and tulsi. I could have written 5 paragraphs about my love for basil! Laura's interests include herb gardening, botany, symbolism and folklore, fragrance and aromatherapy, and the culinary use of herbs.

Lucinda Kontos
Bellaire, TX

In the garden, my favorite is scented geranium- any variety for the lovely leaves and scent. In the kitchen, as an avid baker and cook, it's hard to choose a favorite but I love cinnamon. Lucinda's interests include herb gardening, garden design, symbolism and folklore, crafting, nutritional benefit and the culinary use of herbs.



Faith Strunk
Houston, TX

I live in a small apartment in downtown Houston with my husband and dog, (no place to garden). My favorite herb is rosemary and I use it in liquid bath soaps as well as with mint or sugar on fresh pears. Faith's interest include herb gardening (including container and indoor), crafts, fragrance and aromatherapy, herbal medicine, and the culinary use of herbs.



Carolina Beiro
Sugarland, TX

I do not have a garden. However, I am aspiring to learn more about herbs and gardening. One of my favorite herbs is parsley, and I use it to make chimichurri sauce.

Angela Roth
Bellaire, TX



I am happy to join the South Texas Unit! My husband, Chris and I live in Bellaire and am a part time Urban Ag and Farm to Table Cooking Instructor at Pin Oak Middle School. I am a 15 year Veteran of the US Navy. I have always enjoyed herbs, but my favorite is Texas Tarragon. I enjoy it as a tea, as an herb butter (with orange peel added) and with chicken and orange juice.

Angela's interests include herb gardening, garden design, botany, symbolism and folklore, crafts, herbal-themed stitchery, children projects, history, fragrance and aromatherapy, nutritional benefit and the culinary use of herbs.

Gayle McAdoo
Clear Lake, TX

Originally from Houston, and is now living in the Clear Lake area. Lemon verbena is my "current" favorite herb. She is the secret ingredient that gives my blackberry cobbler a hint of mystery. Gayle's interests include herb gardening, garden design, botany, symbolism and folklore, crafts, children projects, research/writing, history, fragrance and aromatherapy, nutritional benefit and the culinary use of herbs.

Next month look for this feature as we introduce four more of our new members!



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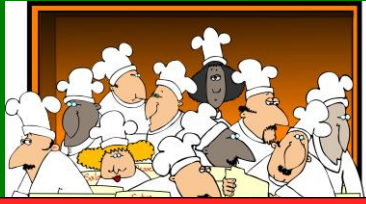
An AmazonSmile account has been set up for the South Texas Unit. Be sure to sign up for www.smile.amazon.com and select the South Texas unit as described below. Each quarter the AmazonSmile Foundation will donate 0.5% of the purchase price of eligible items to our unit.

The shopping experience is the same as shopping through amazon.com with the added benefit the foundation will donate to our organization.

Five Easy Steps to Support the South Texas Unit

1. Go to smile.amazon.com
2. No account? Create one! Have an account? Sign in.
3. Select charitable organization. Found near the top of the smile.amazon.com home page.
4. Type in Herb Society South Texas Unit and click Search. Once the name comes up hit Select.
5. Enjoy shopping!

Questions? Problems? Contact Maria Treviño at maria@burger.com



HOLIDAY GIFTS FROM THE KITCHEN

December 2020

Carolyn Kosclskey

CHAI TEA BLEND

Ayurvedic masala chai beverage (meaning *spiced tea*) dates back 5000 years to an area which is now India, while others claim 9000 years and to Thai origins. Early ingredients did not include tea but did include warming spices of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves and whole black peppercorns. Regional recipes might include other spices such as allspice, coriander, Indian bay leaf, fennel seed, mace, nutmeg, star anise, tamarind and white poppy seeds. Traditional American recipes include green cardamom pods, black peppercorns, whole cloves, cinnamon sticks, and candied ginger in addition to loose black tea. A chai tea blend makes a very nice holiday gift for family and friends as well as for you.

Homemade Chai Tea Blend (makes 12 servings)

- 24 green cardamom pods
- 1 tablespoon whole black peppercorns
- 2 teaspoons whole cloves
- 4 cinnamon sticks
- ¼ cup candied ginger
- ½ cup loose leaf black tea

Heat oven to 350° and place cardamom pods, peppercorns, cloves and cinnamon sticks on a baking sheet with sides and toast for 5 minutes until fragrant. Remove from oven and let cool. Chop the ginger into small pieces. Chop the cinnamon sticks into small pieces. With a sharp knife split the toasted cardamom pods so the seeds are loose. In a small bowl mix the loose tea, ginger and toasted spices. Divide into small jars for storing or gifting. For drinking combine 1 tablespoon of chai tea blend with 1 cup boiling water and stir. Add ¼ cup warmed milk (dairy or non-dairy) and honey to taste. For a chai tea latte heat water to boil in a small saucepan, add 2 tablespoons tea blend and steep for 7 to 10 minutes. Reduce heat and add 1-1/2 cup milk and honey to taste. Enjoy this Indian street beverage with ancient beginnings.



HERB INFUSED HONEY

Making herb infused honey takes more time than the other projects and should be started at least a week before the planned gifting. Supplies needed include a sterilized quart size (32 oz.) Mason jar with lid and 2 cups honey (Kirkland brand, 5 lbs. about \$11.50). You will need enough herbs to fill at least half the jar size you chose or half the volume of the honey. Clean dried herbal leaf and flower material rather than fresh herbs is preferred for this process to eliminate adding moisture to the mixture. Once the honey is added to the herbs in the jar, the jar will need to be turned at least once a day with occasional stirring. Instructions and recipes may be found on this website link: <https://blog.mountainroseherbs.com/herbal-infused-honey>.

FREEMAN FOOD BAR SEASONING

Ingredients

- ½ tablespoon dried lemon zest
- 1 teaspoon celery seed
- 2 teaspoons dried minced onions
- ½ to 1 tablespoon black pepper peppercorns
- 1/8 teaspoon smoked or regular paprika
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1/8 teaspoon turmeric
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons or less, dried coriander seeds

Grind lemon zest, set aside. Grind black pepper, set aside. Grind celery seed, coriander seed and minced onions. Combine all together and mix well. Use to season fresh salmon, catfish, pork, chicken or beef before cooking. You may adjust the herb/spice volumes to your preference. I happen to love coriander. Increase recipe proportionately for gift making in small glass containers.

From the files of Janice Freeman

SUGARED HERBS AND BERRIES For Culinary Decoration

If you plan to decorate with sugared herbs and berries for the holidays, start them the night before because they will need to sit for several hours. After rinsing and letting dry, place the plant material in a large bowl and set aside. In a medium saucepan, bring 1 cup of water to a boil and stir in 1 cup sugar, whisking until the sugar has dissolved. Remove pan from the heat until cool. Pour sugar syrup over the herbs and berries and stir to combine. Let sit at room temperature or in the refrigerator for 6 hours or ideally overnight. During this time the sugar syrup will become quite thick. Drain plant material from the syrup, place in a clean bowl and pour 1 cup of sugar on top and toss to coat. Place the sugared herbs and berries on a baking sheet lined with parchment or a silicone baking mat, and let them dry for at least 2 hours at room temperature or in the refrigerator.



INFUSED DISTILLED SPIRITS

Homemade infused spirits for crafting cocktails make very nice holiday gifts. When choosing ingredients select fresh in-season organic herbs, ripe flavorful fruits, and fresh spices. There are many medium to premium grades of vodka, tequila, gin or light rum to choose from at different price points. Besides your ingredients you will need clean quart size wide-mouth Mason jars for small batch infusing and cheesecloth for straining. After selecting your ingredients rinse and clean your herbs removing any woody plant material such as stems, or damaged parts. With rosemary use the more tender ends of the stems above the woody part. Fruits should be rinsed and cleaned then cut into chunks removing any seeds or stones. Place your selection in a jar filling half way, and then add 1 ½ to 2 cups of spirits to cover ingredients. Cover and shake to make sure all ingredients are submerged and then store in refrigerator. Shake jar several times each day and taste along the way until desired flavor is reached. The milder the flavor the longer the infusing will take ranging from 1 to 2 weeks whereas if using hot peppers they may take only several hours. Once peak flavor is reached, pour through a fine mesh strainer lined with cheesecloth or a coffee filter into a clean jar or bowl, discarding any flavor materials. The infused alcohol can then be returned to a clean jar and stored the same as the original liquor. And for some of you who want a little more holiday vibe, here is a link you'll certainly enjoy: <https://www.bigbearswife.com/candy-cane-vodka/>. Cheers!

The January Stay-At-Home Recipe section for the new year plans to feature winter recipes for the electric pressure cooker. Some of you may have even received one during the holidays! I am also interested in your favorite source for dried herbs and spices. This would include local sources as well as websites.

[Please submit your recipe \(in a form convenient to you\) and/or information to therecipeladycollection@gmail.com.](mailto:therecipeladycollection@gmail.com)

Every Garden Needs a Protector Who's Keeping Watch in Yours?

If I could wear a tee shirt, the front would read, "I'm all about the fun and frolic!"



Our cat Remo enjoys a rest in the coolness of the morning after chasing butterflies and lizards and anything that moves in and around the garden. --- Janice Freeman



SAY IT WITH GINGERBREAD, THEN AND NOW!

Karen Cottingham

“These ‘cookie messages’ were shaped by the baker's molds - more importantly, the common man was being shaped (influenced) by the MASS MEDIA OF COOKIES.”

—Gene Wilson, History of the Use of Cookie Molds



A *Lebküchner* (Gingerbread baker) from a manuscript c. 1520, in the Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg (de), shown with a comic version of the famous children's story, “The Gingerbread Boy” (accessed from <https://exampleschildrensbooks.wordpress.com/about/>)

Sometimes a cookie is just a cookie, and sometimes it's something altogether different. Amusing, sure. Patriotic, great. Didactic, OK. Moralizing, uh-oh. Manipulative, now wait a minute here. As Gene Wilson suggests in his fascinating article “History of the Use of Cookie Molds” (<http://www.cookie mold.com/cookie molds-history.html>), cookies, especially gingerbread, can be understood to be “mass media” way before radio and television were invented.

Those pudgy little gingerbread men with their raisin eyes and gumdrop buttons might seem to say “Christmas” and nothing else, but there is much more to these anthropomorphized sweets than meets the eye.

Actually, the minimalistic, desexualized gingerbread “men” that we know today would have been incomprehensible (or, worse, laughable!) to gingerbread bakers throughout most of history. Until recently, gingerbread-making was not only a serious art form, but a means of education and communication through the complex images pressed into the dough.



As the newspapers of their day, gingerbread "cookie messages" announced royal births and weddings and other important political and social events. These intricate works of art told the news of the day, bearing the likeness of new kings, emperors, and queens, and, possibly more interesting, the image of a famous giraffe. Gingerbreads depicting saints and religious motifs were invaluable for the religious instruction of the illiterate while others facilitated the sharing of proverbs, jokes, folk tales and - of course - love messages. Of course, the gingerbreads themselves are not preserved, but the molds that made them are. Gingerbread molds are literally the "preserved pictures of centuries of living."

The early history of gingerbread is rather sketchy, but many believe that the ingredients for the first honey-sweetened ginger confections were brought to France in 992 by the Armenian monk Gregory of Nicopolis. His cakes made such an impression on his guests that the following words were recorded in a tenth century manuscript: "[H]is guests, on tasting the cake, believed they were experiencing all the delights of Heaven." This may have been a bit of an exaggeration, though, as documented medieval "gyngerbrede" recipes describe a rather unappealing amalgam of dried bread crumbs boiled with honey and seasoned heavily with spices.



The Forme of Cury, a recipe collection created by the "chief master cooks of King Richard II" compiled about the year 1390, includes a recipe for gingerbread.

As unappetizing as this mixture sounds, its advantage was that it was very easy to mold into shapes. Not just any shape, but shapes designed to influence and educate. Catholic monks were the first to recognize the pedagogical potential of gingerbread messaging, and devised a method of imprinting religious motifs onto the surface of the dough. Slabs of wood were carved with the desired image, usually of a saint, which was easily transferred to the stiff, rolled dough. For the mostly illiterate population, gingerbread "Bible lessons" were probably as effective as those taught so eloquently by the stained glass windows.

Those who went on pilgrimages were sustained physically as well as spiritually by the gingerbread sold along the routes. Some even returned home with a souvenir gingerbread image of the holy site.

Gingerbread cookie motifs also provide a rare glimpse into the secular customs and beliefs of medieval populations. Ginger-spiced trinkets, souvenirs, and good luck charms, for example, date back to the 12th century. And although very expensive, gingerbread shaped and decorated to look like flowers, animals, or



even “quite bawdy, scantily clad lovers” (According to Jennifer Lindner McGlinn in her 2010 cookbook, [Gingerbread](#)) were popular treats at medieval fairs and festivals. So popular, in fact, that the cookies became known as “fairings” and the gatherings as “Gingerbread Fairs”.

The designs had symbolic and even magical significance; consuming the correct picture cookie could not only attract a mate, but influence luck, fertility, and virility! Depending upon what was needed, fair-goers had their choice of gingerbread dogs to insure fidelity, pigs for luck, or hearts, which could either attract love or ward off evil.

For the childless, a gingerbread cookie in the shape of a swaddled baby was known as a “child bringer” and eating the image of a hare was thought to enhance fertility. There were several options available to increase virility - a stag, for example, or for the more desperate, a lion-man hybrid. The lion-man is a very old, and very explicit, image of male sexuality emanating from pagan mythology.



Young ladies offered their favorite knights pieces of gingerbread for good luck in jousting tournaments. The image on the left is of John Chalon of England and Lois de Beul of France jousting in a nearly-contemporaneous text, the Royal Armoury Manuscript of 1448. The later “Husband Tree” springerle mold on the right depicts the common belief in the power of gingerbread to entrap husbands.

And of course there were magical charms as well for those women searching for a spouse - not surprisingly, special gingerbreads molded in the shape of a man. These “husbands” were sold to interested maidens with the following instructions: Convince the man of their choice to eat the gingerbread and he would fall madly in love with them! How well this worked, I don’t know, but sadly, women who sold gingerbread as romantic charms were later condemned as witches. In 1607, the fear that gingerbread men were agents of the occult prompted the magistrates of Delft to make it illegal to either bake or eat the biscuits, but fortunately, this prohibition was short-lived.



The intaglio-style carved cookie molds formed the basis of this unique communication network. Talented artisans trained to carve exquisitely detailed woodcuts and engravings applied the same skill and attention to the creation of intricate cookie molds. In addition to the master carvers, gingerbread bakers learned to carve molds during their internships and as journeymen. The most expert of the artisans were recruited from all over Europe to design and carve gingerbread molds for the royals, and the same mold could be used over and over thousands of times.



Portrait of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III (1415-1493)
attributed to Hans Burgkmair the Elder c. 1500 next to the Emperor's Royal Seal.
The mold used to fabricate the Emperor's gingerbread likeness has been lost, but the
contemporaneous wax seal demonstrates the quality of carving possible by the royal artisans

Emperor Friedrich III was the first “politician” to have his own likeness embossed on gingerbread. When he held a Reichstag in Nuremberg in 1487, he invited almost four thousand children to a special event and presented them with Lebkuchen embellished with his imprinted portrait. It's said that he needed to enhance his public image, but I prefer to think of him as someone who sympathized with children.

Queen Elizabeth I (1533 - 1603), definitely a cunning diplomat, devised her own clever way to use gingerbread to advance her political causes. According to a Time interview with Carole Levin, director of medieval studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Elizabeth's reign was famous for elaborate



banquets <https://time.com/4602913/gingerbread-men-history/>. For one such feast, she instructed her royal gingerbread maker to make gingerbread men in the likenesses of the foreign dignitaries and other guests of honor. Levin speculates that Queen Elizabeth's "Gingerbread Summit" may have been designed to alleviate tensions between Anglican Britain and Catholic France and Spain.



Portrait of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester by Steven van der Meulen, 1565, next to a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) by an artist from the English School, c.1600. Dudley was among Queen Elizabeth's favorite courtiers and surely would have been present at an important banquet - both in person and as a gingerbread effigy!

By this time, the recipe for gingerbread had evolved, and bakers were using a combination of honey, saffron, pepper, cinnamon and breadcrumbs, with ground red sandalwood added as a colorant. Other ingredients might have been ground almonds, rosewater, or sugar; and cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves might have been added along with the ginger. Rarely, licorice or grains of paradise might also have been added.

In some places, the prepared dough would have undergone an enzymatic reaction for several months. As the dough became soft and rubbery, it also became rather dry in texture and required considerable strength to be handled. After it was pressed into the mold, it was then "beaten out," that is, the baker slapped and punched the backside of the mold until the gingerbread relief fell out. Rather than being baked, the cookies were then dried at a low temperature in the oven in order to preserve the raised pattern image and keep it from warping. These edible works of art would then be decorated with icings, gold leaf, exotic spices, or shaved sandalwood.

Sadly, we don't have Queen Elizabeth's gingerbread molds, but we do have some very impressive molds from the early 17th century that might have been comparable. The gingerbread figures seen



below were pressed into original molds from the early Stuart period. On the left, the figure was painted with gum arabic and then gilded in the Renaissance manner with a thin layer of edible gold leaf. The rather ostentatious result gave rise to the common expression, “to take the gilt off the gingerbread” which reminds us that not all that is decorated on the outside has real substance within.



Back of a double-sided gingerbread mold with a gentlewoman, Netherlands or Belgium, c.1620, from The Fitzwilliam Museum displayed with gilt, white, and red gingerbread pressings by Ivan Day, 2019.

On the right, the two white gingerbreads consist of a spiced almond paste sandwiched between two sheets of 'sugar plate' (thinly rolled sheets of gum paste).

The figure in the center gets its red color from finely ground sandalwood. Before cochineal was introduced, the wood of the red sandalwood tree (*Pterocarpus santalinum*) was used as a red food coloring. In sixteenth century London, its demand as a dyestuff was so great that there was actually a Guild of Sanders Beaters, whose job was to grind this very hard wood into a fine dust.

As beautiful as they were, these elaborate gingerbreads were still rather unpalatable concoctions of breadcrumbs, honey, and aggressively pungent spices. By the time of the Restoration, they had all but disappeared from period cookbooks, being replaced by custards, creams, fresh cheeses, fruit tarts, and buttery little cakes. Later in the 17th century, cake baking had become more popular in England and gingerbread changed again. It lost the breadcrumbs and was made with the added ingredients of flour, sugar, butter, eggs, and black treacle, with ginger, cinnamon, and chopped or preserved fruits for flavor.

The tradition of intricately carved cookie boards and spiced cookies did remain popular in the Netherlands in the form of Speculoos cookies. Historians believe the name's origin comes from the Latin word



speculum, which simply translates as “mirror” and reflects the traditional method of embossing the cookies in wooden molds that created a “mirror image” of them.

Speculoos cookies go back to at least the mid-1600’s and have a special connection with St. Nicholas. Also known as Sinterklaas, St. Nicholas makes his annual rounds on the eve of December 5th. Children rush out in the morning to see what Sinterklaas has left behind for them - good children find delicious speculoos in their shoes, while the bad ones were carried off in Sinterklaas’ burlap sack.



Saint Nicholas as depicted on an 18th century carved cookie board, a vintage postcard, and as a freshly baked speculoos cookie. Notice the cookie balanced on the dangling shoe!

But much more important than being a tasty treat or an incentive for good behavior, Christmas-time speculoos cookies have conveyed the story of St. Nicholas to countless children.

Let’s “read” the cookie and see how this works.

First, St. Nicholas can be identified by his miter and crozier, the hooked staff carried by a bishop. While these are both general symbols for bishops, St. Nicholas is the only gift-giver portrayed with these symbols. The three gold balls carved on the cookie board symbolize the dowries St. Nicholas provided for the three impoverished maidens threatened with slavery. It may also be that the flat object that the balls are resting on is a book, perhaps the Book of the Gospels or the Holy Scriptures, or maybe the record book of all children’s behavior. And the three children in the tub depicted on the cookie remind us of how St. Nicholas rescued and brought back to life the children who had been murdered and pickled in brine by the evil butcher.



This last miracle of St. Nicholas has been memorialized since the 15th century through another baked good. In German-speaking Switzerland, western Germany, Luxembourg, and the Alsatian and Lorraine regions of France, families still bake small brioches called mannalas (“little guys”) to be served on St. Nicholas Day with hot chocolate. The “little guys” represent the three children rescued from their vat of brine and brought back to life.



Mannalas tell the story of St. Nicholas and the three rescued children

I can't help but note the marked similarity between mannalas and contemporary gingerbread men! Surely there must be a connection.

The gingerbread man didn't become a cultural archetype in America until 1875, when a children's publication called *St. Nicholas Magazine* published “The Gin-ger-bread Boy”. In the tale, a woman desperate for a boy of her own rolls out a little gingerbread boy and dresses him with currants, cinnamon, colored sugar, and chocolate. But the cookie jumps out of the oven and out the door singing, “Run, run, as fast as you can; Can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man.” He runs away from various pursuers—a little old woman, a little old man, and then various farm animals before he is tricked and eaten by a fox. As the fox ate the gingerbread man limb-by-limb, he cried out, “I'm quarter gone ... I'm half gone ... I'm three-quarters gone ... I'm all gone!”

I can imagine children enthusiastically enacting the demise of the Gingerbread Man, but as in all children's tales there is also a moral - Be careful, you can't trust everyone. The cookie who believes the fox won't eat him is not going to last very long!

If you're interested in how children might be influenced by gingerbread characters, here are some suggestions that look intriguing:



In *John Dough and the Cherub*, a baker uses a magic potion in his mix to cook life into a gingerbread man who then travels around the world with a villain on his tail. The bad guy is convinced that eating the gingerbread man will transfer the powers of the potion and grant immortality. Might be interesting, but probably not as good as *The Wizard of Oz*.

I'd love to know what's going on in "Gingerbread Cooky", wouldn't you?

And I have a feeling that "The Gingerbread Girl" is about gender equality and "Girl Power". In case you haven't heard, Gingerbread Men have been banned from Scottish Parliament because they are "sexist". Henceforth, the politically correct cookies in the Parliament's coffee shop are to be addressed as "Gingerbread Persons".

But what I am really curious about is the story behind the illustration below:



What could it mean when these well-dressed animals gather together to devour the images of humans?

Now that is something to think about! Merry Christmas, and enjoy your gingerbread!



The South Texas Unit is a non-profit educational organization incorporated under the State of Texas. The South Texas Unit has no paid employees. Our activities are accomplished through the efforts of our volunteers.

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The Herb Society of America is dedicated to promoting the knowledge, use and delight of herbs through educational programs, research and sharing the knowledge of its members with the community.

