

Gingerbread Script

Gingerbread. One of the most enigmatic treats in existence. You can't find it everywhere these days, but where you do find it, it's plain as day. So what exactly is the deal with this sweet treat, and why is it you find it in Appalachian cookbooks and Christmastime, and about nowhere else?

It might help to specify exactly how we're defining gingerbread here. The go-to prototype of gingerbread that probably springs to mind- that is, the gingerbread man and his house- is only one specific variety of gingerbread out of a good handful. It is, however, pretty well representative of one of the two major types, those being "hard" gingerbreads (such as the gingerbread men) and "soft" gingerbreads, which are more towards the cake end of the cookie-cake spectrum. For the purposes of this video, we'll be including both varieties in our investigation, so for us, a "gingerbread" will basically be any sweetbread in which ginger is a primary ingredient.

Now that we know what we mean by gingerbread, what about where this stuff came from? Well, ginger came from China to Europe over the Silk Road sometime well prior to the 1500s. This was a popular move, because it turns out ginger is very good at a lot of things besides just tasting good. Amongst its other properties, ginger is particularly good at calming upset stomachs, aiding against inflammation, and preserving breads (Raghavan). The end result of that was that gingerbread became widely popular around Europe, and by the Renaissance, was found at every fairground and in every royal court.

This is about when the "Gingerbread men" as we know them start appearing, though not quite in the generic shape we have today. Hard gingerbread had already been cut into various shapes for quite some time- usually something appropriate for the season or fair it was being sold at- but Queen Elizabeth the First of England is the one generally credited with popularizing the humanoid shape, having commanded the kitchen staff to have gingerbread cut and decorated into caricatures of her courtiers (Stellingwerf 9).

Side note: this isn't actually where the "gingerbread man" fairy tale comes from. It's part of an old category of story known as "The Fleeing Pancake" stories, all of which follow the same basic plot of a baked good fleeing to avoid being eaten and ultimately failing at that (Rhodes). As the name of the genre suggests, most versions of the stories involve things like pancakes or johnny-cakes, though it's difficult to tell which exact version is oldest, since these fairy tales were an oral tradition *long* before they were written down. Presumably the "gingerbread man" version is the most popular because the gingerbread man has legs to run with while the pancakes do not. On a similar note, gingerbread houses also have

a fairy-tale touch; though they existed long the Brothers Grimm were born, it was their publishing of the story of Hansel and Gretel in their famous book of fairy tales in 1812, in which the gingerbread house of a witch plays a key part, that made the making of gingerbread houses more widely popular (Eschner).

Back on the main topic, Gingerbread basically continued as it had been for several centuries in Europe. The exact recipes and decorations varied, but in general the upper class decorated their gingerbread lavishly, often to the point of using gold leaf; the lower classes tended to stick to simpler shapes and icings. Geographically, the British Isles tended towards soft gingerbreads while the mainland- especially Germany- preferred the hard varieties (Stellingwerf 10). Both kinds would make their way to the Colonies with their respective nationalities- most notably the Germans and the Brits- and would be carried with them as exploration pushed west- including to the Appalachians, where gingerbread would find a welcome table at church functions and other special events long after the rest of the country moved on to other baked goods.

Gingerbread would stay a fairly big deal until about the 20th century, even being noted to have been used as a bribe in elections to try to sway voter opinion in favor of one candidate or another (Shakelford). As the 1900s rolled in, however, something kinda odd happened. Gingerbread, once so popular, started showing up less and less in general, with the exceptions of the fall and winter holidays and the Appalachian region. Nowadays, gingerbread is mainly the hallmark of genre cookbooks of either the candy-cane or mountain flavors. Sure, it's not totally gone elsewhere, but why is it that gingerbread has held out so much better in these two areas?

For the holiday part, it's relatively simpler to explain. Fairs were historically held for special occasions, and the harvest and winter holidays certainly counted for that. The association with Christmas in particular is a bit tough to explain, but from what Smithsonian Magazine can tell at least, "Somewhere along the way, possibly because of historical connections between gingerbread and religious ceremonies or guilds, gingerbread—and gingerbread houses—had become associated with Christmas," particularly in Germany (Eschner). Gingerbread's holdover in the Appalachian region, however, takes more explaining to understand.

To begin with let's look at some actual recipes for gingerbread. The best place to start is probably "A Domestic Cook Book" by Melinda Russell. It's an important cookbook for a number of reasons- it's the first published cookbook written by an African-American lady, for one thing, as well as a rare example of a cookbook written by a woman from the Appalachian region just after the Civil War. The most relevant part for now, though, is the sheer number of gingerbread recipes this cookbook contains. Out of 33 pages of recipes, about 14 involve ginger in some way, and 10 or so out of those can be considered gingerbread proper. That's a *very* high percentage of any one specific food being represented in a single cookbook, especially one this short. It's a

strong indicator of how popular gingerbread was in this time period, especially in Appalachia, since that was where Russell got her start. The sheer number of different recipes is also a good indicator that gingerbread was a fairly accessible dish in the Appalachians in this time period.

The second recipe Russell gives for gingerbread in her cookbook is one of the simpler ones she gives. We'll ignore the exact measurements and focus on the ingredients themselves. This recipe calls for molasses, sugar, lard, eggs, baking soda, ginger, flour, and sour milk. But this is just one recipe for soft gingerbread- what do other recipes call for?

These recipes from "The Gingerbread Book" by Steven Stellingwerf and are for two slightly different versions of "hard" gingerbread. Again, ignore the exact measurements and the instructions- those vary between recipes. The "Basic" gingerbread uses flour, ginger, molasses, brown sugar, butter, baking soda, and some egg. The "old-fashioned" gingerbread uses only a slightly different recipe- there's more spices than just the ginger, the butter has been substituted for vegetable shortening, but the rest of the ingredients are the same.

So what do these recipes tell us? That there are certain ingredients that *have* to be in gingerbread to make gingerbread. As it happens, Stellingwerf has also noticed this, and did short bits about how each ingredient impacts the resulting treat in his book. Using this as a guideline, we can see that Stellingwerf has defined the basic ingredients for gingerbread as being eggs, spices, sugar, molasses, and flour. That doesn't quite cover all the bases however- while the different recipes don't all call for butter exactly, all the gingerbread recipes called for some variety of fat or shortening. Baking soda also makes an appearance in all the recipes. That leaves the final list at eggs, spices, sugar, molasses, flour, fat, and baking soda. All of these, then, are ingredients that would need to be accessible by the average Appalachian cook.

But some of these things don't sound like they could be easily acquired by many Appalachian people. Wheat doesn't grow well in Appalachian soil, and molasses has to be traded for, as does baking soda and ginger. Considering how difficult it could be for many Appalachian families to get more than the bare necessities, how did they get the stuff to make gingerbread in the first place? They did the same they did with any other hard-to-obtain thing: make do and substitute!

For wheat, the substitute of choice is cornmeal. Corn is by far easier to grow in the Appalachians, and cornmeal was already a staple for a variety of recipes anyway. The end texture obviously ends up different, and probably won't ever be able to make any "hard" gingerbreads, but the end result is still a perfectly delicious gingerbread.

Molasses is actually one ingredient that Appalachian people probably didn't even realize they were substituting. The molasses found in grocery stores today is a product of producing sugar from sugarcane, which cannot grow in Appalachian territory, and

yet, as Sidney Saylor Farr notes in her book “More than Moonshine,” homemade molasses was far more readily available to her community than refined sugar. Farr’s same section on Molasses offers the solution to this sticky mystery- the syrup that brought communities together to make didn’t come from sugarcane, but sorghum. Sorghum syrup is by this point one of the quintessential foods when Appalachian foodways are talked about, and is actually fairly expensive to get your hands on these days, but can still make a delicious part of any gingerbread.

Baking soda would be one of the trickier substitutes. Admittedly, once it was widely available, baking soda would have been relatively affordable- in 1892, one advertisement lists wholesale prices for it as being cents per pound, at least to resellers (The Progressive Farmer). Baking soda’s creation was a revolution in the world of cooking, allowing far more control over the leavening of breads than ever before, but what was used in baking before baking soda was mass-produced? The precursor to baking soda- a rough substance called pearlash, refined from potash, which is itself a byproduct of burning plant material- usually wood(Civitello). Pearlash was widely used in the colonial era, and it isn’t much of a stretch for the stuff to have lingered in areas of the Appalachians that would have had difficulty getting to a store.

For ginger, the substitute that Appalachian people historically would have used is actually *wild* ginger, scientific name *Asarum canadense* (USDA Forestry Service). The flavor of wild ginger is different from the variety usually found in modern grocery stores, but similar enough to be an acceptable substitute for most ginger-based recipes. It should be noted, however, that wild ginger has been determined to contain poisonous compounds, so *please* do not try this substitute at home!

Considered all together, we can see that the ingredients for gingerbread would be relatively easy for the average Appalachian cook to assemble. Compare said ingredients to what’s needed for something like most cakes or cookies (which tend to require stuff like vanilla and chocolate, neither of which are exactly *plentiful* in the middle of the mountains) and we can see just how much easier gingerbread would be to put together, hence the continuing popularity when other treats overtook gingerbread in star status elsewhere in the country.

Works Cited

Albright, Mary Beth. "Gingerbread: Ageless Treat of Spice and Structure." *The Plate*, National Geographic, 27 Dec. 2015, theplate.nationalgeographic.com/2015/12/24/gingerbread-historic-treat-of-spice-and-structure/.

Ashliman, D L. "The Runaway Pancake." *Runaway Pancake: Folktales of Type 2025*, University of Pittsburgh, www.pitt.edu/~dash/type2025.html.

Avey, Tori. "The History of Gingerbread." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 20 Dec. 2013, www.pbs.org/food/the-history-kitchen/history-gingerbread/.

Bode, Ann M., and Zigang Dong. "The Amazing and Mighty Ginger." *Herbal Medicine: Biomolecular and Clinical Aspects*. 2nd Edition., U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2011, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK92775/.

CIVITELLO, LINDA. "The Liberation of Cake: Chemical Independence, 1796." *Baking Powder Wars: The Cutthroat Food Fight That Revolutionized Cooking*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana; Chicago; Springfield, 2017, pp. 18–32. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1q31s7n.6.

Clarkson, Janet. "Through the Ages with Gingerbread." *The Old Foodie*, Blogger.com, 12 Dec. 2006, www.theoldfoodie.com/2006/12/through-ages-with-gingerbread.html.

Eschner, Kat. "The Un-Christmassy Origin of Gingerbread Houses." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 12 Dec. 2017, www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/un-christmassy-origin-gingerbread-houses-180967461/.

Fiegl, Amanda. "A Brief History of Gingerbread." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 24 Dec. 2008, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/a-brief-history-of-gingerbread-50050265/.

McLoone, Juli. "Beyond the Reading Room." *University of Michigan Library*, 24 Feb. 2016, www.lib.umich.edu/blogs/beyond-reading-room/now-online-oldest-known-cookbook-authored-african-american.

Raghavan, Susheela. *Handbook of Spices, Seasonings, and Flavorings*. CRC Press/Taylor & Francis Group, 2007.

Rhodes, Jesse. "The Gingerbread Man and Other Runaway Foods." Smithsonian.com, Smithsonian Institution, 8 Dec. 2011, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-gingerbread-man-and-other-runaway-foods-2255339/.

Russel, Malinda. A Domestic Cookbook. 1866. Hathitrust.org, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015091768104>.

Shackelford, Laurel, and Bill Weinberg. Our Appalachia: an Oral History. University Press of Kentucky, 1988.

Stellingwerf, Steven. The Gingerbread Book. Rizzoli, 1991.

Stritch, Larry. "Wild Ginger." United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/plant-of-the-week/asarum_canadense.shtml.

Van Willigen, John. "Hard Times: The Great Depression and the New Deal." Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage: Two Hundred Years of Southern Cuisine and Culture, University Press of Kentucky, 2014, pp. 93–108. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zwd6.7.

Worth, W.H. The Progressive Farmer, April 12 1892, Page 7, <https://newscomnc.newspapers.com/>.

Images

Mjuk_pepparkaka_med_lingon By Johan Bryggare (Mjuk pepparkaka med lingon) [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Buckley_gingerbread_men By U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Elisa Labbe [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Ginger_Root_Display By Ellin Beltz [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

Silk_route By Whole_world_-_land_and_oceans_12000.jpg: NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center derivative work: Splette (talk)NASA - Visible Earth, images

combined and scaled down by HighInBC (20 megabyte upload limit)NASA
Visible Earth [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Portrait of Queen Elisabeth I By Marcus Geeraerts the Younger [Public domain],
via Wikimedia Commons

Hänsel and Gretel By Alexander Zick [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm: Bleistift By Ludwig Emil Grimm [Public domain], via
Wikimedia Commons

Medieval and modern times; an introduction to the history of western Europe
from the dissolution of the Roman empire to the present time By James Harvey
Robinson via Internet Archive Book Images [No restrictions], via Wikimedia
Commons

Neela's Gingerbread House By Roopesh Sheth [CC BY-SA 2.0
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

BRITANNIA prout divisa fuit temporibus ANGLO-SAXONUM, praesertim
durante illorum HEPTARCHIA. By Joan Blaeu [Public domain], via Wikimedia
Commons

A New Map of Germany, Hungary, Transilvania & The Suisse Cantons, with
many Remarks not extant in any Map By Herman Moll [Public Domain], via
Wikimedia Commons

Colonial North America 1689 to 1783 By United States Army Center of Military
History [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Rainy Blue Ridge-27527 By Ken Thomas (KenThomas.us(personal website of
photographer)) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Old Czech extruded gingerbread in Městské muzeum Žamberk By Employees of
MMŽk [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC-BY-SA-3.0
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Portrait of Shakespeare [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Pancakes being cooked on a griddle By Kanko from Nagasaki, Japan (Flickr) [CC
BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Illustration for a Grimm fairy tale By George Cruikshank (grimmsgoblinsgri00grim on archive.org) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Traditional form for molding gingerbread By Piotr Kuczyński [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

"Dawn of the Century" March & Two-Step, sheet music cover By E.T. Paull [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Farr, Sidney Saylor. *Table Talk: Appalachian Meals and Memories*. Diane Pub Co, 1995. Photograph.

Renaissance fair - people By (User:Piotrus) [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

The Harvest By Camille Pissarro [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Moscow in Winter By Ivan Aivazovsky [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Happy Christmas By Viggo Johansen [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Smithsonian Logo By US Federal government. (Constructed from different PDF sources) [Public domain or Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Entrance to the Museum of Appalachia By Brian Stansberry [CC BY 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

Russel, Malinda. *A Domestic Cookbook*. 1866. Hathitrust.org, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015091768104>. Photograph.

Stellingwerf, Steven. *The Gingerbread Book*. Rizzoli, 1991. Photograph.

Wheat Close-up By User:Bluemoose [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>), CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>) or CC BY-SA 2.5 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

Blackstrap Molasses By Badagnani [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC BY 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

Arm and Hammer brand Best in the world By Boston Public Library [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Lonely farm home near Bulls Gap, Tennessee By Tennessee Valley Authority [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Cornmeal Breeding By Leena [CC BY 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

Corn By WiseMan42 [CC0], from Wikimedia Commons

raw cane sugar, light By Fritzs [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

Sugarcane field in Queensland, Australia 3 By Phil (Flickr: [_MG_6940](#)) [CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Sorghum bicolor03 By No machine-readable author provided. Pethan assumed (based on copyright claims). [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Boiling down sorghum at the Stooksberry homestead near Andersonville, Tennessee. By Tennessee Valley Authority [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Score! sorghum molasses...not from Benton County...but close. By Farther Along [CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)] Source: Flickr

Asarum canadense 23zz By David J. Stang [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Asarum canadense 24zz By David J. Stang [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Baseball Diamond By [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons