

TOOLS

BY JESSICA MAHER

SHAPING HISTORY, ONE COOKIE AT A TIME

I pursued a career as a pastry chef because I love to make people happy with food, and because I love a challenge. Those precious cakes and tarts you swoon over in bakery windows take a lot of concentration and patience to create. Almost every one of them also requires the right sort of mold or cutter. After years of working in professional kitchens across the country, I've learned from experience that you can never have too many tools.

Because I never tire of learning new techniques or recipes, you can see how I might get carried away with the bric-a-brac of baking. I probably have a tool for almost any baking situation, which is just the way I like it. One piece, however, is still missing from my collection—a cookie mold. Not the metal cutouts of trees or dog biscuits—I have those—but the old wooden type that probably decorated my great aunt's kitchen. What I really want is a beautiful, hand-carved *springerle* mold.

I first discovered the *springerle* cookie while working as a pastry cook in New York, and quickly came to think it epitomized the magic of the holiday season. We made them as gifts for customers, along with scores of chocolate-filled Santas and iced gingerbread snowflakes.

The executive pastry chef I worked for at the time had an amazing red Craftsman toolbox with a million drawers, each teeming with implements for piping, curling, poking and pressing. But one drawer held just two molds he'd brought home from Germany years before, and they were lent to us only on the condition that they remain perfectly clean and stowed safely after use.

Of all the delicious-yet-labor-intensive German and Austrian Christmas pastries I've come to love—*stollen*, *kipferl*, *eisenbahner*—*springerle* is perhaps the most high-maintenance. It takes three days to prepare, after which it develops enough staying power to survive a nuclear holocaust. It's pure white, sticky and traditionally leavened with hartshorn, or ammonia carbonate, which makes the raw dough inedible—you'll just have to take my word for it—though the toxin cooks out during the baking stage. This dough has a remarkable ability to hold the shape of a detailed mold, and transforms into an elegant, snowy-white, licorice-flavored Christmas cookie. Like gingerbread cookies, *springerle* can be eaten with a hot cup of joe, or painted with acrylic and hung as an ornament from the tree.

Devoting three days to a process that challenges even professionals may not sound all that inspiring to the amateur baker, but I think the wow factor is worth the trouble. And the mold is really key.

Springerle molds made their way into the suitcases of immigrants bound for America in the 19th century. Some are



SPRINGERLE RESOURCES

Der Küchen Laden • 258 E. Main St., Fredericksburg
830-997-4937 • littlechef.com • Great store for up-close-and-in-person shopping for molds, and very close to German bakeries.

Terry Baker, Grandma Oscar's Attic • 507 Main St., Calvert
979-364-3690 • Terry Baker, local wood-carver, has an intermittent online eBay site—going to see his wares in person might be more reliable.

Gene Wilson, "America's Cookie Mold Carver" • cookiemold.com
This website has an amazing selection, and it seems that Mr. Wilson knows a thing, or even two, about wooden molds.

house on the hill • houseonthehill.net • Huge selection of quality molds.

Sur la Table • surlatable.com • Selection is very limited, but the quality is heavy-duty and good for serious holiday baking.

centuries-old heirlooms, passed down by descendants of German and Swiss families. Some may still be in use, but I suspect they mostly hang on a wall at Oma's house. Or worse, they've been tucked away in a box.

If you're lucky enough to have a family heirloom of your own, don't miss the opportunity to keep a deeply rooted tradition alive. And if you want to start one of your own, you can find both original wood molds and resin-cast replicas at a multitude of online stores. Those who can't quite find the time or motivation to bake their own *springerle* should make a pilgrimage to the Hill Country, which makes up in German bakeries what it lacks in snow-tipped mountains and warm, woolen mittens—a few of my favorite things.

Despite the Central Texas weather, I'm starting to feel the electricity of the approaching holidays. If I can get our old clunker of an oven purring again, I'll start narrowing down the list of cookies I like to bake and give as gifts—not to mention a list of recipients. I probably won't make it to Europe in time, but if I can get just 75 miles out of Austin, this might be the year I finally add the cookie mold I've always wanted to my collection.