

ROOTS

BY KATIE CANTRELL

TEX-CZECH

A trip through kolache history

The following is a legend every Central Texan ought to know.

Long ago, in a corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire now known as the Czech Republic, Maminka was trying to bake bread, but her daughter, Lebuse, kept interrupting her. So Maminka gave her a piece of dough to play with. Happily, Lebuse rolled and flattened her dough, added some plums from the table, and slipped her creation into the oven with the rest of the bread. When her father came in from the fields for a snack, he grabbed Lebuse's little cake, which promptly squirted him with scalding plum juice. Crazy with pain, he began hopping around the table in a circle. Lebuse, who found all this very funny, cried out, "Tatinek je do kola!" In other words: "Tatinek is making a wheel!"

And so the *kolache*—a ball of dough not unlike a slightly sweetish dinner roll filled with fruit or cheese—was born, its name having evolved from the Czech *kola*, meaning “wheels” or “rounds.” Texans also enjoy the sausage kolaches that resemble pigs-in-a-blanket. Either way, kolaches are as Texan as barbecue, sold anywhere from dedicated kolache bakeries, such as Lone Star Kolaches in Austin, to convenience stores on the Interstate. Houston's Kolache Factory has actually franchised the kolache, setting up stores as far away as Indianapolis.

These tasty morsels arrived in Texas along with the tens of thousands of Czech immigrants who came through the port of Galveston in the 1850s through the early 1900s. Determined to farm, these new Texans settled mainly in the coastal plain and rich blackland areas of Central Texas, setting up the churches and fraternal organizations that ended up doing such a good job of preserving their heritage. By the latter half of the 20th century, celebrations of Czech culture and the kolache—



among them Westfest, in West, and the Caldwell's Kolache Festival—had become popular annual events.

Naturally, when my husband and I left for a trip to Prague last summer, I assumed I'd find not just kolaches, but authentic, ancestral kolaches. I may be an adoptive Texan, but I know what I like. I envisioned a kolache stand on every corner, a Czech Dunkin'-Donuts-style empire.

The city itself, with its requisite huge hilltop castles, didn't disappoint. But the kolache situation did. Some bakeries had one or two varieties; some had none at all. Some were filled with fruit, poppy seed or cheese, but others were more like square

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slices of yellow cake with a cream cheese mixture baked on top. Most puzzlingly, given that pork is Prague’s most dominant meat, I couldn’t find a sausage-filled pastry anywhere.

I had to return to Texas to find out why. I did this by visiting Georgia Montgomery in her hometown of West. She’s presided over the Village Bakery there for 55 of her 90 years. And though she’s never been known for her baking prowess, and so gave up trying long ago, she is basically the mother of the retail kolache. And despite her lack of proficiency with flour, she’s forgotten more about kolaches than most of us will ever know.

Of course we didn’t find many kolaches in Prague, she explained. Most of Texas’s Czech settlers—and their kolache recipes—came from Moravia, a region many miles further south. Of Moravian descent herself, Georgia grew up in a town now known as the Czech Heritage Capital of Texas. But in those days, a visitor still couldn’t buy a decent kolache. “Outsiders” could only get Czech food if they went to a Czech wedding or church bazaar, or if they could butter up a Czech woman.

“My sister had friends from school,” Georgia remembered, “boys who were just friends—she never went with either of them. Still, they would come over every Saturday and mow the lawn, just for my mother Honey’s kolaches.”

Honey’s parents had come through Galveston armed with an excellent recipe, and she was indeed a gifted baker. This was not lost on Georgia’s husband, a pharmacist named Wendel Montgomery. His brainstorm, like so many other Texas phenomena, owes its spark to high school football.

“One night after a game, a group of our friends were sitting around having kolaches,” Georgia told me. “The football coach, H.J. Kozelski, was teasing me for not being a good cook.” Unfortunately, he was right. Despite her pastry-adept mother, Georgia didn’t bake at all. Perhaps this is why the coach dared Georgia’s husband Wendel to open a Czech bakery.

The idea actually made sense to Wendel. If church bazaars could sell hundreds of kolaches in a day, surely the demand existed for retail Czech baked goods. And though not of Czech heritage himself—he came from old Texas German stock, his family having migrated from Tennessee in the early 1800s—he recognized the need to preserve the traditional Czech ways that were starting to fade.

So he cleaned out a storeroom next to his drugstore, while Georgia made curtains and painted. Wendel and Honey put their heads together, using her talent and his chemistry background,

and remade her family-size recipes on a commercial scale.

“Baking is a science,” his daughter Mimi Irwin said. “As a chemist, Daddy knew how to work with dough. With cooking, you put a little of this and a little of that together and you have a sauce. If you try to put a little of this and a little of that together when you’re making kolache dough, all you get is a mess.”

The Village Bakery opened for business in 1952—the first store on record ever to sell kolaches to the public—and the rest is pastry history. Not surprisingly, Honey’s traditional kolaches, filled with fruits and herbs indigenous to Czechoslovakia, including apricot, apple, prune, poppy seed, peach and cherry fillings, remain popular. So do the authentic cheese-filled pastries.

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The strawberry, raspberry, blueberry and pineapple varieties added to the menu over the years, however, are concessions to the American palate.

“When my father got off the boat in Galveston in 1906, he’d never even heard of a pineapple,” Georgia remembered.

As for the sausage kolache, it was actually invented at the epicenter of the Village Bakery itself. Apparently, the concept came to Wendel while he was eating a hot dog. He and Honey experimented for a while before getting it right—plain or jalapeño sausage and sausage-and-cheese were both winners, but an attempt at sausage-and-sauerkraut never made it out of the test kitchen.

“I don’t care how long you drain sauerkraut,” Georgia said firmly, “it never stops leaking.”

Wendel went on to trademark his invention under the name *klobasniki*, a Czech word meaning “little sausage.” Thanks to this legal protection, anyone can sell a sausage kolache, but only the Village Bakery can sell a *klobasniki*.

If you want one—or any other variety of the original commercial kolache varieties—you’ll just have to go to West, because the bakery doesn’t ship. George and Wendel once sent a batch to Mimi at UT, via Greyhound bus, but the Montgomerys think road travel compromises the flavors they’ve fine-tuned for a half-century, and they wouldn’t dream of using preservatives.

If you get there on a Wednesday, say hello to Georgia. Just don’t look for her behind a mixer.

“I still don’t bake,” she says. “I do the books.”