

Pfeffernusse (Peppernuts)

Small, round spice cookies are popular in Germany and parts of northern Europe. But in the U.S., the pfeffernusse (FEHF-fuhr-noos) has enough fans to have its own food holiday: Dec. 23, otherwise known as National Pfeffernusse Day.

Pfeffernusse is very much like German Lebkuchen—otherwise known as gingerbread. However, they differ from gingerbread in that they are rolled into balls and then glazed with sugar afterward.

The name pfeffernusse means “pepper nuts.” The pepper part refers to the white pepper that is added to the dough, which gives these cookies a very unique and flavorful touch. The nuts part refers to their walnut-like shape. You will often find pfeffernusse coated one of two ways, either with a hard icing coating or a powdered sugar coating. As with many of these traditional cookies, there are variations; recipes may contain anise, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, mace, nutmeg, honey, and/or molasses. Some recipes include ground nuts and others don’t have nuts. Pfeffernusse cookies are packed with an intense spice flavor that will truly tantalize your taste buds!

After the cookies cool, they become very hard. Hard enough that they require dipping into a liquid such as cold milk or hot coffee to soften them for eating. They will soften with age and their flavors become more complex.

The cookie’s exact origins are unknown, but it has been an integral part of Yuletide celebrations since the 1850s in Europe. These cookies are also associated with the Feast of Sinterklaas, celebrated in Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. It’s usually held on December 5th or 6th and is a tribute to the life of the patron Saint Sinterklaas (or St. Nicholas), who died on December 5th and dedicated his life to helping others. As the tradition goes, Sinterklaas visits during the night and leaves gifts for the children in their shoes. The next morning children may find chocolate coins or initial letters, candy treats, cookies, nuts, tangerines, and little gifts in their shoes. Everyone hopes for sweets, not coal or a little bag of salt.

While pfeffernusse are commonly found in bakeries and even supermarkets during the holiday season, they are not difficult to make. One of the best things about these classic German cookies is they get better with age, making them the perfect make-ahead Christmas cookie.

To ship cookies, place two cooled cookies together back to back. Wrap the two cookies up tightly with plastic wrap. Unless the cookies are very soft and falling apart in your hands, they shouldn’t break or tear during the shipping process because they are confined and have the support from the cookie beneath it.

Place all of the wrapped cookies into a tin or plastic container. Stuff the tin or container with tissue paper, crumpled newspaper, or packing peanuts to keep the cookies snug. Place the tin or container into a shipping box and use more crumpled newspaper or other shipping materials if needed. Then send off!

One of Germany's most popular and beloved Christmas treats, these spiced and iced cookies are a lot easier to make than they are to spell! Try your hand at making a batch of pfeffernusse. Recruit a family member or two to join in the fun. Add a little international flair to your holiday celebration this year with pfeffernusse cookies.

(en.wikipedia.org; www.daringgourmet.com; foodimentary.com)