

Catholic Kuchen?

Really? The Catholics have a special kind? Yes, really!

But before I launch into this topic, I want to discuss the word for this delectable dessert itself. Of course, since the word in question is a noun, in German it is spelled with a capital “K”—Kuchen. However, in English, we use the lower case—kuchen. And then there is the issue of plurality. In German, Kuchen is both singular and plural, but in common usage in English, there are people who speak of kuchen. So, that leaves me with...

The Kuchen Konundrum

The problem with Kuchen is not in the eatin'.
It's so sweet and tasty and cannot be beaten.
But really the trouble, it is with the English:
Should that yummy Kuchen be plural or singlish?

In the following article, kuchen will be both!

Some time ago I got put down because I suggested that Roman Catholics made a different kind of kuchen than Protestants make. In truth, there is a special kind of Catholic kuchen—Hochzeit or wedding kuchen. Ted Becker tells me that his mother, Julia (Tischmak) Becker, made two kinds of kuchen. Wedding kuchen “was really very thin,” and then there was the kind that Protestants know which was “maybe one-half, maybe three-quarters of an inch thick.”

Ted thinks the reason for the difference is simple: A cook could make about three times as many kuchen with the same amount of dough as with what I will henceforth refer to as traditional or secular kuchen. Ted’s mother used the same yeast sweet dough recipe for both kinds of kuchen. With wedding kuchen “she just rolled it out thinner.”

Hochzeit kuchen was probably more often made with baking soda than with yeast as a leavener. In fact, in Dorothy Feist’s Hebron, ND world, “Wedding kuchen was never made with yeast.” Dorothy’s mother, Philippina (Schumacher) Nagel, made wedding kuchen “for every holiday there was.” Her mom “made the raised [with yeast] also, but only for Christmas and Easter.” [Ed. My wife, Cathy, overheard my conversation with kuchen makers and joked that, “You’d have to have the raised kind for Easter!”] Dorothy’s recipe makes twelve ten-inch kuchen, but she bakes two ten-inch kuchen and one nine-inch kuchen at a time since that is all that can fit in her oven.

The custard was the same for both types of kuchen made by Ted’s mom, only thinner on the Hochzeit kuchen. For toppings, she used prunes, canned peaches, rhubarb, or cottage cheese, depending on her whim and what was available. The best cottage cheese was homemade cottage cheese because it was drier than store-bought cottage cheese. Her wedding kuchen was not soft like traditional kuchen, but it wasn’t crunchy, either. It was somewhere in between. But “when mom made kuchen, she kept some dough back to bake with cinnamon and sugar.” This kuchen didn’t have custard. “It was crunchy, and I really liked it.”

Ted’s aunt Susie (Tischmak) Blotsky made cinnamon-sugar kuchen also, but “it tasted different because the bottom was almost black—not burned, but close.” This kuchen was good, too. Ted suggested that making kuchen was like making borscht: “If you have 500 different cooks, you’ll have 500 different kinds of kuchen.”

When Ted was growing up in the 1950s, it was usually the mothers of the bride and groom, sometimes with the help of the aunts, who made the Hochzeit kuchen. Together, they’d bring 60 or 80 kuchen to the church hall. By this time, church halls had freezers in their basements, so

the moms would pile their kuchen in the freezers, each kuchen separated by a piece of wax paper.

At the reception, it was the job of older teenage girls to set out the kuchen. This was sort of a rite of passage for the girls. They would set out ten or twenty at a time, each nine-inch kuchen cut into about six slices. The men (including the young men) who had been drinking would periodically saunter over to the kuchen table where “They just grabbed the kuchen with one hand while holding a beer in the other. Guys would just stand there and eat until they were full.”

Ted says that having something in their stomachs kept the men from getting too drunk. Parenthetically, he says that before his dad went out drinking, he would eat a slice of bread slathered with a half inch of butter so he could drink without inebriation. On the surface, this seems goofy, but as a gastroenterologist, I know that fat delays stomach emptying, so Ted’s dad probably was onto something!

Diane Grossman grew up in Linton, ND where the Knights of Columbus Hall was booked solid with weddings or family reunions each weekend from May through October during the 70s, 80s and 90s. Her mother, Christine (Bosch) Schumacher, frequently made kuchen, and it was almost always the flat wedding kuchen type. Hers was a baking powder recipe that made about twenty, seven- or eight-inch, very thin kuchen. Her custard was made with eggs and cream and vanilla which she cooked in a double boiler until it thickened some. She then spread the custard on top and baked her kuchen.

When Christine did make “what we called ‘filled kuchen’”—the thicker kind—she topped those with either prunes or peaches. Diane likes the thick kuchen, but “we grew up on the wedding kuchen, and that is what we really liked.” Diane doesn’t think her mother ever used yeast as a leavener for her kuchen. Christine just didn’t roll her dough as thin for her “filled kuchen,” and she pushed the dough higher up on the sides of her pie pans to make a deeper depression for her custard. Like Ted’s mom, Christine also saved some dough scraps on which she sprinkled cinnamon-sugar and then baked, and Diane and her siblings really liked that as well.

When a wedding was coming up, the mothers, aunts and grandmas baked Hochzeit kuchen, sometimes a month in advance. They packed these in ice cream pails, each kuchen separated from the others by a piece of wax paper. Then they were frozen. The reason Christine made the smaller diameter kuchen is because nine-inch kuchen wouldn’t fit in an ice cream bucket. On the wedding day, the kuchen was brought to the hall and set out on a table with the non-alcoholic punch and maybe some bars and mints.

The usual sequence was that after the wedding ceremony, everyone descended on the hall where the kuchen was mostly eaten before the meal. As folks entered the hall, they were greeted by two men, one on each side of the door, who offered shots of redevye in little plastic shot glasses. Male “beer pourers” went around with a pitcher of beer in one hand and a stack of plastic glasses in the other. Beer drinkers would take their own glass from the stack, and the pourer would fill it. Sooner or later, most people would graze by the kuchen table and take one or two pieces on a napkin. Some would keep on walking, and some would sit. Diane had about 200 guests at her reception in 1983, and there were about eighty kuchen served.

The Schatz sisters Ida Engelhardt and Angela Mastel grew up in a Roman Catholic family three miles from Zeeland, ND, a town that was about half Catholic and half Protestant. Ida says their mother, Eva (Gross) Schatz, made lots of kuchen—both “the raised kuchen and the unraised kuchen.” Angela says Eva’s unraised wedding kuchen was “put away to go along with soup on meatless Fridays.” “Her wedding kuchen was not made with yeast.” It was made “with very little baking powder,” and when baked, “It was crispy, almost like pie dough.” “It had a thin crust and only enough custard to hold the cinnamon and sugar so they could bake it.” In the days before deep freezes and before one could easily buy wax paper, Eva would put her wedding kuchen in the wax paper that came in boxes of corn flakes. It was then stored for some days in the bread drawer of a metal China cupboard. Eva actually made more raised than wed-

ding kuchen. Angela “liked either one equally really well,” but Ida preferred “the good ones with the good sauce on it.”

Angela mentioned that before the Second Vatican Council, Catholic wedding masses were held in the morning with the receptions in the afternoon. Wedding kuchen was commonly served in the Zeeland area, but Ida cannot recall kuchen of any kind being served at any of the eight Schatz kids’ wedding receptions.

Margaret (Getz) Feist is a friend of Ida’s. Margaret’s family was Catholic and lived on a farm near Strasburg, ND. A Protestant family lived nearby. The Feist’s on occasion served their neighbors wedding kuchen. Margaret told Ida, “They liked it, but they didn’t know how to make it and didn’t want to learn.”

Catholics still make wedding kuchen, and Ted Becker makes it with his daughters, Corinne and Carol. But nothing stays the same. Ted says, “Fast forward thirty to forty years and mom was absolutely mortified that I and my kids used chocolate chips and bars for our topping.”

Article by Ken Vogeles; Photo from GRHC