

A Slice of German Life

BAKING A LUSCIOUS LOAF OF STOLLEN IN THE CITY WHERE IT WAS BORN | By MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA



Dresden has 11 Christmas bazaars, of which Striezelmarkt (left) is the largest. Stollen (right), mulled wine, and X'mas trinkets are popular buys.

“You have small hands,” Michael Wippler tut-tuts. I’m struggling with my two kilos of cake dough, trying to coerce the gooey mixture into an oblong loaf. Beside me, the 60-year-old master baker swiftly scoops up his mix with one hand, raises it above his head, and slams it down on the wooden slab, where it lands with a squelch. He flexes his ruddy fingers and proceeds to firmly thwack the dough until it transforms into a polished ball of goodness flecked with plump, rum-soaked raisins and bits of orange rind. This process is a piece of cake for Wippler. For novices like me, his practised art is incredible to watch. “I bake around 1,000 kilos of stollen every day,” he says, with twinkling eyes and a big smile. “Now, it’s your turn.”

Stollen, a cross between bread and cake, is loaded with raisins, nuts, orange rind, and lightly infused with lemon zest, rum, and spices like ginger and

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Dresden, Germany



Dresden’s Striezelmarkt is Germany’s oldest Christmas market and dates back to 1434. It is held between 27 Nov and 24 Dec every year.

nutmeg. Its beginnings in the 14th century weren’t quite as indulgent. The German classic started as austere bread baked without butter during the season of Advent (the weeks preceding Christmas). There are many legends around the shape of the loaf, one of which says it resembles baby Jesus in swaddling clothes.

I’m learning to make the richer, denser version that was born in Dresden during the 17th century. Wippler Bakery, one of 131 stollen-speciality stores in the city, is 104 years old. It is run by Michael, a third-generation baker, his wife and two children. In the run up to Christmas, the Wipplers conduct baking classes, which begin with a spread of stollen and steaming coffee for the participants. The cosy baking room is bathed in orange light and crammed with old weighing scales, ladles, rolling pins and sacks of flour. I try a sugary loaf that’s chewy and dense; another with the granular poppy

seeds that complement the saccharine icing beautifully; and the sinful raisin variety, generously infused with rum and sugar.

Then, apron on, I start to mirror Michael’s actions, kneading bits of lard into the dough, pounding at the yeast-risen mix until it begins to feel light and airy. What started out as an amoeba-esq mass of dough gradually transforms into a long, oval loaf. It’s dotted with delicious bits of orange, green, and brown, ready to be popped into the oven and baked at 230°C.

The air is heavy with the scent of rum, butter, and warm cake. The chatter of happy bakers fills the room as Michael and his team pass around another round of coffee and mulled wine. When my cake is out of the oven, he coats it with powdered sugar. “It looks like snow”, he says. To me it looks like Christmas on a plate, and tastes even better. ●