

Wendish Comfort Food: Kaffee Kuchen

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Article by Julie Ardery

Photos by Bill Bishop

What food says "welcome" in your town? In Lee County, Texas, it's coffee cake -- just the thing for breakfast, as a snack, or after long a Trans-Atlantic crossing.



The Coffee Cake Bake-off in Serbin, TX, honors a local delicacy and passes the skill of baking it on: an entry in the "Youth" category, Alyssa Nowlin's Plum Kuchen.

Every region likely has its signature hospitality food. In the blackland prairie counties of Central Texas, where Czech, German, and Wendish heritages run together, the taste of Gemütlichkeit (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gemütlichkeit>) is coffee cake.

The families of Serbin, in Lee County, chose to press that point sweetly home with a coffee cake bake-off held annually during the fall Wendish Heritage Festival. This is a homecoming for the Dubes, Kokels, Lehmanns, Mikans, and others descended from the brave immigrants who sailed with their Lutheran pastor from Eastern Germany to Galveston, arriving in this part of Texas in 1854.

Dianne Hannusch Wassenich, who was in charge of this year's contest, September 25, bustled at an outdoor pavilion checking in the big trays of breads laden with fruit slices and cheese, or drizzled with icing. "We're trying to get the older ladies to make 'em, make sure their families know what they are, pass on their recipes," Wassenich said.

The Wends, a Slavic people with their own language, faced discrimination in Germany. When the Prussian king required that all Protestants join one national sect, they refused to moderate their strict Lutheran worship, and some 600 left under the leadership of Rev. Jan Kilian. Many died of cholera and yellow fever on the voyage to Liverpool, England, to Queensland, Ireland, and then across the Atlantic.

If ever a people needed comfort food!



The classic Streusel Kuchen, yeast dough topped with a sweet crumble of butter, sugar, flour, and spices.

And this is it. The two most traditional recipes are Streusel (pronounced "STROY-sell") with a crumbly topping of butter, sugar, flour, and spices, and Kaese Kuchen, with cheese. "Most people make it nowadays with cottage cheese," said Wassenich, "but you know people used to make their own cheese. My mother used to hang it in a bag on the wash line to drain when I was a kid. Sometimes people put raisins in the kaese -- that's a little avant-garde. But we go along with it, because for some people it's traditional."

For the cookoff, there are four categories of entry, all made with yeast-raised dough: a youth competition for cooks ages 14 and under, streusel, kaese, and a catch-all division for experimental recipes.



All the entries are sliced and sold at the Wendish Heritage Festival, proceeds going to the Wendish Museum. “When people add things like rhubarb or apples or pears, we put that in a category called special,” Wassenich explained. The wide variation among these Kaffe Kuchen makes comparisons tough on judges. “They’re comparing apples and oranges,” literally, Wassenich said. “The poor judges. They have to eat all this sweet stuff before they get lunch.”

Among the impressive competitors this year at Serbin were Julia Winkler Turner of Troy, Texas, (the 2010 Streusel winner) who brought a gorgeous tray of cinnamon rolls, a truly “special” entry from a recipe five generations old. Evelyn Buchorn arrived with a whopping eight trays: kaese, streusel, and specials. Contest volunteers carefully sliced off portions of each entry for the judges to sample, cutting up and boxing the rest to sell as desserts to the festival crowd.



Evelyn Buchorn of Austin brought a stunning eight trays of coffee cakes and sweet rolls this year.

When the winners were announced, no one was more surprised that George Boerger of Houston. He won first place in both Streusel (recipe below) and Special -- topped with peaches -- and third place in Kaese. Boerger used the dough recipe of his late mother, Linda Kieseling Boerger, a native of O'Quinn, Texas, not far away.

“I remember as a boy visiting my mother’s mother, and she always had the delicious cheese coffee cake and cinnamon rolls and many other things. My mother made most of these same things and she usually sent a small coffee cake home with me when I visited about once a month.”

Boerger said that his mother entered the Serbin contest several times, placing third in 1993. About eight years ago, George asked for her recipe and began experimenting with baking. “I would make different coffee cakes and take them to Wendish Society meetings and get people to tell me what could be better,” Boerger explained.

“My mother died two years ago, and during her last year, she was not able to make coffee cake anymore. So I would almost always bring her one when I came to visit her...she was so proud that I could make coffee cake and carried on the tradition, as she had only two boys.”

Sunday, with the Kovanda Czech Band shifting in their seats ready to resume polka music, all the winners lined up for a photograph, George Boerger towering above his fellow bakers with a dazzled smile.

“Good for George,” remarked Georgie Boyce of Amarillo, snapping a picture. “I hear he’s been practicing every Saturday.”



George Boerger "trained" for eight years using his mother's recipe and took three trophies Sept. 25 in Serbin.

Coffee Cake – George Boerger

5/8 cup milk
1/4 cup + 1 tsp. sugar, divided
1/2 tsp salt
1 envelope active dry yeast
5/8 cup warm water (max 110 degrees)
1 egg
3 cups all-purpose flour

Heat milk and 1/4 cup sugar until sugar melts (use relatively low heat)
Cool milk to lukewarm temperature
Dissolve yeast and remaining sugar in warm water in large bowl; wait 10 minutes
Beat egg into yeast mixture
Beat in milk mixture
Beat in flour a little at a time until dough becomes elastic
The dough should not be too sticky
Turn dough onto floured surface and knead until smooth and elastic, about 5 min.
Place in greased bowl (I use a dutch oven with a glass lid)
Cover and let rise until double in size (about 2 hours)

Punch dough and knead it a few times (I just roll it onto the middle of the pan)
Roll onto 15 X 10 inch greased aluminum baking pan with lip turned up to double the height of the pan.
Spread evenly to the edges
Cover (but don't let it touch the dough) and let rise about 20 minutes
Gently put many fork marks on top of coffee cake except at the very edge (1/4")
Apply topping
Let rise until even or just slightly below the edge (experiment for yourself)
Place in preheated oven at 325.
Streusel coffee cake bakes ~ 30 minutes

Streusel topping

If you use fruit, cut into thin layers and apply solidly across the top, except for the 1/4 inch edge

Mix: 1 cup flour
3/4 cup sugar (3-1/4 servings)
3/8 soft margarine

(If streusel too sticky or bally, add more flour; if streusel too loose, add slightly more margarine)

Cinnamon is optional
Mix with pastry blender or fork for 2 minutes
Place lightly and evenly across coffee cake except for 1/4 inch edge.