

pfeffernusse

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Pfeffernüsse

Small, domed, hard German spice cookies, glazed white, and traditionally left in a tin for two to three weeks before anyone is allowed one. The name means pepper nuts, and there really is black pepper in them — a survival from the medieval spiced honey cakes of Nuremberg and Aachen, where pepper stood in for the whole imported spice trade.

They are the clearest example on this site of a cookie where the curing is the recipe. Fresh from the oven they are a jaw hazard.

What makes it work

- **The cure is not optional.** Honey and invert sugar are hygroscopic: sealed in a tin, they pull moisture out of the air and out of the apple slice most German bakers add, and the biscuit softens from rock to chew over two to three weeks. Baking them soft instead gives a cookie that goes stale rather than one that improves.
- **Potash and hartshorn, historically.** Baker's ammonia (hartshorn) gives a drier, more open crumb than baking powder because it leaves as gas entirely. Baking powder works; the texture is slightly denser.
- **Honey is cooked with the butter and sugar**, not creamed. This is a boiled honey-cake batter, closer to gingerbread than to a butter cookie. See [Honey](#).
- **Glaze while warm.** A powdered-sugar glaze on a warm dome dries to an opaque shell; on a cold one it stays translucent and tacky.

Ingredients

Makes about 50.

- 175 g [honey](#)
- 100 g dark brown sugar
- 75 g unsalted butter
- 1 [egg](#)
- 350 g all-purpose flour
- 5 g baking powder, or 3 g baker's ammonia
- 3 g fine salt
- 50 g ground [almonds](#)
- zest of 1 [lemon](#)

Spices: 6 g [cinnamon](#) · 2 g ground cloves · 2 g [nutmeg](#) · 2 g ground [ginger](#) · 1 g ground black pepper · 1 g ground cardamom · 1 g ground anise

Glaze: 200 g powdered sugar · 2–3 tbsp hot water or [lemon juice](#)

Method

Warm the honey, brown sugar and butter together until the butter melts and the sugar dissolves. Cool to lukewarm — hot batter scrambles the egg — then beat in the egg.

Stir in the flour, leavening, salt, almonds, zest and every spice. The dough is sticky and dark. Cover and rest it at room temperature for at least four hours, or overnight.

Roll 15 g balls with damp hands and space them 3 cm apart. Bake **180 °C / 350 °F for 12–14 minutes**, until firm and cracked on top.

Whisk the glaze to the consistency of thin cream. Dip the warm cookies top-down, set them on a rack, and let the glaze dry for an hour.

Pack them into an airtight tin with a slice of apple, replacing the apple every few days. **Wait two weeks.**

Notes

- Baker's ammonia smells sharply of ammonia in the oven and the smell leaves entirely as the cookie cools. This alarms people once.
- The Danish *pebernødder* is the same family, cut small as dice and left unglazed.
- **Keeps two months.** Genuinely peaks around week three.

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