

Christmas magic

in the Old World, and the New

By Laurel Kallenbach



Courtesy of Esslinger Marketing & Tourism/Thomas Wagner

The Medieval Fair and Christmas Market in Esslingen, Germany.



Discover spirit-lifting holiday celebrations in downtown Denver and Germany.

Being an American couple of Swiss-German heritage, my parents celebrated Christmas the Old Country way. Growing up, we decorated the tree on Christmas Eve, and that night we opened presents—not on Christmas morning. In the kitchen, we baked *Springerle*, anise-flavored cookies cut into patterned, festive shapes. Holiday décor included gifts from relatives' vacations in Europe: German nutcrackers, painted-glass ornaments, Advent candles, and a Christmas pyramid—a tiered, spinning “carousel” with carvings of angels, shepherds and the Magi.

As the years passed, Christmas for me lost some of its glow, replaced by the wearying repetition of “Jingle-Bell Rock” just after Halloween. Then I recently encountered a German custom that restored the magic of Christmas: *Weihnachtsmärkte* and *Christkindlmärkte*. These festive markets originated as town fairs during the Middle Ages, when villagers would stock up on supplies for winter. Over time, the markets became a holiday tradition—one I first sampled at Denver's Christkindl Market, which has been running for a handful of years.

New World: Denver's Christkindl Market

The doors of the shuttle I rode in downtown Denver slid open on the 16th Street Mall at Skyline Park, revealing a windmill-like Christmas pyramid. The red-and-green toy incongruously framed Denver's sleek, monochromatic skyscrapers—my first glimpse at the American version of a beloved European celebration.

Amid the early-December chill, the sight of German-style decorations warmed my heart. In a pine-swagged wooden hut I saw intricately carved candle holders and nutcrackers. Nearby, at the Modern German Lace booth, Elke Abate tucked her hands inside a sheepskin muff. Born in Dusseldorf, Abate remembers childhood *Weihnachtsmärkte* and is happy they're springing up in the States because she can share her love for German artisanship.

For five years, she's sold her goods—tablecloths, runners, doilies and placemats handcrafted in Plauen, Germany—at the Denver Christkindl.

"Lace is a special Christmas gift that never goes out of style," Abate said. "It gets passed down from generation to generation." I nodded, thinking of my grandmother's lace table-

A windmill-like Christmas pyramid welcomes visitors to the Denver Christkindl Market, where vendors sell holiday decorations, gifts, sweet treats, and spiced *Glühwein*.

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cloth that I use for holiday parties.

When friends arrived, we browsed the other rows of huts and booths, taking in Old-World handicrafts, including pottery from Poland, carved-wood St. Nicholas figures, and German beer steins.

Next, we slavishly followed the aromas of bratwurst, *Spätzle*, goulash,

kraut and schnitzel. We carried our loaded plates to one of many picnic tables inside the heated beer-garden tent where a trumpet/accordion/tuba trio played polkas and German hiking songs. At the bar, we chose from German beers, Colorado craft ales and mulled red wine, called *Glühwein* (pronounced "gloo-vine").

Glühwein is practically synonymous with Christmas markets, according to a German friend, who translates it as "glow wine" because of the effect of the hot, alcoholic beverage. The spiced wine accompanied my brat and sauerkraut dinner; after an hour on Denver's chilly sidewalks, I cupped my *Glühwein*—surprisingly sweet with hints of cinnamon and citrus—between both hands.

When the band struck up "Chicken Dance," we resumed our tour of the booths outdoors. This time we lingered among the Colorado/local wares at the market, including aspen-leaf jewelry and blown-glass from Buena Vista. Thriving Lotus Creations owners Kirk and Katie



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Visitors share a steamy mug of *Glühwein* at the Frankfurt Christmas Market.

Old World: Esslingen's Christmas & Medieval Market

Howlett heated lumps of glass with the roar of a 3,400-degree F blowtorch. With a few twists and turns, the lumps became colorful ornaments, tree toppers, perfume bottles and bottle stoppers. Perfect presents.

The beauty of Denver's Christkindl Market is that it gives visitors a taste of European celebration with a few American twists—and no language barrier. It certainly coaxed my local pals into the Christmas spirit. No plane ticket required.

Not me. The experience left me hungering for Germany's *Weihnachtsmärkte* and *Christkindlmärkte*. Lufthansa's nonstop flight from Denver to Frankfurt delivered me to an experience as rich as a slice of *Stollen*—a cake made with candied fruit, nuts and spices.

The piney smell of old-fashioned Christmas tickled my nose as I walked beneath the pungent fir-bough portal into historic Esslingen am Neckar, a 1,200-year-old town near Stuttgart in southern Germany. After a 2.5-hour train ride from Frankfurt (one train change in Stuttgart), I stepped into a world of medieval churches and colorful half-timbered houses with criss-crossed beams. Esslingen has hosted a Christmas market for centuries. For the last 16 years, a Medieval Christmas Fair (*Mittelaltermarkt*) has been held concurrently.

The market's elaborately embellished wood huts, thickly decorated with evergreen and pinecones, offered pungent chocolates, schnapps, honey, jam, mustard and vinegar. In a place I'd never been before, I encountered a taste

of home—*Springerle* cookies. Few Americans have heard of them. Now here they were, along with exotic-sounding goodies like braided rolls called *Flachswinkel* and a starburst-shaped *Mutschel* bread.

At another hut, I watched Helmut Höschle, an old man in a Bavarian hat, use fine-edged knives to remove bits of wood with a surgeon's skill to create Nativity sets like those a great-aunt brought home from a long-ago Germany vacation.

Of course, I had a mug of *Glühwein* (made with either red or white wine—I liked them both). Mugs require a deposit; you can keep the mug as a souvenir, or return it for your money back.

Next I meandered into the Medieval Market—like Colorado's Renaissance Festival but with a different accent. People dressed



Traditional crafts, such as handmade figures created by woodcarver Helmut Höschle, are just one of the charms of Esslingen's festive Christmas and Medieval Market.

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in European period costumes and speaking German revive old crafts and trades. I met calligraphers, candlemakers, blacksmiths, knife grinders, soap makers, bakers, mead brewers, and brush- and basketmakers.

A man who stirred browned chestnuts in a flat pan called to the crowd: “*Heisse Marroni! Hot chestnuts!*” I bought a paper cone filled with them, peeled off their charred skin, and popped the starchy meat into my mouth. Hmm ... bland and dry, yet everywhere people gobbled them.

At 5 p.m., exuberant church-bell clanging attracted a crowd around the Old Town Hall’s 1589 clock. Everyone raised their cellphones to Instagram the clock’s mechanical Imperial Eagle flap his wings.

Even a market as exciting as Esslingen’s requires a timeout from the revelry. One afternoon, I soaked my cobblestone-weary feet in the natural thermal waters at Merkel’sches Baths and Pool. (Be aware that most Europeans don’t wear bathing suits in the waters. Women seeking modesty should check the schedule for women-only hours.) Another diversion, the Kessler cellars, revealed how Germany’s oldest sparkling wine is fermented.

A second night in Esslingen included dining at the 150-year-old Palmscher Bau, specializing in forest-mushroom soup followed by *Rostbraten* (roast beef) with grilled onions, noodles and sauerkraut.

All of it warmed me through and through.

Fortified by the local Riesling and Palmscher Bau’s *Apfelküchle* dessert, I re-entered the torch-lit, pulse-quickenning medieval streets of the Christmas Market. Musicians pounded drums and wailed on medieval instruments while a fire-dancer snapped sparks into the air with a bullwhip. I elbowed my way through the crowds gathered in the square—and that’s when it happened. As I beheld the four-story Christmas tree in front of the wedding-cake curlicues of the Old Town Hall’s façade, my heart leapt with joy. I stood smack in the center of a Christmas postcard, so pretty, so old-fashioned. I couldn’t leave empty-handed.

Under the tree on Christmas Eve this year, my family will display the items I brought home: *Glühwein* mugs (perfect for Christmas-morning coffee), tea-candle holders that illuminate scenes of snow-covered German villages, a lace doily, miniature nutcrackers to hang on the tree, and bags of *Springerle* made in Germany. After all, they’re a family tradition. ▣

Read about two more of Germany’s Christmas Markets—one in Wiesbaden and one in Frankfurt—in the online version of this article.

With its backdrop of half-timbered houses, historic Römer Square in the Old World heart of the Christmas Market in Frankfurt, Germany. This hut sells *Bethmännchen* marzipan cookies, a local specialty.



Some new ornaments from Germany’s Christmas markets now decorate author **Laurel Kallenbach’s** (laurelkallenbach.com) tree.

Make Merry

Christmas Markets begin in late November and run until a few days before Christmas.

Denver Christkindl Market: Nov. 21–Dec. 23, 2014, at downtown Denver’s Skyline Park (16th and Arapahoe). Sun.–Thu.: 11 a.m.–7 p.m.; Fri.–Sat.: 11 a.m.–9 p.m. denverchristkindlmarket.com.

Esslingen Medieval and Christmas Markets: Nov. 25–Dec. 21, 2014. 11 a.m.–8:30 p.m. tourist.esslingen.de. ▣

Recipe



Christmas Stollen is a popular holiday treat.

Christmas Stollen with Marzipan

This Dresden-style *Stollen*—with a marzipan center—is a popular version of a beloved holiday treat. The recipe calls for *Quark*, a German fresh-curd cheese with a Greek yogurt-like consistency, available at Whole Foods or gourmet grocery stores. Logs or blocks of marzipan (sweet almond paste) are available at gourmet or import groceries—or you can order online.

Shelley Sampson, a chef and orchestra administrator who lived in Germany for 10 years, provided this recipe that she's used since 1982 to bake *Stollen* as Christmas gifts. The recipe makes eight *Stollen* (9- or 10-inch loaves):



Ingredients

3 1/3 cups raisins
 1 3/4 cups sultanas (golden raisins)
 1 cup golden rum (or to taste)
 12 cups (3 1/3 pounds) flour
 5 1/2 tablespoons baking powder
 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg, freshly ground
 1/2 teaspoon cardamom
 1 teaspoon cinnamon
 2 1/8 cups sugar
 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
 6 eggs
 2 teaspoons almond extract
 1 organic lemon (finely grate the peel; reserve the juice)
 3 1/3 cups (27 oz.) *Quark*
 3 1/4 sticks (26 tablespoons) cold butter, chopped into pieces
 8 ounces cold clarified butter (or ghee), chopped into pieces
 2 1/4 cups blanched almonds, finely ground in a food processor
 3/4 cup of candied lemon, orange and/or citron peel, chopped
 32 ounces (2 pounds) marzipan paste, about 4 ounces (1/4 pound) per *Stollen*
 2 sticks butter, melted for topping
 Powdered sugar for topping

One week before

1. Spread the raisins and sultanas in the bottom of a shallow Tupperware container.
2. Pour 1 cup of rum (or more to taste) over the fruit and shut lid tightly.
3. Allow to soak for one week, shaking the container daily to distribute the rum evenly. By the end of the week, most of the rum will have been absorbed into the raisins.

Baking day instructions

1. Preheat oven to 415°F.
2. Sift flour, baking powder and spices onto a large, flat work surface. Make a well in the center of the dry ingredients.
3. In the well, add the sugar, vanilla extract, eggs, almond extract, and juice of one lemon. With your hands, push the flour/baking powder mixture into the lake of wet ingredients and combine.

4. Add the *Quark*, butter and clarified butter/ghee. Mix quickly with your fingers until the wet/dry ingredient mixture resembles coarse oatmeal.
5. Add the rum-soaked raisins and sultanas (along with any remaining rum), ground almonds, candied fruit, and fresh-grated lemon peel.
6. Mix everything together until ingredients adhere to themselves and you have one gigantic ball of dough. (This can take some elbow grease; it's easier if you use a dough scraper for lifting and turning.) **Note:** This *Stollen* dough will not be as smooth as yeast dough.
7. Divide the dough into eight separate loaves, each about 9 to 10 inches long. Place about a 1/4-pound stick of marzipan in each loaf, lengthwise, and fold the dough over the marzipan so that it's covered and runs through the middle of the loaf.

8. Arrange all the loaves on a large cookie sheet (one with a lip is best). It's fine if they're touching.
9. Bake the loaves for 30 minutes at 415°F, then lower the heat to 330°F and continue baking for 60 minutes. Turn off the oven, leaving the loaves in the oven for another 15 minutes.
10. Remove the baking sheet from the oven and let the *Stollen* cool slightly.
11. Melt two sticks of butter and brush each loaf with it, then sift powdered sugar over each one.
12. When the loaves have cooled completely, wrap first in plastic wrap and then aluminum foil.

Note: Well-wrapped *Stollen* will remain fresh for at least two weeks and has been known to keep for a month.