



A Holiday Tradition

The "BOX" arrived from Green Bay, Wisconsin. It was the week before Christmas. The "BOX" wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string was finally here.

The "BOX" from Grandma Osiecki is one of my most cherished Christmas memories.

Even before it was opened, we could smell the goodness that was carefully wrapped and tucked inside.

Grandma had been baking for weeks and now we were the recipients of all the wonderfulness and tasty goodness that would be found inside.

There were frosted sugar cookies decorated with sparkling sprinkles, silver balls and red dots. Rum Balls, Molasses Cookies (my favorite), Hungarian Butter Horns (my sister's favorite), Mint Surprise, Peanut Rolls, Divinity, Pecan Puffs, Melt-aways, and of course wonderful creamy fudge.

Everything was carefully wrapped in wax paper, two cookies back-to-back to minimize breakage.

We didn't care if they were broken. They tasted fantastic whole or broken.

The arrival of the box even inspired my mom to do some baking. While she never liked cooking or baking there was something special about baking Christmas cookies that inspired her.

She stuck to the simple and traditional. Chocolate Chips, Peanut Butter, and Spritz Cookies. She would press out the Spritz Cookies with a manual cookie press - green Christmas Trees, pink hearts, and white wreaths which we decorated with a variety of sprinkles.

The spell cast by the smell of freshly baking and baked cookies filling the house is one of my cherished memories of the season.

Our next-door neighbor Jean was busy making her mini Pecan Tarts, jam filled cream cheese delights, and her famous crescents. She guarded her crescent recipe and would not share it with anyone.



My other grandmother was making some of her traditional German cookies. She baked the most buttery butter cookies that melted in your mouth, almond meringue topping a delicate cookie disk, and Pfefferbisse.



A second box would be delivered to her house from family in Germany. Her sister would send traditional Christmas Stollens, marzipan, and brandy filled chocolates.

All these marvelous holiday confections were shared making for a beautiful display on multitiered cookie trays starting on Christmas Eve and refilled and shared throughout the holiday season.

We would bring a tray of cookies when visiting friends. Our offering would be mingled with their own for an endless variety of treats.

I grew up with a love of baking especially tied to the holidays.

When I was first married, I sat down with Grandma Osiecki and asked her to share her recipes with me. She did so happily as we talked about how much I loved watching her bake and especially loved seeing that special "BOX" arrive each Christmas.

For her, baking was a labor of love, and I embraced her love for baking throughout my adult life.

I sat down with my Grandma Reichert and not only was able to get her traditional German recipes, I also received my very own metric measuring cone, as all of her recipes were in grams.

My father started making Christmas Stollen when my Grandma Reichert was in a nursing home. He struggled a bit with the yeast in the beginning but soon produced a Stollen to be proud of. This made my grandmother smile as she slathered the thin slices of Stollen with butter.



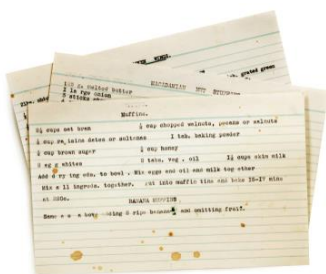
Jean finally shared her Crescent recipe with me.

Every year I baked Christmas cookies. Lots and lots of cookies. I made quick breads, pumpkin, cranberry, and lemon bread. I made 10-11 varieties of cookies and 4-5 types of candies. I would wrap up trays to give away to friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

I baked when I lived in Boston. I baked when I lived in Kwajalein. I bake now in New York.

My Grandmother sent the "BOX" every year. She even sent a box the year she turned 90 in 1991. She passed away one month later, that January.

My Grandmothers, my mom, dad, and Jean have all passed away but they live on in my baking.



Every year I take out my recipe box and pull out the flour and oil stained recipe cards.

I lovingly recreate their recipes. I think of them while I am baking and smile remembering all the wonder filled Christmas celebrations, they were a part of and how they are still a part of them even today through the baking I do.

I would spend four days baking.

My husband called me the "White Tornado". I would come home from Costco with giant bags of flour, sugar, brown sugar, powdered sugar, chocolate chips, walnuts, pecans, eggs, and pounds of butter. At the grocery store I filled my cart with cream cheese, graham crackers, marshmallow fluff, brownie mix, butterscotch chips, candied fruits, sprinkles, cornstarch, baking powder, baking soda, vanilla, and Chinese noodles.

On baking days the Christmas music was blasting as I put on a holiday apron and went to play in the kitchen. I always thought of it as play not work.

I'd pull out my trusty Kitchenaid Mixer, my Cuisinart food processor, my trusty rolling pin, mixing bowls, mixing spoons, measuring cups and spoons. Ready for a baking marathon.



Ready to make the double and triple quantities of Chocolate Chip, Oatmeal Scotchies, Peanut Butter, and Spritz coolies.

I perfected a Peanut Butter Fudge recipe at long last.

Most other recipes were in single batches. I made trays of bars to be cut into squares. Every giant cookie tin I owned was lined with wax paper and filled with fresh baked goodness.

Some things required refrigeration before baking, and some were refrigerated after baking or making.



Every morning for two weeks before the holiday breaks I would fill 10-12 cookie trays, wrap them in cellophane and tie them up with decorative Christmas ribbon. They would be delivered throughout the day to my clients.

I would laugh as some willingly shared them with their staff and others hid them to take home to their families or eat all by themselves.

When I retired 11 years ago, I no longer needed to bake in the quantities I did before.

Over the past few years, a new baking tradition has evolved. I no longer spend days in my kitchen baking by myself.

Instead, I get together with my sister and her daughter and we all bake together. We each make 3-4 kinds of cookies. They have reined me in; but I often push the envelope and make 5.

The Christmas music is playing, the mixers are humming, the ovens are pre-heated, and we are sharing the baking experience together. My sister's grandkids join in cutting and decorating the sugar cookies.

I'm still the "White Tornado" and the flour is flying. My brother-in-law follows us all, but mostly me, on cleanup making sure the floor does not become a hazard.

After four hours we stand back and admire our work and set about dividing the bounty we have created.

Everyone has a favorite cookie.

Once all of those favorites are accounted for, everyone is happy.

Smiles all around!

Joy to the world, another holiday baking marathon is completed...



Ask yourself:

- What are your treasured holiday food and baking traditions?
- What are the foods that remind you of times past?
- Have you sat down with your grandmother, mother, aunt, or neighbor and told them how much the special things they make every year mean to you?
- Have you asked them to show you how they make the things they make? (sometimes there are secrets that are not written down that can only be seen when you work together)
- Have you written the recipes down that mean something to you?
- What are you doing to pass the traditions down to the next generation?



Holiday traditions are an important part of your family legacy.

They connect one generation with the next and the next after that.

Creating a family cookbook of those traditional recipes can be a fun family project.



Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Self-publish your family cookbook or use a cookbook service.
- Take pictures of the food, table settings, and family members preparing and enjoying the food together.
- Put them together in the cookbook along with the recipes.
- Put notes and stories in the cookbook about the people who created or made the foods being highlighted.
- Put their pictures next to their recipes.

This way their legacy will never be forgotten.

You will have created a family treasure that will be passed on for generations to come.

Also know that some traditions may evolve and change like my own baking tradition has.

Embrace those changes as they include the generations behind you.

When the next generation feels the same magic you do you have successfully passed on the love that made the tradition meaningful to you.

Celebrate your holiday food traditions this year and every year.

Do so with joy and love in your heart.

Remember those here and long gone with the holiday traditions that make the holidays so special.

I know I do, and I will continue to.

Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanza, and Happy New Year to all...

