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Chuchichäschtli (Kitchen cupboard)

Zopf: Swiss plaited loaf

As so many things from time immemorial, there is a rich history and mystery around the "Zopf", the plaited white loaf so treasured by the Swiss. This history is not only rich but also rather macabre!

In our darkest past, it appears that wives had to follow their husbands into their graves, so that the couple could start their journey on the other side together. Fortunately, this custom disappeared over time. Initially, women just cut their plaits off as a grave good offering (this custom is described in old Greek literature). This "hairy sacrifice" eventually gave way to a bread offer: The husband ended up with a Zopf in his grave.

So much for Zopf legends! According to the bread researcher Max Wahren, there is not much evidence for separating fact from fiction.

However, it is historically verified that the bakers of Basel in Switzerland were organised into a guild already in 1256 and were well versed in the secrets of their trade. Soon, similar bakers' guilds emerged in other Swiss cities.

It is thought that the Zopf was invented by a very creative Swiss baking profession during that time, as baking of so-called "Zupfen" in Switzerland has been known from 1430. "Zupfen" ranked among the most favourite culinary Christmas and New Year presents, was used for love-gifts and even for the sealing of marriages.

Berner Zopf: Recipe

Ingredients: 1kg white flour, 100g butter (melted), 2 eggs (with one yolk set aside), 400ml milk, 3 tsp dried yeast, 1 tbsp sugar and 1 tsp salt.

Sift flour into a bowl and create a depression in the middle. Dissolve yeast in cold or warm milk, add sugar and gently mix. Let stand for 1/2 hour.

Add the yeast mix and remaining ingredients (without one of the egg yolks) into in the depression, gradually mix with the flour and knead into an elastic dough. Cover dough with a moist towel and rest for an hour. Braid into a plait. Allow to rise again until twice its size. Finally, mix the remaining egg yolk with a little water and brush it onto the loaf.

Bake in the middle of the oven for approximately 40 minutes at 200-220° C. The dough can be used to create a range of creative shapes other than plaits, for example "Gritibaenze", little doughmen decorated with raisins, or Easter bunnies.

Contributed by Edith Hess



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Garden Diary - Gardening in February/March

With Autumn nearly around the corner, beetroot, brussel sprouts, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauli, chicory, corn, salad, kale, leek and lettuce can be planted in most gardens. In many Southern areas, it is best to plan ahead and plant cooler season vegetables. In the warmer North, it is best to begin planning the winter garden. Plant a generous amount of silverbeet and spinach to see you through. In warm areas, sow seeds of bok choy, dwarf and climbing beans. In cooler areas, plant swede and turnips. Protect seedlings from the white cabbage moth by draping old net curtains over them. Wait for potatoes to die back completely before digging up to store, if you want to keep them.

Garlic can be harvested once the leaves begin to die back. Brush off the dirt and leave out in the sun to cure the skins for better storage, then plait into bunches and hang up to dry, or they will rot if left out in the rain.

Watch out for late blight, a fungal disease on tomatoes, which spreads rapidly in hot humid conditions. Prune off damaged foliage, and spray with copper or sprinkle with tomato dust, but once it takes hold you are better to get rid of the infected plants. Don't put them in the compost, as that will only spread the spores. Put them out into the rubbish, or burn them if you can.

Feed and water courgettes monthly with liquid fertiliser, and watch for mildew and wilt. Mulching with grass clippings helps prevent water loss and regular picking encourages more fruit. Stake plants to prevent wind rock.

Mist dwarf and climbing beans with the hose to improve pollination and move potted chillies to the warmest part of the garden. Aubergines and capsicums also thrive on extra warmth. Mulch with sawdust or lay black plastic over surrounding soil to reflect heat.

If you have a glut of veges, turn them into pickles, chutneys and sauces to savour over the next few months. Save seeds of coriander and fennel, and leaves from herb plants such as sage, oregano and bay for winter stews, soups and stocks.

By Melissa Lanz

