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Grittibenz and its history

Grittibenz – the pastry (wo)man that sweetens St. Nicholas Day

By Luzia Sauer



<http://www.kulinarischesterbe.ch/product.aspx?id=156>

No matter how nervous we would suddenly become when we heard Samichlaus's bell ring in the dark outside our cosy house on the evening of 6 December, none of us kids ever wanted to miss him. Samichlaus's arrival brought fear of scolding yet always also promises of sweetness in the form of peanuts, mandarins, dates and most importantly my favourite pastry Grittibenz; all tucked neatly in his huge linen bag.

Later in life I realised of course that Samichlaus was not the only one making these delicious pastry (wo)men but that I could buy them in bakeries and supermarkets and even bake them myself.

Only recently though did I wonder: What exactly is a 'Grittibenz' and how long have the Swiss been making this treat?

The name 'Grittibenz' means 'the man ('Benz' – widely used male name) with splayed legs' ('gritten'). Making Grittibenz has become part of the tradition that surrounds the worshipping of St. Nicholas (Bishop of Myra, died 6 December 343). First reports of Grittibenz are from the 14th century. Basler children are reported to have paraded through their villages on 6 December behind a child dressed as a bishop, after which they received a white sweet bread roll. Over time different regions in Switzerland have continued making the

pastry and developed slightly different ingredients and looks for their Grittibenz on St. Nicholas day. Apparently, up until some 60 years ago the pastry figure often also appeared in the form of a 'Frowli' (woman), which is rarely the case today. Today, the typical Grittibenz is either a sweet pastry or a buttery pastry. Here is the recipe for the sweet pastry Grittibenz:

Grittibenz recipe (makes four)

500g white flour
15-20g fresh yeast (5-7 g dry yeast)
50g sugar
80g butter
1 tbsp salt
2 ½ dl milk
1 egg yolk

1) put flour in bowl and make a hole **2)** activate yeast with sugar and luke-warm water **3)** melt butter slightly (add milk if you wish) **4)** add all ingredients to the flour hole and mix. Knead the dough until shiny and elastic. **5)** Put aside to rise to twice the size **6)** Make four pieces of dough, cut legs and arms with scissors and fold them slightly outward. Pull out the head. Decorate the Grittibenz with ties, beards, belts, skirts, shoes etc. using almonds, raisins etc. **7)** Brush the Grittibenz with egg yolk and let rise for another 20 minutes **8)** bake for 25 minutes at 180 degrees **9)** enjoy !

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