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CHRISTMAS COOKIES OF SWITZERLAND

It is well known that there is not only one Switzerland, but twenty-five of them, inasmuch as the different Cantons and Half-Cantons jealously guard their autonomy. We glibly talk of "Schwyzertütsch", but there is no such thing, for it is "Bärntütsch", "Baseldytsch", "Zürütütsch, to name but a few of the distinctive languages spoken in the German-speaking part. This in itself makes no sense, and I always maintain we should call it the German-writing part. I challenge the German who will be able to explain to me what "Tirggel" and "Bruunsli" stand for. Even if he were to guess a little, he would be even less able to tell what they are made of than a Swiss could surmise how to produce an English Christmas Pudding.

The preparation of Christmas cookies or goodies follow a time-honoured ritual. Indeed, it may be said that "Wiehnächtsgutzi" (here speaketh the *Basellandschäftler*) is the only really traditional Christmas fare. There is the "Lebkuchen", the gingerbread, but that is on sale almost all the year round and appears for Santa Clause (6th December) in the shape of Father Christmas, with a coloured paper face and body stuck onto the cake.

I have recently studied some old cookery books in the hope of finding out exactly how many different kinds of Christmas Goodies there are. But my efforts have not been rewarding. So my guess is something like two dozen, but it really is only speculation. Perhaps the most popular of them all are the aniseed cookies ("Aenisbrötli" or "Chräbeli") which may be star- or crescent-shaped,

whitish of colour. The art in producing these is to treat them in such a way that only the top layer of the biscuit rises, and the lower part remains as a slightly darker base. Contempt is showered on the Swiss housewife whose "Aenisbrötli" have no proper "foot".

The cinnamon star is another popular cooky, light brown and less hard than the aniseed one, topped with a soft white icing. In Basle, the "Bruunsli" is a favourite, a cooky made of almond, egg-white, chocolate and "Kirsch", dark-brown in colour and slightly bitter. As "Basler Braunes" it has found its way into cookery books. There again, the "Bruunsli" may be made in many different shapes, hearts, crescents, stars, triangles, fish or bird, and, of course, "Baslerstab", the Bishop's staff, emblem of the town of Basle.

Also of many different shapes are the "Mailänderli", thin, crumbly biscuits made of egg and flour, painted over with yolk and baked to a golden yellow. The "Makrönli" on the other hand, are usually little heaps of grated almonds, sugar and egg-white with an almond stuck in the top. Then there are "Butterplätzli" and many different kinds of almond and nut biscuits, especially the "Haselnussleckerli".

In every home, the family gets busy rolling out the pastry and cutting the different shapes two or three weeks before Christmas, and children love to help. Clever is the mother who manages to hide the full amount of goodies until Christmas Eve — for they are something special and well worth eating.

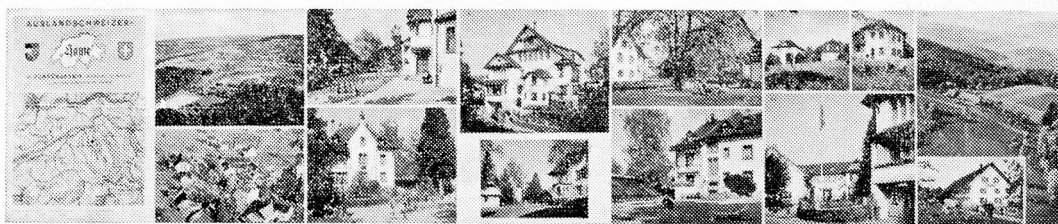


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For over three decades, I have heard of the famous Zurich "Tirggel", but to my shame I must confess that it was only a few weeks ago that I tasted the first. The reason why they are not as easy to come by as the ordinary Christmas goodies is that they are not made in the home. I was told that they are produced exclusively by two or three Zurich firms who will not divulge the recipe. May be that somebody owns an old cookery book in which this traditional Zurich Christmas cooky is mentioned — I have enquired in many homes and have not been able to find any.

The "Tirggel" are wafer-thin cookies, made of honey, flour and sugar, pale brown on top, but off-white on the reverse. Special moulds, some of them centuries old, are used to show in relief intricate pictures of animals, country-life and historic scenes, buildings and various objects. Each little picture has some lettering on it, and on one of them I discovered a whole verse:

*Ein froher Mut gesundes
Blut und Thaler g'nug
daneben das wünsch ich Dir*

*heüt kürz und gut mehr
braucht man nicht zum leben.*

Just how fine the moulds must be is shown by the fact that the above verse in ordinary handwriting and with a garland border takes up no more than 2½x4 inches. Now the interesting thing is that every packet of "Tirggel" is accompanied by an *Essrezept*, instruction how to eat it. *Honigtirggel sind keine Biscuits*, it says. We are told to admire the beautiful pictures first, then break off a little and let it dissolve slowly in the mouth, whilst masticating every so slightly. I tried it, and I must confess, even as a dyed in the wool *Basellandschäftlerin*, I found the honey taste of the Zurich "Tirggel" very much to my liking.

Automation has taken the place of hand-pressing into the moulds, not only of "Tirggel" but of any other Christmas cookies which may be bought at bakers' and confectioners' in most parts of Switzerland. But there are still bakers and pastry-cooks who fashion every cooky by hand and take great pride in the art of producing the traditional Swiss Christmas goodies.

MM

CHRISTMAS 1966

Dear Compatriots,

My Christmas message to you is a special one this year, and my feelings as I write it for the "Swiss Observer" are tainted with gratitude as well as regret. In a few weeks' time I shall be returning to Switzerland with my family. It has been a joy for us to live in your midst, sharing in turn your problems, your rejoicings and your sorrows. 1966 brought a mixture of these. We have lost some very dear friends among whom Mr. Fred Suter, who for so many years has kept open at Lueg-is-Land, a warm typical Swiss home, the disappearance of which will be keenly felt.

Our Churches and societies have carried on the good work, some of them with unusual success, and if the Forum which they so much need is not yet ready at the Swiss Centre, there is no slackening in the efforts made to bring it to completion.

It has been my privilege to serve our country in many parts of the world, to participate in patriotic gatherings with our compatriots in Portugal, Egypt, Austria, to mention but a few of the recent ones. It is of this enlarged family that I am thinking today as I take my leave of you, dear Swiss of Great Britain, with my warmest wishes for your well-being and my hope that all of you will ever keep closer and stronger the links with the mother country. I cannot but see a good omen of this in the recent introduction of Article 45bis in our Federal Constitution.

My wife and my three daughters join me in wishing you a Happy Christmas and in bidding you Godspeed and "Au revoir"!
Christmas 1966.

B. DE FISCHER

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A Happy Christmas and a Prosperous New Year

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