



# Built for Yum

Edible architecture, for the holidays

BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN



If you ever have wondered why the carved, often colorful architectural detail found on many Victorian homes is referred to as “gingerbread work,” the answer is a tale of culinary history.

Let’s start with the ginger root—technically, a rhizome. The Chinese first cultivated the spice as far back as the sixth century BC. Though highly valued for its medicinal qualities in treating digestive problems, ginger also became an indispensable ingredient in Chinese cooking. Arab traders traveling the Silk Road probably brought it from the east to the Mediterranean region some time before the first century AD. From there, the crusaders brought it to Europe in the 11th century.

So, when did the delight known as gingerbread first appear? According to at least one culinary historian, around the year 992 AD, the Armenian monk Gregory of Nicopolis brought the treat from what is now Greece to France. It is reported that he even taught gingerbread baking to the French.

By the late Middle Ages, gingerbread had become immensely popular. Fairs in England, France, Holland, and Germany sold cookies fashioned into seasonally themed figures as well as animals, kings, and queens. Queen Elizabeth I was so enamored of the confection that she directed her chefs to prepare elaborately decorated cookies for state occasions, often shaped like the foreign dignitaries to whom she served them. Some of the figures even sported gold leaf.

The Queen’s contemporary, William Shakespeare, was also a fan of gingerbread. In his play

*Love's Labour's Lost*, his character Costard claims, "An I had but one penny in the world, thou shouldst have it to buy gingerbread."

Like their European neighbors, Germans also got into the act. In fact, the confection was so popular in Germany that in the 15th century, its production came under the control of a gingerbread guild.

And so, we come to the gingerbread house. First seen in Germany in the 16th century, the decorative cookie-walled structures, often extravagantly decorated with gold leaf, were a hit. The structures became inextricably linked with Christmas. (Some credit the Brothers Grimm and their "Hansel and Gretel" for popularizing the gingerbread house.)

Today, no single baked good symbolizes the holiday season quite like gingerbread. Whether it takes form as cake, iced and decorated gingerbread people, or elaborately decorated gingerbread houses, this confection practically shouts "Merry Christmas!"

Here in our neck of the woods, we found a delicious generation-spanning tradition in the



**Proud builder Mabel Cooney shows off her gingerbread construction project that she made at Starving Artist Cafe and Good Purpose Gallery in Lee.**

PHOTOS BY MEGAN HALEY





construction of gingerbread houses. JoAnn Moran and her granddaughter, Zoé, have been decorating together at [Dottie's Coffee Lounge](#) in Pittsfield every year since owner Jessica Rufo Lamb established the workshop five years ago.

Working in tandem, the two artfully affix clear, sparkling, hard-candy shingles to the roof and multi-colored jellybean pillars



to the corners of their cookie abode. They plan to display the house as the centerpiece on JoAnn's dining-room table, a decision made at least in part so that Zoé's baby sister can't reach it.

Nine-year-old Colin Smith says, "I like the special time with my dad." He and Brian Smith have returned again and again to Dottie's for the annual event. He enjoys planning and executing the design, while dad Brian applies the royal icing that holds the candies, pretzels, and pasta to walls and roof. Although Colin admits to snacking while working, the house itself will be used for decoration, not eating.

Rufo Lamb has always been a fan of gingerbread houses, although, she says, "I had never decorated a gingerbread house in my life until we started this. One of our employees at the time said that his family did this every single year, and he really wanted to share that tradition. It was such a great success, people were so appreciative of it, and it was so much fun that we continued.



“Everybody’s working with the same 30 things and just to see how their houses come out is amazing. Some people build trees and houses, sheds, cars. There’s a color theme sometimes. We’ve had some with lots of earth tones with lots of pasta and shredded wheat. It’s a lot of fun. Every year, there are houses that surprise me.”

Patricia Richards, Program Supervisor at Otis Town Hall, is getting ready for her town’s eighth annual gingerbread house event, so popular that it requires three sessions to accommodate community members who throng to participate in it. She says, “It gets better every year. There’s a different variety of candy every year, and I love to see what people do

with it. It’s really amazing to see how they can use different foods. Everybody has so much fun.”

Emmy Davis, proprietor of the Starving Artist Cafe & Creperie in Lee, comes from “a huge family. I’m one of five children and 15 grandchildren. We always used to do it in the house, so I thought, why not invite other people and make it a nice thing to do.” And it is, with two sessions being an indication of its popularity.

Adding to the festivities, Davis’s mother, costumed as Mrs. Claus, is present at the workshops, helping out and inspiring young decorators.

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## WHERE THE COOKIE CRUMBLES

### **Lenox Library**

“Lenox Through the Years” gingerbread-house-making contest, sponsored by the Lenox Chamber of Commerce as part of its annual “Making Spirits Bright” weekend activities. Saturday, December 2, from 1-3 p.m., 18 Main Street. [lenoxlib.org](http://lenoxlib.org).

### **Otis Town Hall**

Gingerbread-house-making community event. Saturday, December 9, at 1, 4, and 7 p.m. (three sessions). 1 North Main Road. Free; registration is required, at [townofotisma.com](http://townofotisma.com) or call 413-269-4541.



## Dottie's Coffee Lounge

Gingerbread-house-decorating party. Sunday, December 10, at 4 and 6:30 p.m. (two sessions). 444 North Street, Pittsfield. Cost: \$35. To register, call 413-443-1792. Maximum two people per party; house kits to go for \$25. [dottiescoffeelounge.com](http://dottiescoffeelounge.com)

## Starving Artist Cafe

Gingerbread-house-making classes. Saturday, December 16, at 3 and 4 p.m. (two sessions), 40 Main Street, Lee. Cost: \$35. To reserve a spot, call 413-394-5046. Mrs. Claus may make an appearance and lend a hand! [starvingartistcreperie.com](http://starvingartistcreperie.com)



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*This article appears in the [Winter 2017](#) issue of [TownVibe Berkshire](#)*

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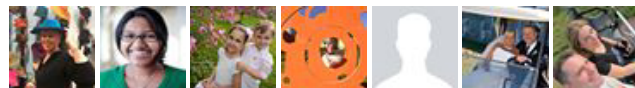


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- 11:15 AM - 12:00 AM | **38th Annual Photography Show Call For Entry** ▾
- 3:00 PM | **Holiday Jazz** ▾
- 3:30 PM - 5:30 PM | **Cocoa & Crafts Family Event** ▾
- 4:00 PM - 5:30 PM | **Seasons Readings at Pequot Library** ▾
- 4:00 PM - 7:00 PM | **Robert Deyber Satirical Painter** ▾
- 4:00 PM - 5:00 PM | **Percussion Concert in Litchfield** ▾
- 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM | **Jason Griska Photographs** ▾
- 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM | **Jessica Drenk Artist Reception** ▾
- 6:00 PM - 5:00 PM | **Clay Art Center Presents Clay Holiday: Annual Sale and Studio Tour** ▾
- Jivan Wolf MasterJewelry: In The Realm of Light** ▾
- 9:30 AM - 5:00 PM | **Gunn Memorial Library Stairwell Gallery Art Exhibit** ▾
- 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM | **Great Trains Holiday Exhibit** ▾
- 10:00 AM - 7:00 PM | **Fall 2017 Weekly Adult Classes at Clay Art Center** ▾
- 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM | **The Great War And The United States Home Front at Pequot Library** ▾
- 10:00 AM - 5:00 PM | **New Works by Erin Nazzaro** ▾
- 11:00 AM - 4:00 PM | **Miniature Masterpieces Holiday Art Exhibit** ▾
- 7:00 PM - 9:15 PM | **Natalie MacMaster & Donnell Leahy – A Celtic Family Christmas** ▾
- 9:30 AM - 4:00 PM | **Natural Beauty Workshop at Red Bee Apiary** ▾
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