

© 2022 Angela Berg and Georg Berg, ISSN: 2750-4069

Cakes from the Hanseatic City of Deventer

Deventer and cakes are like Lübeck and marzipan. The city is inseparable from its specialty. It's a connection with a long history. The specialty has its origins in the Middle Ages and it owes its spread and popularity to the flourishing and cross-border trade of the Hanseatic League. So the Deventer Koek is a culinary celebrity.

According to the original recipe, the exact composition of which is still unknown, the honey spice cake is still made in Deventer and shipped from there all over the world. Even in the days of the Hanseatic League, the *Deventer Koeck sailed* on merchant ships as far as Norway. There were cakes for King Olav IV of Norway in exchange for Nordic cod.



Hanseatic city of Deventer from the other bank of the IJssel with a view of Lebuinuskirche / © Photo: Georg Berg

Deventer – Hanseatic city on the IJssel

Deventer is one of the oldest cities in the Netherlands. The Anglo-Saxon monk Lebuinus is said to have rowed across the IJssel around 806 and the missionary monk built a small wooden church on the very spot where the mighty Lebuinuskirche stands today. Traders had already settled in Deventer a century before the priest's arrival. The place quickly developed into one of the few large cities in the early Middle Ages. The city's heyday began in the 10th century. Deventer had already been granted city rights and imperial privileges by Emperor Charlemagne.



Ceiling painting in the Lebuinuskirche. In the heyday of the Hanseatic League, every merchant ship from Deventer wore the divided coat of arms with an eagle and stockfish. The eagle is still part of the city coat of arms of Deventer and goes back to Emperor Charlemagne. Stockfish was an important commodity imported in barter with Norway. Deventer was also known as Stockfischkaff "Stockvissengat" / © Photo: Georg Berg

Goods protection under the sign of the guild

The history of the Deventer cake goes back many centuries. According to a note from the town clerk Nicolaas Verheyden from 1534, the first regulation on the baking of Deventer cakes dates back to 1417. Which may mean that the cake already had a long tradition in Deventer at that time and the merchants of the thriving Hanseatic city now appeared to be an asset particularly worthy of protection. In this ordinance, the appearance and weight of a large cake and a small cake were specified. It should be

long and narrow and weigh between two and three pounds. The decree was of a protectionist nature, as it was not allowed to produce cakes for trade outside of Deventer. The spice mixture was the secret of the guild and not even known to the bakers.



The Deventer Koek, a honey cake that has been branded since 1593. It consists of water, rye flour, honey and spices and has a long shelf life. This made it a popular commodity in the Hanseatic trade. The cake was transported by ship to Norway / © Photo: Georg Berg



Salesroom in the Deventer Koekwinkel, the biscuit and cake shop on De Brink market square in the Hanseatic city of Deventer / © Photo: Georg Berg

Fair and secret recipe

The recipe for the Deventer Koek and the spice mixture used in it are still secret today. It is not known since when the cake, which still bears the suffix *Deventer*, has been baked in Deventer. In any case, the long-lasting honey cake was already on the trading lists in the early Middle Ages. The cake contains no egg and no dairy products and is therefore very durable. This made it a popular commodity in the Hanseatic trade, even beyond the borders of the Netherlands. In the early Middle Ages, one of the largest fairs in Europe took place several times a year on the De Brink market square. This circumstance has certainly contributed to the popularity and spread of the sweet cake with spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg and pepper and led to the specialty being protected in the 15th century *Deventer Koek*.



The Deventer spice cake in different packaging units. Since the Middle Ages, the Deventer Koek has had a long, narrow shape and is served in thin slices and spread with butter / © Photo: Georg Berg

Take clean water...

Even if the exact recipe is not known, thanks to the European ingredients regulation, the main ingredients of the cake are now on the packaging. Rye flour, honey, water and spices. The old recipe emphasizes the use of “clean water”. A valuable commodity in earlier times. The Middle Ages are known for the fact that people preferred drinking beer to water, since the brewed beer contained fewer germs than some well water. The honey has a preservative effect and the absence of fat and eggs ensures that the baked goods keep well if stored dry.

In 1593, when the town had 13 bakers, the baker Schutte was admitted to the bakers' guild as a master baker. The business of the former guild master Schutte was taken over by Jacob Bussink in the nineteenth century. The entrepreneur Bussink continued to stick to traditions and now produced the honey cake under his own name. To this day, Deventer Koek can be bought in the traditional form and even in the historic “half a cubit” measure at the Deventer Koekwinkel on De Brink market square.

Cakes for kings



Historical scene from 1809. King Lodewijk Napoleon finds out about the then already famous Deventer Koek.
/ © Photo: Georg Berg

The Deventer Koekladen has been located in a corner building on the Brink, the central market square, since 1958. The interior with wooden counters and high shelves comes from the old Bussink bakery. A creaking staircase leads to the tea room on the second floor. Here hangs a picture that reflects an event from the year 1809. From 1806 to 1810 *Lodewijk Napoleon* was king of the Kingdom of Holland created by his brother Emperor Napoleon. The king visited the bakery to see with his own eyes how the famous Deventer cake is made. In Deventer the story is told as follows: *"To do this, he sat down comfortably on an upside-down baking trough, had everything explained to him in detail and happily tasted the delicacy that was offered to him. After placing his order, he was about to board his carriage waiting outside, but Miss Van der Toorn, the wife of then-bakery owner Gerrit van de Toorn, respectfully tugged the king's arm and stammered, "You forgot to pay." King Louis, who did not understand Dutch very well and spoke it very poorly, understood that the matter was*

financial and instructed his eunuch to rectify the omission. A golden handshake allayed the concern of the ragged baker's wife, whereupon the king rode on, smiling." (JB Bussink, Deventer Koekwinkel).



The oldest weigh house in the Netherlands from 1528 is on the De Brink square. The city scales were of great importance for commercial life. Under the supervision of the city authorities, the merchants had to have their goods weighed. The levies and road tolls contributed to the wealth of Deventer / © Photo: Georg Berg

New sales channels for old pastries

The world-famous spice cake has been baked for 430 years in 2023. But the trade routes are different today. With the Covid pandemic, Bussink's online shop got going. Tourists from all over the world ordered the classic from Deventer. The old barter of stockfish for cake may seem obsolete, but it is firmly part of the identity of the Hanseatic towns on the IJssel. In Deventer, a new large mural was created in 2022. The motif refers to the past and the present. A market woman from the Middle Ages is shown who sells goods together with her son. Good to see is the Deventer honey cake and stockfish. Both important goods in the Hanseatic trade of Deventer. The boy is also wearing a Deventer Eagle football club fan scarf. Football wasn't invented back then



Mural painting in the old town of Deventer. Motif on the occasion of the Hanseatic year, which the nine Dutch Hanseatic cities are celebrating in 2023. The mural painting has a connection to the past and the present. Here in Deventer: market woman with her son sells Deventer honey cake and cod, important goods in the Hanseatic trade of Deventer. The boy is wearing a Deventer Eagle football club fan scarf / © Photo:

Georg Berg

Dutch Hanseatic Year 2023

The nine Hanseatic cities on the IJssel *Doesburg , Zutphen , Deventer , Hattem , Zwolle , Hasselt , Kampen , Elburg and Herderwijk* are celebrating their Hanseatic League in 2023, which has flourished for four centuries. Around 1500 the center of the Hanseatic League shifted to the North Sea area. Amsterdam increasingly competed with the small towns on the IJssel and after the artificial widening of the Rhine, it literally dug the water from the IJssel and made shipping more difficult.



From classic products such as bread or cheese to modern superfood made from sprout vegetables. At the new Hanseatic market in Deventer, only local traders offer homemade products / © Photo: Georg Berg

Today the nine Hanseatic cities have joined forces again. This time to draw the attention of visitors to the region and the common history. In 2023 there will be events and actions in all Hanseatic cities along the IJssel. The program for this is available on the joint [website of the nine Dutch Hanseatic cities](http://www.hanseatic.nl) .

Never miss a new box story again! 

With the help of a [feed reader](#) , all stories with a broader view can be subscribed to in real time.

The research trip was partially supported on site by the Dutch Tourist Board.

[Angela Berg](#)

[November 7, 2022](#)