

HAWAII ISLAND
A Sweet Turn

Markus Stolz dons three pairs of gloves before crawling into the furnace to retrieve his cake-on-a-stick. “Baumkuchen” is a sixteenth-century German cake that’s baked on a spit. It’s wildly popular in Japan, and Stolz hopes it will be a hit in Hawai‘i, too.

During the pandemic shutdown, while everyone else fussed with sourdough, Stolz and his wife, Marie, perfected their baumkuchen recipe. “It wasn’t easy,” says Stolz, who shipped a custom German oven to his nine-acre farm in Pāpa‘ikou on Hawai‘i Island. He now spends hours in front of the furnace’s twelve rotating sticks, carefully brushing them with cake batter. Each crepe-like layer of batter turns golden brown. When sliced, they resemble a tree’s growth rings.

Baumkuchen, or “tree cake,” dates back to the 1500s, when German nobles served the labor-intensive delicacy on festive occasions. In 1919 a German prisoner of war introduced the cake to Japan, where it remains a favorite. The cake’s distinctive, concentric rings came to symbolize prosperity and longevity, and now baumkuchen can be found in most Japanese groceries and convenience stores.

Stolz, who grew up in Japan, prefers the Japanese recipe over the original German—it’s softer and sweeter. He’s added a few Island touches to his cakes: Hawai‘i-grown macadamia nuts, coffee and pineapple. He also notes a possible connection between baumkuchen and Hawaiian royalty. “I cannot prove it, of course,” says Stolz, “but baumkuchen was very popular in the late 1880s, when King Kalākaua was on his world tour. When he was in Berlin, he

attended a state dinner. I am 99 percent sure that he was close to a baumkuchen and maybe 91 percent that he ate one.”

Stolz brought samples of baumkuchen to local farmers markets. He found an appreciative audience. Japanese visitors in particular are thrilled to try Hawai‘i-style baumkuchen. “I’ve never received so much intense appreciation as I have at the farmers market,” says Stolz. He and his wife now host tours of their bakery and farm. People watch Stolz brave the furnace before trying their luck with something simpler: Sitting around a campfire, they slowly roast sticks of dough over open flames, a charming nod to the cake’s medieval origin.

—Shannon Wianecki
 Photos by Andrew Richard Hara

baumkuchenfarm.com



Markus and Marie Stolz make baumkuchen, or German “tree cake,” on their farm in Pāpa‘ikou, Hawai‘i Island. Popular since the 1500s, labor-intensive baumkuchen is baked layer by layer, resulting in a soft, sweet pastry with a pattern resembling a tree’s growth rings.