

# Healthy Kuchen and the Artful Plate: A Modernized, Healthy Take on a Traditional German-Russian Pastry



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# Activity, Time and Materials

## ACTIVITY:

As a group, discuss the concept of German-Russian *kuchen*, various *kuchen* stories and recipes, or other favorite ethnic desserts from the participants' backgrounds. Invite elders to participate in the making and plating of this delicious dessert. This activity is designed to actively involve elders in the *kuchen*-making process; the sharing of an experience that stimulates the sense of taste, sight, smell, and touch, as well as to encourage the sharing of baking memories, if possible. Volunteers and elder facility staff members, like activity directors, dieticians, and cooks, may assist the artist and elders in the artistic cooking and plate design. The finished *kuchen* is to be plated artistically using squirt bottles, brushes, and parchment-paper-stencil designs. The results are to be enjoyed at the end of the session. This activity is designed for a small group of elders, perhaps four elders per group, with multiple groups possible depending on the number of artists, volunteers, and facility staff members available to assist each group.

## TIME:

Two and a half hours over four sessions. (Includes mixing, baking, plating, and eating.)

## MATERIALS:

The following kitchen equipment will be necessary:

- 2 medium-size mixing bowls
- 3 large mixing spoons
- 3 soup spoons
- 4 small bowls
- 1 small kettle
- Measuring spoons and measuring cups (both liquid and dry)
- 1 rolling pin
- 4 dinner forks
- 1 large balloon whisk
- 1 can opener
- 1 small cutting board
- 1 paring knife
- 20 pieces of serving-plate-sized parchment paper
- Decorative paper lace (For participants who are not physically able to cut paper or use scissors very well. Decorative paper lace as a whole piece or partial piece can be used in making the designs. Make sure the lace has large holes, which allows for cinnamon to pass through when sprinkled over the top of it.)
- 4 small scissors
- 4 pencils
- 1 small, electric, stand-up blender or food mill
- 8 clean, dry towels
- 1 plastic bucket for bleach/hand-sanitation water

- 1 small, fine-mesh strainer
- 1 oven (preferably non-convection)
- 3 clean squirt bottles for edible sauce garnishes (Have at least 3 bottles available. It is preferable to have 6 or 9 bottles.)
- A supply of spoons, food-appropriate brushes or paintbrushes, and toothpicks (Have enough for each participant to use to create designs with edible sauce garnishes.)
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

### INGREDIENT LIST (FOR FOUR NINE-INCH *KUCHEN*):

#### **Crust:**

- 6 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 package rapid-rise active dry yeast
- ¼ cup warm water
- 1 large egg (beaten)
- 1 cup potato water
- ½ cup organic white sugar, plus ½ tsp. of same
- 1/3 cup extra-virgin OLIVE OIL, plus 2 Tbsp. of same
- ½ cup potato puree
- ¾ tsp. sea salt

#### **Custard and Fruit Filling:**

- 4 cups LOW-FAT milk
- 1 ½ tsp. vanilla
- 12 Tbsp. organic HONEY
- 4 large eggs

- 2 ½ Tbsp. cornstarch
- 2 cups sliced peaches (set aside)

#### **Sauce Garnish:**

- 2 pints fresh raspberries
- 2 cups of fresh or lite-canned peaches
- 2 cups prunes
- 1 cup prune juice
- 1 tsp. lemon juice

#### **Spice for Decoration:**

- Cinnamon

**Healthy Note (Significantly Reduced Fat, Cholesterol, and Calories):** This *kuchen* crust recipe replaces the traditional fats of lard and butter with extra-virgin olive oil. Traditional *kuchen* custard would include twice the amount of eggs, heavy cream, and 1 ½ cups sugar. This custard filling uses low-fat milk and honey. We are using corn starch as a thickening binder in order to use half the amount of eggs. This recipe therefore contains significantly less fat, cholesterol, and calories than that of a traditional *kuchen*. People love the traditional foods they were raised with and some of those foods are high in fats, cholesterol, and calories. Yet, traditional foods can be revised to make them healthier—which is especially important for people battling diabetes and who may be overweight.

### **“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):**

This activity addresses all three plagues through social interaction, group activity, shared memories, humor, eating together, and the simplicity of pure enjoyment. The elders will be actively involved in making *kuchen* and plate decorating. Many elders have mobility issues that may create a sense of helplessness. This activity is designed with that in mind. The use of spoons, squirt bottles, and stencils do not require a steady hand to create artistic, beautiful designs. The stenciling allows participants to “stay within the lines,” while the use of spoons and squirt bottles do not require straight, smooth lines for artistic creation.

### **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:**

Fitzsimmons and Buettner’s “study describes a clinical trial of a recreational therapy cooking program for older adults with dementia and disturbing behaviors [residing in a locked special care unit] in an assisted living center. After two weeks of daily participation [for one hour per day], results indicated a significant improvement in levels of both passivity and agitation. Biographical data collection [measuring blood pressure variability and heart rate] was useful in identifying the physiological changes that occurred during each session.” (Fitzsimmons and Buettner, 2003: 23)

“There were 38 biograph readings recorded during the cooking intervention in this study. Of these, 21 were attempts to alert the participant and 17 were attempts to calm the participant. Of the 21 alerting attempts, 18 were successful based on the physiological data from the biograph readings and three were not successful. Of the 17 calming attempts, all were successful based on the biograph readings.” (Fitzsimmons and Buettner, 2003: 29)

“Although there were direct benefits for all the participants, there were indirect benefits for other residents on the unit as well. The smells, sounds, and location of the program made it highly visible. Staff, family members, and residents frequently sat nearby to watch. This was particularly true of the male residents on the unit. Participants often enjoyed sharing their creations with other residents. Although the participants lived together on the unit, few appeared to have friendships with each other. Each day at the end of the program, the participants did not wish to split up but wanted

to stay together as a group, and they would often remain together talking or going for a walk.” (Fitzsimmons and Buettner, 2003: 31)

“Cooking programs have the potential to calm, increase appetite, and entice people to a social gathering, and relieve some of the stress related to living in group settings. These programs provide familiar sensory stimulation with smells, textures, and taste.” (Fitzsimmons and Buettner, 2003: 23)

Fitzsimmons and Buettner also write that, in another study, “reminiscence-based sensory motor stimulation using cooking was used successfully in clinical practice as a behavioral alternative to medication or restraint in long-term care clients.” (Fitzsimmons and Buettner, 2003: 24)

*--Fitzsimmons, Suzanne, and Linda L. Buettner. “A Therapeutic Cooking Program for Older Adults with Dementia: Effects on Agitation and Apathy.” American Journal of Recreational Therapy (Fall 2003): 23-33.*

# Activity Plan

## SESSION 1 (30 TO 45 MINUTES):

### INTRODUCTION TO *KUCHEN* AND DISCUSSION

1. The activity director should begin with a quick introduction to *kuchen*. Read aloud and discuss with the participants the following passages, utilizing relevant and contrasting examples, from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*:

- folklore item “74. *Kuchen* is More Than Just a Word,” page 281, Chapter 10
- folklore item “75. Our Family’s *Kuchen* Recipe,” page 282, Chapter 10
- folklore item “80. How to make Lefse” (and show picture), page 284, Chapter 10
- folklore item “78. Norwegian Flat Bread,” page 283, Chapter 10
- folklore item “5. A Silver Dollar in the Bread,” page 196, chapter 8

2. The activity director should then ask the following questions to engage the participants in conversation and discussion:

- Does everyone know what *kuchen* is? (If people are unfamiliar with this ethnic delicacy, the activity director should explain that *kuchen* literally means “cake,” but in actuality it is a German-Russian custard pie called *kuchen*, consisting of

custard, crust, and filling.)

- Does everyone here know who the Germans from Russia are? (If people are unfamiliar with this ethnic group, the activity director should explain that German Russians are descendants of German colonists who settled in the Russian empire in the 1700s and 1800s. They lived in German colonies, maintaining their language, customs, and traditions. This unique group of people is one of the most prominent and populous ethnic groups on the Northern Great Plains.
- Has anyone made *kuchen* or *lefse* with potato water/puree?
- Can anyone recall making *kuchen* or some other ethnic dessert?
- What type of *kuchen* or other ethnic dessert was made at home?
- Did you eat the dessert fresh-baked (warm) or chilled?
- Does anyone have a favorite *kuchen* or other ethnic dessert recipe?
- Did you eat anything along with that dessert?
- Does anyone know any humorous stories about making *kuchen* or some other dessert?

The activity director should involve everyone in a fun and lively conversation, while listening closely to the participants’ ideas, shared stories, and any questions, advice, or suggestions they may have. Elaborate on the questions and responses to avoid simple “yes”

and “no” questions. Engage the participants in a conversation. The person directing the activity should share his or her own experiences to encourage others to also share theirs.

## SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

### KITCHEN PREPARATION OF THE *KUCHEN*

I. The activity director should divide the elder participants into groups of four. (Any special assistance needed for the elders should be addressed ahead of time so everyone can be included.) Two additional groups of four could be formed if there are enough materials, volunteers, and elder care facility staff members available to actively assist each group. In this session, those elders who wish to participate will make *kuchen* dough and the *kuchen* filling together. Follow the steps below, evenly dividing tasks for those elders and volunteers wishing to participate.

Prepare the crust:

- In a large bowl, add contents of yeast package to  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup warm water and stir gently. Add  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. sugar and stir again. Next add beaten egg, potato water, remaining sugar, olive oil, and salt, and mix. Add 4 cups of flour and stir to incorporate into the wet mixture. Place dough on floured counter and knead. Add as much of the remaining 2 cups of flour as necessary to make a dough that is soft and pliable but no longer sticky. Set dough aside and let rest until doubled in size (approximately 30 minutes).

Prepare the custard filling:

- While the dough for the *kuchen* crust is rising, prepare the *kuchen* filling. Combine milk, vanilla, and honey in a medium saucepan over medium-low heat. Slowly bring to a simmer, then remove from heat. In a small bowl, beat eggs and cornstarch together. Next, add a small amount of the milk mixture to the egg mixture and stir thoroughly to temper. Repeat with another small amount of milk mixture. Once eggs have been tempered with the hot milk mixture, add tempered contents of the bowl to the saucepan. Return saucepan to stovetop and bring mixture to a low boil over medium heat, stirring frequently. Once mixture has thickened, remove from heat and set aside. (Note that only the activity director, capable volunteers, and/or elder care facility staff should use the stove and handle the hot filling mixture.)

Assemble the *kuchen*:

- After *kuchen* dough has doubled in size, punch down and divide into four equal pieces. Roll dough into 8 to 9-inch rounds and press one dough round into each pie pan. Prick dough with a fork, then add  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup sliced peaches. Cover peaches with custard filling (approximately  $1\frac{1}{4}$  to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups per pan). Bake at 350 degrees for 30-35 minutes until custard filling is just set and crust is golden brown. Remove from oven and let cool on a wire rack. (Note that only the activity director, capable volunteers, and/or elder care facility staff

should place the *kuchen* in the oven and take it out to cool.)

Prepare the sauce garnishes:

- While the *kuchen* is baking, prepare the sauce garnishes that will be used to artistically decorate the serving plates. Add two pints of raspberries and 1 tsp. lemon juice to a blender. Puree until smooth, then strain to remove seeds. Pour puree into squirt bottles. Rinse blender, then repeat with 2 cups fresh sliced peaches or lite canned peaches, omitting lemon juice. Rinse blender again, then repeat with two cups of prunes and enough prune juice to make a thick but pourable sauce. Refrigerate purees until ready to use.

### SESSION 3 (30 MINUTES):

#### CREATIVE PLATING OF THE *KUCHEN*

I. The activity director, others assisting, and the participants will now make creative plate designs for the *kuchen*. Two techniques can be used; using parchment stencils or paper lace with cinnamon, or using the sauce garnishes in squirt bottles.

For parchment stencils or paper lace:

- The participants will stencil parchment paper to decorate the finished *kuchen* with cinnamon. While the artistic creation of unique stencils is preferred, some elders may not have the physical capacity to do this. Therefore, as a backup, paper lace can be utilized in decorating the plates and the dessert. Make

sure the lace has holes large enough to allow the cinnamon sprinkled on it to pass through. The parchment stencils will be made by folding parchment paper in half and snipping it into creative snowflake designs. Once made, the parchment stencil or paper lace is placed on a plate. Sprinkle a healthy dose of cinnamon over the stenciled parchment or paper lace. Carefully removing the parchment or lace by lifting slowly upward will leave behind an ornate design on the plate. Then put the *kuchen* on the plate. A design of cinnamon also can be applied to the top of the *kuchen* in the same way. The person directing this activity plan or other people who are assisting should demonstrate this technique to the people participating.

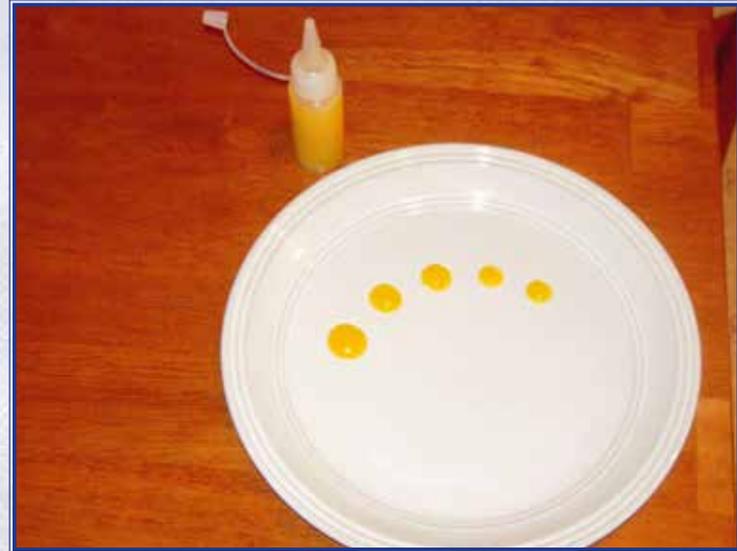
For the sauce garnishes:

- The participants will decorate their plates with squirt bottle sauces. The peach, raspberry, and prune sauces can be applied to the surface of a smooth plate using squirt bottles. Dots, swirls, wavy lines, zigzag patterns, circles, or whatever the person is inspired to create in whatever color combinations can be done. Food brushes or small, clean, never-before-used paintbrushes also can be used to apply the different sauces in creative designs on the plate, or dabs of sauce can be placed on the plate with the outward stroke of a spoon to decorate the plate. Dragging toothpicks outward through dabs of sauce on a plate can create interesting ornamentation.

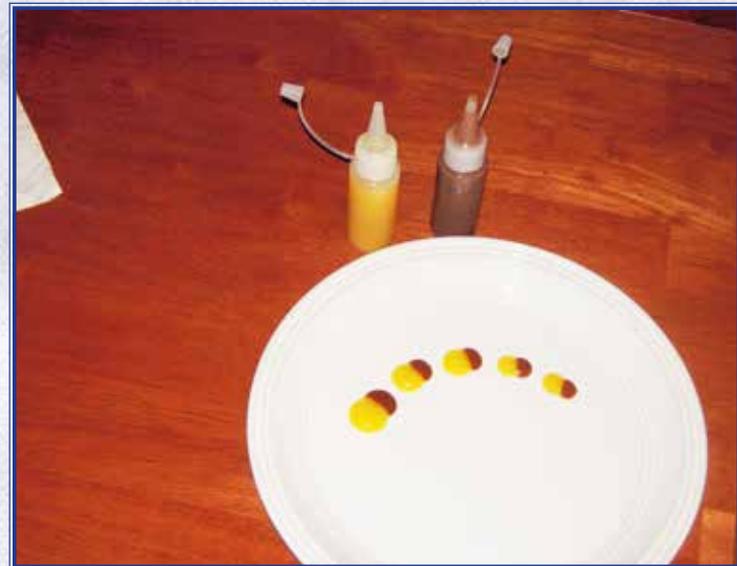
The activity director should explain that there is no wrong

way to plate-decorate. While the elders may have chastised their children not to play with their food, encourage the elders to play with theirs. The participants should be reassured and encouraged to have fun with the process and to create their own designs. Whether the elders have shaky hands or limited mobility, these techniques can create colorful, whimsical designs.

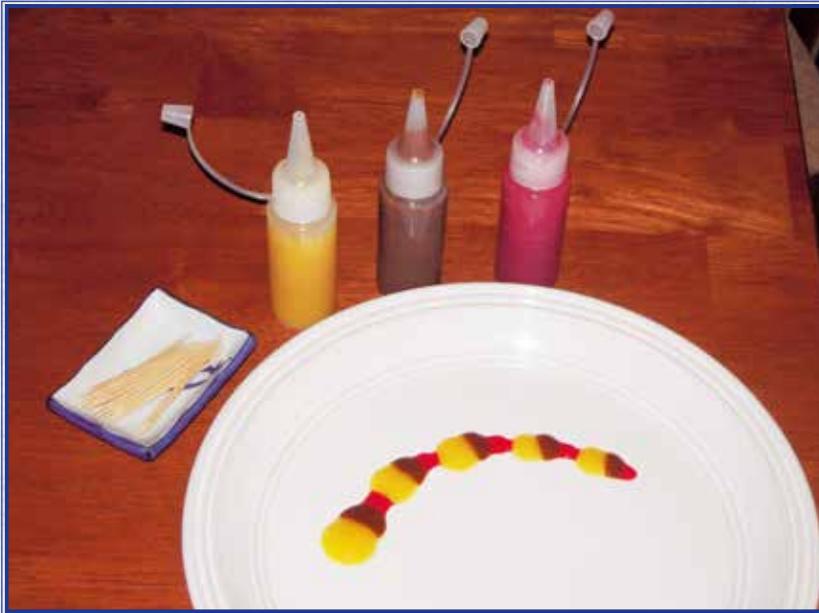
The following images are examples of artful plating that can be accomplished with squirt bottles, paintbrushes, paper cutouts, and toothpicks.



*Dots in decreasing size created with a squirt bottle of peach puree.*



*Then the same process is used with prune puree.*



*Raspberry puree is added next.*

*The end of a toothpick is dragged through the puree from one end to the other forming a blended design. Kuchen is then added to the plate.*





*The kuchen could be cut as a circle and added to the plate to be flanked by puree designs.*

*Parchment paper can be folded and cut to create various lace-like designs. Place the paper on the plate and sprinkle cinnamon over it. Be generous with the spice. Then slowly lift the parchment from the plate to reveal the design.*





*The same puree can be applied to a plate with paintbrushes.*

*Note the triangle designs. These were made by folding and cutting parchment paper, much like how one would make a paper snowflake, placing it on the dessert, sprinkling cinnamon over the top, and removing the paper to reveal the pattern. Also shown are decorations made with paintbrushes, toothpicks, and placement of raspberries.*



*(All images above provided courtesy of Matt Kloberdanz.)*

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**SESSION 4 (15 MINUTES):  
REFRESHMENTS AND ENJOYMENT  
OF THE KUCHEN**

I. The activity director, others who assisted, and those participating in the activity now should enjoy the *kuchen*, coffee, tea, and social time. Have cups, plates, napkins, and forks set aside and ready for use.

In 2013, Matt Kloberdanz conducted an *Art for Life Program* activity on decorative plating and the making of healthy *kuchen*, a German-Russian custard dessert. Elders at the Heritage Centre care facility in Jamestown, ND, made their own individual-sized healthy *kuchen* that had half the fat, calories, and sugar. Using the sauces and techniques described herein, even the shakiest of hands were able to create designs. And, of course, everyone loves to eat! The images below are some of the plates decorated in that activity.



*Chef Matt Kloberdanz demonstrates artful plating using a paintbrush and fruit puree at the Heritage Centre care facility in Jamestown, ND.*

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*Left and below: Elders creating unique, self-directed designs with fruit puree.*





*Left and below: More decorated plate designs.*



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*A final decorated plate design...*

*...and with the addition of the healthy kuchen,  
the final product is ready to enjoy!*



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## **AUTHOR • MATT KLOBERDANZ:**

Matt grew up in North Dakota and is of German-Russian descent. He is a full-time ambassador for the culinary arts and has cooked all across the country, in places as diverse as Palm Springs, Palm Beach, Manhattan, New Orleans, Las Vegas, and Washington, D.C. He has cooked in some of this country's finest restaurants, including Jean Georges at the Trump International, Le Bernardin, Daniel, Bouley, Aureole, Pair of 8's, The Union Square Café, The Inn at Little Washington, Jardiniere, Joel Robuchon's The Mansion at MGM Grand, The Grande Lakes Ritz-Carlton, JW Marriott Resort, and Arnaud's. One of Matt's passions is revising traditional foods to make them healthier by reducing in half, in some instances, the fat, sugar, and calories of the original recipe. With diabetes a serious issue among many older Americans, such revisions can have a positive impact on a person's health, especially for those people who love the traditional ethnic foods with which they were raised. This is what Matt has done with the German-Russian delicacy of *kuchen*. Matt is fortunate to have spent time learning to cook *kuchen* from his mother Rosalinda and both his German-Russian grandmothers, Elizabeth and Maria. He also would like to thank Virginia Dockter, one of the very best traditional *kuchen* makers in North Dakota, for her cooking tips and culinary expertise. She is a true inspiration to many of us. Matt is the son of Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, one of the world's leading experts on German-Russians, and co-author of the publication *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.