

In 2000, after Pia and Arve married, they took over the shop, started a family, and, in 2011, moved Nordic House to its current spacious spot at 2709 on Berkeley's San Pablo Avenue. In this cheery, light-filled space, they offer made-to-order deli sandwiches and a selection of imported cheeses, house-made sausages, liver paté, and meatballs, as well as scores of Scandinavian foods like lingonberry jam, licorice candy, and *lefse* (a Norwegian potato tortilla).

Arve and the kids always help out at Nordic House during December, their busiest month. Each Nordic country has a traditional specialty enjoyed for Christmas dinner and throughout the winter season such as Swedish brined ham, Norwegian pork ribs, and Danish pork with crispy skin. The Klausens prepare and freeze hundreds of servings of these cuts of meat and ship them all over the country.

Seasonal specialties also include *gløgg* (*gløgg* in Danish), a warming drink for December get-togethers made with mulled, spiced red wine and spirits. The recipe varies among families and usually contains a combination of cinnamon, ginger, cloves, orange peel, and cardamom. In Denmark, the typical snack to accompany *gløgg* is *æbleskiver*—spherical popovers made in a special indented cast-iron pan. The unsweetened egg-y orbs are often eaten sprinkled with powdered sugar or dipped in strawberry jam.

Continuing an annual tradition started at Nordic House by Pia's father, the Klausens host a holiday open house on the first three days after Thanksgiving to kick off the Christmas season and thank their customers (this year November 25, 26, and 27). Pia sets out long tables set with a generous spread of pickled herring, meatballs, liver paté, salami, sausage, and potato salad. There's Christmas music, plenty of *gløgg*, and her three kids make the *æbleskiver*, just like Pia used to do as a child. ☺

## In Belgium (or Berkeley), St. Nick Rewards Good Children with Speculoos Cookies

Berkeley resident Evy Ballegeer's nostalgia for a treat she ate growing up in Belgium inspired her to start a business making the traditional crispy, spiced cookies called *speculoos*. Her company, Little Belgians, founded in 2014, produces a variety of these molded cookies.

After a career in journalism, Ballegeer wanted a change. Noting the growing interest in artisanal food, she attended Tante Marie's cooking school in San Francisco and interned with the pastry chef at San Francisco's Nopa. When she offered her handmade *speculoos* for the restaurant's cookie plate, she received an enthusiastic response and realized there was a demand that wasn't being satisfied by the mass-marketed version. "I was interested in preserving the history, craft, and tradition of *speculoos*," says Ballegeer. "We use organic butter and nine spices, including cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, pepper, and ginger. Mass-market *speculoos* are made with palm oil and just cinnamon."

These thin, crispy spice cookies, which are also enjoyed in the Netherlands and Germany, trace their lineage to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Dutch East India Company opened up the spice route to Asia. Town bakers in these Northern European countries employed hand-carved wooden molds to form the treats in a variety of shapes, from animals to representations of local personages or saints. The Dutch liked their cookies, which they call *speculaas*, to be in the shape of their ubiquitous windmills.

Ballegeer started with four shapes inspired by childhood memories: "an umbrella, because it always rains in Belgium; a bird for my grandfathers, who raised and raced pigeons; a house representing a dwelling in Ghent, my favorite Belgian city, where I went to college; and a cyclist, to honor my aunts and uncles, as they avidly watched bicycle races on TV while drinking coffee and eating *speculoos*." She recently added two new shapes: a fireplace for a gourmet s'mores kit (along with TCHO chocolate and The Candy's marshmallows), and a cookie in the shape of Saint Nicholas with bishops' robes and a pointed miter, to reconnect to one of *speculoos*' most iconic uses.

The cookies are enjoyed year-round as a traditional accompaniment to coffee. (Children typically dunk theirs in their parents' coffee cups.) But in Belgium and the Netherlands, the cookies are also essential for celebrating the birthday of *Sinterklaas* or Saint Nicholas, (a thinner ancestor of our Santa Claus). On December 5, the eve of the saint's birthday, Belgian children place their shoes with a carrot or rutabaga inside next to the fireplace. That treat is for St.

Nick's horse, which gets parked on the roof while the boss delivers presents through the chimney. In return, if the children have been good,

St. Nick leaves them mandarin oranges, chocolate, a little gift, and a large wrapped *speculoos* in his own image, which will be discovered on the morning of December 6.

Now, Ballegeer's children, ages 9 and 11, can enjoy the authentic cookies of their mother's childhood, enriched with their own cozy memories.

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[littlebelgians.com](http://littlebelgians.com)



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