



*Dutch Breakfast Cake*

# Bossche Koek

's Hertogenbosch might be one of the most French Burgundian-Dutch cities in the world. The very old city is where you will find the traditional koek of this story.

When we meet Gieljan and Sylvana De Backer, we immediately dive into Dutch history while enjoying the Bossche koek with a cup of coffee. On the outside this koek reminds you of other similar Dutch breakfast cakes, called peperkoek or ontbijtkoek, but when we taste this one, we realize that this is a totally different cake. This one is more refined in aroma and taste. The Bossche Koek is a traditional concept, because the recipe, with its different mix of spices, has been unchanged for centuries. It is believed that the famous 15th and 16th century painter, Jeroen Bosch, was familiar with this koek. Just like a French family hotel, where you will find a chair they tell you was once occupied by Napoleon, it is the same with cakes, tarts and sweets: every family has its own recipe with their own spices and flavors; a family secret, passed on from father to son, as with the case of the De Backer family. The making of their family koek started in 1865. Adrianus de Backer, a member of the Bossche baker family, committed the recipe to print in 1915 and gave it to his sons Jan and Egi. Jan continued the family koek tradition. The Bossche koek from Gieljan's father Jan was famous in Holland and beyond. The cake gained its fame as Jan De Backer sold them in wicker baskets to tourists who were visiting the St. Jans' Cathedral. After years of hard work, Jan passed away in 1988, just a few weeks after he retired. He must have taken the recipe to his grave, as the written recipe had been lost for years. It seemed that the family recipe had been lost forever, until a small miracle twenty-three years later. In 2001, while they were building a café on the site of Jan's former home and bakery, Gieljan's son Jules saw something sticking out of a canvas wall, which turned out to be the lost recipe! Partially eaten by mice, but still readable, the Bossche koek of Jan de Backer was reborn...

### Figuring out the Recipes

Old recipes are totally different than the ones we use today. For successor Gieljan, who has no background in baking, recipes were like secret



codes. He and his wife Sylvana called on several old bakers and experts to get help. Old fashioned ingredients like alum and ammonia were replaced with products of today. Happy with the results, the proud couple decided to give the koek back to the city with great success. The bakers, who had helped them deciphering the recipes, got permission to bake the koek themselves, but only receive the dough after it has been made by the De Beckers. While we are visiting, the couple behaves nervously and is afraid somebody is spying on them. They are afraid that the production will lose its special nature if someone other than them makes the dough and passes it on to another baker. We have to smile a bit with all this secrecy, because we know pretty well how this koek is

produced. We are also familiar with the production of peperkoek. Still, the secrecy has its charm, so we play the game.

For this, we visit Baker Daniël van Schijndel, who receives his dough in small wooden containers. The only thing he has to do is sprinkle sugar candy over it and bake it. He knows nothing about the recipe, but tells us how the process of making the koek works. A peperkoek is created with a starter dough mixed with rye flour, sugars, water, salt and old Bossche koek. The old koek provides the extra taste and binding. The sugars are cooked to make a syrup at 98oR, which together with the other ingredients forms the dough. This dough has to rest for at least 3 days. It is sometimes called rest dough. This dough looks very grey and dull and it is hard to imagine that at some point it will become a delicious treat. After that, one starts with the second part of the dough, which is sometimes called the breakthrough of the dough. The second part consists of extremely secret spices and flavours, sugar coated fruits, honey and rice. The spice mix may vary, but the most commonly used spices are cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, cardamom, cloves, white pepper, coriander seeds and mace. The dough is put in small thin wooden containers lined with parchment paper. Just as in the early days, the small containers are baked in a wooden mold. The wooden mold is necessary to avoid burnt crusts on the sides. The koek is baked at 180oC/350oF for 80 minutes. A good koek should not be eaten for a few weeks, maybe even a few months to get the maximum flavour of the spices. This is one of the reasons that sailors ate peperkoek as they could be safely stored for a long voyage at sea. Sylvana and Gieljan personally check Daniël van Schijndel's koek. They break it in half with culinary flair and check the structure, scent and taste. The koek is definitely not dry and sticks to your fingers. This is because of the sugarcoated orange and lemon peel, the honey and the caramelized candied sugar. Gieljan secretly tells us that there are 30 ingredients in the koek, including 8 spices. The Bossche koek is a very important item in Daniël's shop; he sells about 80 per week, small and large. At this point we would like to visit the other bakery, where the dough is made, but are told that it is strictly prohibited. Gieljan promises us that he will take pictures and send them to us. We assume that the Pentagon has less security. You can find a recipe for making a bomb on the Internet, but not for making a Bossche koek...



However, it is possible to find bakers in 's Hertogenbosch who are making their own Bossche koek. Gieljan shrugs his shoulders, saying all those recipes have changed many times over the years. He is the only one who can take credit for authentic formula of the past.

### **Yes, still a recipe...**

The scientific part of the Bossche koek is a big secret; but we don't want to disappoint you, so here is a recipe. When you start working with this, you might come close to making the authentic article.

***For the starter dough: 540 g rye flour, 200 g glucose, 120 g fructose, 160 g water, 50 g old koek, 100 g candied sugar.***  
***For the second part: 25 g honey, 90 g baking powder, 50 g spice mix of your own choice, 50 g sugar coated fruits.***

Starter dough: cook water and sugar and the old koek at 96°R and mix with the flour and later with the candied sugar. Let dough rest for at least 3 to 7 days. For the second part, mix the dough with the honey, the spices and the sugarcoated fruits, pour into a mould and bake at 180°C/350°F for 80 minutes.

