

The last sheet of Lucia buns, also known as *lussekatter* or *lussebullar*, just came out of the oven. December 13th is Lucia Day. A tradition developed generations ago that entailed daughters—with candlelit wreaths in their hair—bringing morning coffee and pastries to their parents. I'm not sure how many people actually keep this old tradition in Sweden now, but it is still a time of feasts and Lucia celebrations with white-robed girls at the forefront. And the Lucia buns live on.

These sweet rolls are flavored and colored with saffron. I had always assumed that Runo's mother made her Lucia buns without saffron because the family (mainly the boys, probably) did not like the flavor. And, it is true that Runo does not enjoy the taste of that most expensive of all spices. But, while reading a little of the history and customs surrounding Lucia buns, I discovered that in West Sweden, and primarily in the Göteborg area, saffron was not often used in Lucia buns until the 1980s. And even today, there are people in that part of the country who are skeptics when it comes to the inclusion of saffron in their Lucia buns.

In reading the information I found in books and in a couple of web sites I found more interesting facts about the Lucia customs. I had never quite understood why a Sicilian martyr became part of a Christmas tradition in the far north. As it turned out, though the 13th of December is Lucia Day, the girls with the candlelit wreaths come from a different tradition. In Germany after the Protestant Reformation, there was a movement to eliminate references to St. Nicholas, whose feast day is December 6th, because he was the Catholic patron saint of children. According to Jan-Öjvind Swahn's book *Swedish Traditions*, on that day, a grownup came to school dressed as a bishop and gave buns and other treats to the good children. Another adult, dressed as the devil in horns and fur, whipped the lazy, disobedient children. Nicholas became a "stumbling block for the Lutheran priests because saints were like salt in a wound to them."

So, a new custom replaced this tradition. The celebrations were moved to the homes, and in the western part of Germany, a girl appeared in protestant homes. She was dressed in a white gown with a crown of candles. She was known as "Child Jesus," and she gave presents to good children. The old devil of the Catholic tradition was still part of the evangelical outlook, so he was allowed to remain. Lucia Buns are really more properly called *lussekatter*, because their name refers to not Saint Lucia, but the devil Lucifer. And they were also known in times past as "*dövels-katter*," or "devil's cats."

It was time to see just what this flavor issue was all about. Today, I used a recipe from one of my Swedish baking books and made a batch of Lucia buns. I did, though, make just half a batch with saffron and half a batch with cardamom, more commonly used before 1980 in the western part of the country. When the rolls were done, I brewed a pot of

coffee, and we tried both kinds.

Runo is faithful to his earlier opinion. “They taste like medicine,” he said of the saffron-flavored buns. The saffron *lussekatter* are certainly prettier than the pale ones. And, after eating one of the “white” ones myself, I know why those I had made in other years were more flavorful. I had rolled the dough into a very thin sheet, brushed it with butter, added cardamom and sugar, and folded it in half before cutting strips to twist into rolls. They have a lot more flavor than the ones I made today.

On Wednesday evening this week—December 13th, Lucia Day—our group of Friends will meet here in the cabin with us. We will have a taste-testing session after Meeting, and we will get the opinions of everyone here. As for me? I can eat either kind, but I would trade them all for a pan of those good cinnamon rolls that have always been traditional here in our neighborhood—all year round. We roll our sweet roll dough into a sheet, spread it with butter and sprinkle on—very generously—brown sugar, cinnamon, and cardamom. We add lot of raisins, maybe some walnuts, and roll the sheet up. We cut it into slices, bake them, and put on more butter when we eat them—warm. Those that go into the freezer are generally warmed a bit before eating.

But, tradition is tradition, and we get a lot of enjoyment and comfort by following some of the old practices, even when they often represent something that is, these days, far from our beliefs. And eating the devil’s cats before Christmas—saffron yellow or pale—is a pleasure. However, if anyone is so enamored of the flavor of saffron to want to make *lussekatter* year round, it might be noted that this most dear of all flavorings is made from the threads—stigmas—of a violet crocus flower. Only three threads are picked, by hand, from each blossom, and it takes 7500 crocus blooms to produce a pound of spice. At between ten and twenty dollars a gram, saffron isn’t a spice one wants to waste.

