

LOCAL

Full Circle

FROM CZECHIA TO TEXAS AND BACK AGAIN, THE HUMBLE KOLACHE MAKES ITS TRIUMPHANT RETURN.
BY DAVID FARLEY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LENKA GRABICOVA

THE FIRST THING Veronika Vavrová does when we meet at her bakery is to deflect credit for sparking Prague’s current kolache renaissance. Kus Koláče opened in 2020 and since then has been a sensation for its namesake pastries: puffy dough topped with quark cheese, a dollop of fruit, and poppy seeds. “It’s my grandma’s recipe,” she demurs.

The kolaches I tasted on a recent visit to Czechia, more widely known as the Czech Republic, were a revelation. I lived in this Central European country for three years in the mid-1990s, and the kolaches I encountered in Prague were drab, mass-produced baked rounds that you’d think twice about even feeding to your dog. Things have most certainly changed.

Vavrová was among the first commercial bakers in generations to approach the kolache with care and craftsmanship. And for many of her customers, Kus was the first place outside their grandmother’s home where they’d tasted one made with artisanal ingredients. Since then, a handful of nearby bakeries have joined the revival, including Kolacherie in the city center; Šodó, an all-day café in Dejvice; and Eska, with locations in Karlín and Letná.

History has not been kind to the kolache. During the 41 years of Soviet rule, Czech cuisine suffered under centralized planning and cultural collectivization. Craft was replaced with industrialization, and traditional recipes fell out of favor.

Artisan baking is booming worldwide, but in Prague, that trend has greater significance. Oscar Novak, founder of Kolacherie, explains that, under communism, there were few independently owned businesses. For those who dared try, the

government would torment them for not playing into the system. “There were no craft bakeries back then,” Novak says. “We lost a lot because of it.”

Meanwhile, some 5,500 miles away in Texas, the pastry had taken on a very different life. In the late 19th century, Czech immigrants settled in the Lone Star State, bringing their recipes and traditions along with them. A Tex-Czech kolache evolved into something quite unlike its ancestors, as regional ingredients like chorizo and chiles found their way atop the sweet yeast-leavened dough.

A few years ago, Novak traveled to Texas to visit these old immigrant towns; the experience was akin to meeting a long-lost cousin, at once foreign and familiar. After returning to Prague, he opened Kolacherie in 2022, selling knockout Czech versions of the pastry alongside Texas-inspired ones with jalapeño and pork sausage. He even added a few of his own savory twists, such as ham and Emmentaler. The kolache has made its triumphant return.

At a sidewalk table at Šodó, co-owner Jan Valenta slides a kolache in front of me. Topped with quark and plum jam and sprinkled with candied hazelnuts, the crisp surface gives way to a soft, chewy interior. The combination of flavors and textures brings a depth I’ve never tasted in a traditional kolache.

Until recently, Valenta explains, the bar was pretty low. But this new generation has little affection for the industrial foods of the past. “These days,” he says, “we are much more self-assured.” Thanks to them, this once unassuming Czech pastry that’s traveled halfway around the world has at long last come home. •



Clockwise, from top left: Kolaches topped with fresh fruit at Kolacherie; Kolacherie owner Oscar Novak; roasted squash and blue cheese kolaches at Kus Koláče; Kus Koláče owner Veronika Vavrová.



APPLE CINNAMON KOLACHES
Makes: 16 kolaches

From Kolacherie baker Oscar Novak, these autumnal pastries are topped with a buttery oat crumble. Flattening the dough rounds with the bottom of a glass creates a tidy rim to contain the abundant filling.

- For the dough:*
- 2½ cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
 - ¼ cup whole milk
 - ¼ cup sugar
 - 1½ tsp. instant yeast
 - 1 tsp. vanilla extract
 - + Kosher salt
 - 1 large egg yolk
 - 2 large eggs, divided
 - 15 Tbsp. unsalted butter, divided (5 Tbsp. cut into small cubes, plus 10 Tbsp. melted)
 - + Vegetable oil, for greasing

- For the apple filling:*
- ⅓ cup sugar
 - 2 Tbsp. unsalted butter
 - 1 tsp. ground cinnamon
 - 3 green apples, such as Granny Smith, peeled and cut into ¾-in. cubes

- For the oat crumble:*
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
 - ½ cup sugar
 - ⅓ cup rolled oats
 - ½ tsp. ground cinnamon
 - 7 Tbsp. unsalted butter, cut into small cubes

1 Make the dough: In a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook, mix the flour, milk, sugar, yeast, vanilla, ¾ teaspoon of salt, egg yolk, 1 of the whole eggs, and ¼ cup plus 1 teaspoon of cold water on low, scraping down the sides of the bowl as needed, until a compact dough forms, 2–3 minutes. Add the 5 tablespoons of cubed butter, turn the mixer to medium-low, and continue mixing until fully incorporated, 2–3 minutes. Turn the dough out onto a clean work surface and knead until smooth and elastic, 2–4 minutes. Transfer the dough to a large oiled bowl, cover with a damp kitchen towel, and set aside until doubled in size, about 3 hours at room temperature or 6–8 hours in the fridge.

2 Make the apple filling: To a small pot over medium-high heat, add the sugar and butter and cook, swirling frequently, until the butter is melted and the sugar is dissolved, 3–4 minutes. Continue cooking and swirling until the mixture turns deep brown, about 3 minutes more. Stir in the cinnamon and apples, then immediately remove from the heat and set aside.

3 Make the oat crumble: In a medium bowl, stir together the flour, sugar, oats, and cinnamon. Using your hands, rub in the butter until mostly incorporated, with only a few small visible butter pieces remaining. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

4 Line two large baking sheets with parchment. On a lightly floured surface, divide the dough into 16 golf-ball-size pieces. Using a cupped hand, roll each piece in a circular motion to form a smooth ball. Divide the balls between the prepared sheets, spacing at least 3 inches apart. Cover with a kitchen towel and set aside at room temperature until nearly doubled in size, 40–60 minutes.

5 Position racks in the upper and lower thirds of the oven and preheat to 350°F.

6 Beat the remaining egg with a pinch of salt. Dip the bottom of a glass or a dry measuring cup in flour, then gently press down onto each dough ball to make a 3–4-inch wide indentation. Brush the sides of the dough with the beaten egg, then fill each indentation with 1 heaping tablespoon of the apple filling followed by 1–2 tablespoons of the oat crumble.

7 Bake, rotating and swapping the baking sheets halfway through, until the tops are golden brown and the bottoms are crisp and light brown, about 20 minutes. Brush the sides of the hot kolaches with the remaining melted butter, then set aside to cool on the baking sheets. Serve warm or at room temperature. Leftover kolaches will keep well in an airtight container stored at room temperature for up to 2 days.



BLUE CHEESE AND WINTER SQUASH KOLACHES

Makes: 25 kolaches

At Kus Koláče, baker Veronika Vavrová combines sweet roasted squash with salty blue cheese for this seasonal savory take. Her method involves rolling out the dough and cutting it into rounds, which results in an extra-puffy rise. After baking, she piles them high with fresh arugula and powdery shaved pecorino.

- 1 cup whole milk, warmed to 100°F
- 3 Tbsp. sugar
- 2¼ tsp. instant yeast
- 4 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- 6 Tbsp. unsalted butter, or lard, softened
- 2 large egg yolks, at room temperature
- 1 large egg, at room temperature
- 2 Tbsp. plus 1 tsp. kosher salt, divided
- + Vegetable oil, for greasing the bowl
- One 2-lb. red kuri or butternut squash, unpeeled, seeded, and cut into ½-in. chunks
- 3 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
- ¾ tsp. dried oregano
- ¾ tsp. pumpkin spice
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 lb. cream cheese, softened
- ½ tsp. garlic powder
- ½ tsp. onion powder
- 6–8 oz. blue cheese, such as Gorgonzola, crumbled
- + Arugula and shaved pecorino, for garnish (optional)

1 In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook, stir together the milk, sugar, and yeast. Set aside until bubbly, about 10 minutes.

2 Add the flour, butter, salt, egg yolks and whole egg, and 1 tablespoon plus ½ teaspoon of the salt to the bowl and mix on low, scraping down the sides of the bowl as needed, until a shaggy dough forms, 2–3 minutes. Turn the mixer to medium-low and continue mixing until the dough is stretchy and no longer sticky, 8–10 minutes more. Transfer the dough to a large oiled bowl, cover with a damp kitchen towel, and set aside until soft to the touch and not quite doubled in size, about 1 hour.

3 Position racks in the upper and lower thirds of the oven and preheat to 350°F. On a large, parchment-lined baking sheet, toss together the squash, olive oil, oregano, pumpkin spice, black pepper, and 1½ teaspoons of the salt. Bake until the squash is tender when pierced with a knife, 30–40 minutes.

4 Meanwhile, on a lightly floured work surface, roll the dough out to ⅛-inch thickness. Using a 2¾-inch round cutter, punch out 25 circles, then transfer to two parchment-lined baking sheets, spacing at least 2 inches apart. Set aside at room temperature until lightly puffed, about 20 minutes. (Discard the dough scraps or reserve for another use.)

5 In a medium bowl, stir together the cream cheese, garlic and onion powders, and the remaining 2 teaspoons of salt. Using a small spoon, spread 2 tablespoons of this mixture onto each dough round. Divide the roasted squash over the kolaches, then top each with 2 teaspoons of blue cheese.

6 Bake, rotating and swapping the baking sheets halfway through, until the cheese is melted and the bottoms are crisp and golden brown, about 18 minutes. Set aside to cool for 10 minutes, then transfer to wire racks to cool completely. Drizzle with olive oil, top with arugula and shaved pecorino if desired, and serve at room temperature.

