

The Hole Story

By C

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WITH DOUGHNUTS, it's all about the hole. No hole, no doughnut. That little circle of nothing means everything. Otherwise, it's a cruller, or a Bismarck, or a beignet, or a churro, or any of those words that mean a fried piece of dough but not a real, all-American doughnut.

The idea of frying a chunk of dough is ancient. The Romans did it. So did just about every other long-lived European culture, from the Dutch to the Spanish to the Germans.

But the story of that little porthole in the center of a perfectly round doughnut is quintessentially American. It started with a 19th-century Maine teenager, continued with a 1920s Russian Jewish immigrant in Manhattan and moved into the 21st century with a North Carolina doughnut company that blazed past high-tech computer firms with the hot stock of the past year.

A century and a half after 15-year-old Hanson Crockett Gregory of Clam Cove, Maine, punched a hole in what he called "greasy sinkers," we are scarfing down doughnuts at a record pace. Thanks in part to the waning popularity of bagels (another roll with a hole), doughnut sales have been rising faster than yeast dough in a warm room. Sales since 1994 have jumped from \$6.5 billion to \$8.5 billion and are expected to hit nearly \$9 billion this year, according to Business Trend Analysts of Commack, N.J. That's more than 10 billion doughnuts -- and some 2.2 trillion sugary calories -- in American tummies a year, says the National Restaurant Association.

Pumping up this carbo overload is the phenomenal success of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. Based in Winston-Salem, N.C., the 65-year-old company achieved iconic status in the South for its hot, glazed, yeast-raised doughnuts. It began expanding outside the South about five years ago to slavish acclaim. The price of Krispy Kreme stock soared; doughnut shops everywhere basked in the newfound interest and sales increased. Even tony restaurants got into the act, offering fresh doughnuts on dessert menus as the newest American comfort food to get an upgrade.

All of which brings us back to the hole truth. When historians talk about how the doughnut first got to this country, they mention the Dutch olykoeks or "oily cakes," which 17th-century settlers in New Amsterdam (later called New York) loved to eat. In 1809, writer Washington Irving described these sweetened dough balls, fried in hog fat, that were also called "dough nuts" because of their shape. Dough nuts, maybe, but not a doughnut. They had no holes.

Food historian John Mariani believes it was the Pennsylvania Dutch from Germany who were the first to make doughnuts with holes for dunking in coffee, but the evidence remains murky. Or, perhaps, it just isn't as colorful as the story about the young sea captain from Maine.

The year was 1847. According to family lore, Hanson Gregory, the teenage scion of a prosperous Maine shipping family, asked his mother why her fried cakes were so soggy in the middle. She said she didn't know; the centers just wouldn't cook through. So, on an impulse, her son took a fork and punched out the center of a couple uncooked rounds of dough. Here, Mom, fry these. And the all-American doughnut with the hole was born.

Or not. That very same kid, when he turned 19, became Maine's youngest sea captain. During his sea travels, there were tales that the doughnut was invented when he jammed one of his mother's cakes on the spoke of the ship's wheel during a storm. Or that he lightened the cakes with a hole after six men fell overboard and sank to the bottom because of the heavy, fried (holeless) cakes they had eaten. Or that he wanted fried cakes that looked like his ship's life preservers.

Gregory himself, in an interview around the turn of the century in the Boston Post, gave yet another version, according to "The Donut Book," by Sally Levitt Steinberg. He said that in 1847 he was on a schooner eating tough, greasy fried cakes and had used the round cover of the ship's tin pepper box to cut a hole in the middle of the "greasy sinkers." He called it "the first hole ever seen by mortal eyes," adding, "Of course, a hole ain't so much, but it's the best part of the doughnut -- you'd think so if you had ever tasted the doughnuts we used to eat."

Whether he came home that same year and poked holes in his mother's cakes as well is unknown. What is known is that despite an illustrious career as a ship captain, his lasting claim to fame is as inventor of the doughnut hole. A photo of Capt. Gregory taken about 1890 shows a serious, bearded man holding a thin doughnut with a hole big enough to fit a child's fist. In 1947, the 100th anniversary of his impulsive invention, a bronze plaque honoring him was put up in his hometown, now called Glen Cove. The nearby town of Camden still has doughnut fests celebrating his legacy.

It was the 1940s, however, that saw a real doughnut hole frenzy, says Ellen Dyer, archivist at Camden's public library. "The whole doughnut thing went crazy," she says. The 1940 World's Fair had a doughnut exhibit with a portrait of Gregory and in 1941 the American Donut Corp. sponsored the Great Donut Debate at the Astor Hotel in New York City with a panel of celebrity judges. The subject of the debate: "Who Put the Hole in the Doughnut?"

Camden's library recently exhibited old letters and other documents related to the event, in which Gregory's cousin, Fred Crockett, victoriously defended his relative against a wily Cape Cod lawyer. The lawyer, with no evidence save his storytelling abilities, claimed that the hole was created when a Nauset Indian shot an arrow

through a Pilgrim woman's fried cakes. Crockett, who came armed with letters and affidavits, was judged the winner and Gregory's reputation was assured.

Crockett, who lives in Rockport, Maine, not far from the bronze plaque honoring his ancestor, is 91 and still starts each day with coffee and a plain cake doughnut. He also takes sharp exception to any theory about the origin of doughnut holes but the one his relatives told him about Gregory and his mother. "When she told him the centers don't cook up, he just walked across the floor of the kitchen and stuck a fork through the dough. The rest are just crazy stories," he says.

Still, Crockett admits that neither he nor Gregory realized the commercial potential behind that simple hole. "After the debate, some wealthy people offered to set me up with a doughnut shop, but I turned them down. Maybe I could have been a millionaire," he says, with a trace of regret.

Others, however, did see the potential. During World War I, Salvation Army volunteers handed out millions of doughnuts to U.S. soldiers in France to give them a taste of home. Once they were actually back home, those soldiers still wanted doughnuts. So in 1920, Adolph Levitt, an enterprising immigrant from Russia, devised a machine that could turn out the fried rings faster than ever.

He called it the Wonderful Almost Human Automatic Donut Machine and he put it in the window of his Harlem doughnut shop so people could watch the dough stream in, the rings gently bubble and fry, and the fresh, puffy doughnuts tumble out. Levitt soon became known as the Donut King, selling his machines across the country. When his doughnut machine was set up in a coffee shop in Times Square in 1930, the police had to be called to control the crowds wanting to see it, wrote Levitt's granddaughter, Sally Levitt Steinberg.

By 1931, reported the New Yorker magazine, Levitt had a \$25 million business selling doughnut machines, despite the nation's economic hard times. At the 1934 World's Fair in Chicago, doughnuts were billed as "the food hit of the Century of Progress." Seeing them produced by machine made them seem like the wave of the future, yet they cost only a nickel -- a price even the poorest could afford.

It was also during the '30s that a Frenchman named Joe LeBeau sold his secret recipe for a yeast-raised doughnut to a Kentucky entrepreneur named Vernon Rudolph. Rudolph at first sold his treats door-to-door. But in 1937, he took his equipment, the recipe and, most importantly, the name Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, to Winston-Salemand opened a small shop. Like Levitt, Rudolph let customers see (and smell) the doughnuts being made. Few could resist.

America's devotion to doughnuts continued into the '40s, although people began to demand more doughnut and less hole. A photo from 1948 shows a businessman pointing to a poster that shows a 1927 doughnut with a hole that is 1 1/2 inches across. That opening had shrunk to seven-eighths of an inch by 1937 and to just three-eighths of an inch in 1948.

By then, Levitt had started the Mayflower doughnut chain, with shops in the mid-Atlantic, including Washington. Many customers remember not just the doughnuts, but the optimist's saying on each of the Mayflower boxes: "As you ramble on thruLife, Brother, Whatever be your Goal, Keep your Eye upon the Doughnut, And not upon the Hole."

Rudolph did keep his eye upon the doughnut. In the early '50s, to meet increased demand, he took a page out of Levitt's book and introduced the Ring King, an automated machine that could churn out about 75 dozen doughnuts an hour. The machine was necessary because competitor Dunkin' Donuts, begun in 1950 in Quincy, Mass., (the city where hole inventor Gregory is buried, by the way), was flourishing as well.

The Ring King was obsolete by the 1980s (today's machines pump out 800 dozen doughnuts an hour), but it has earned a permanent place in doughnut -- and American -- history. The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History made it part of its permanent collection in 1997 at a ceremony where, what else, doughnuts were served.

Why is the Ring King so important? David Shayt, one of the collections managers for the museum's division of cultural history, was quoted then as saying, "Doughnuts are one of those all-American products that we have a duty to explore and document."

Oh yes, and eat.

 Comments

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