SOFTWARE & TECH

The History Of The Doughnut

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A Brief History of the Doughnut: From Savory Snack to Sweet Icon

Few pastries enjoy the universal adoration of the humble doughnut. Whether it is a simple glazed ring from a corner shop, a jelly-filled classic, or an artisanal creation topped with cereal and unicorn glaze, the doughnut has a special place in our hearts and stomachs. It is a food that appears simple, yet its journey from a purely practical fried dough ball to a global cultural phenomenon is a fascinating tale of innovation, war, and indulgence. To understand the history of the doughnut is to take a bite out of culinary history itself, tracing a path from European kitchens to American drive-ins and back around the world.

The story begins long before the modern glazed ring took its final form. The concept of frying dough in hot oil is ancient, found in many cultures from Roman times to medieval Europe. However, the specific lineage that leads to what we recognize today as the doughnut begins with Dutch settlers who brought their traditions to the New World.

The Dutch Origin: The Olykoek

When Dutch immigrants arrived in Manhattan (then New Amsterdam) during the 17th and 18th centuries, they brought with them a recipe for **olykoeks**, which translates literally to "oily cakes." These early doughnuts were exactly that: small, sweetened balls of dough fried in pork fat until golden brown. They were often filled with nuts, fruits, or even cheese, but they lacked the signature hole. The centers, being the thickest part of the dough, often remained undercooked and doughy while the outside became dark. This minor flaw would soon inspire one of the most important innovations in the history of fried dough.

The olykoek was a simple, delicious treat, but it was not yet the icon we know today. It was a dense, often greasy ball of fried dough, a far cry from the light, airy rings of modern times. Yet, this humble beginning laid the groundwork for what was to come, establishing fried dough as a staple in the early American diet.

The 19th Century: The Birth of the Hole

The most defining moment in the history of the doughnut is the invention of the hole. While several stories circulate, the most widely accepted account points to a young American sailor named **Hanson Gregory**. In 1847, at the age of 16, Gregory was aboard a lime-trading ship. Accounts say he was dissatisfied with the greasy, raw center of the traditional fried dough balls. In a moment of inspiration, he is said to have punched a hole in the center of the dough using the lid of a pepper tin (or a ship's wheel spoke, depending on the version). The result was a more evenly cooked pastry that was lighter, crispier, and easier to eat.

While Hanson Gregory is credited with the modern ring shape, his mother, **Elizabeth Gregory**, also played a significant role. She was known for making excellent fried dough, and she often spiced her dough with nutmeg and lemon rind. She was also the first to call them "doughnuts," a term that likely referred to the tiny, walnut-

sized "nuts" of dough that were often fried alongside the larger rings. Elizabeth Gregory is also sometimes credited with the invention of the hole itself, though the general consensus favors her son's nautical ingenuity. Regardless of who deserves the ultimate credit, the addition of the hole revolutionized the pastry. The **hole** was born, and the modern doughnut as a ring-shaped treat was here to stay.

The Doughnut Gains a Name

The word "doughnut" itself has a debated etymology. Some say it derives from the "dough" and "knot," as some early versions were shaped like knots. Others support the "nut" theory, referring to the small, nut-sized fried dough balls. Washington Irving, in his 1809 book "A History of New York," referred to "doughnuts" as a staple of Dutch households in New Amsterdam. By the late 19th century, the spelling "donut" began to appear as a simplified version, but "doughnut" remains the traditional spelling. Hanson Gregory himself later patented the doughnut cutter in 1872, creating a device that would produce the perfect ring, solidifying the shape for generations to come.

The 20th Century: Doughnuts Go to War and Mainstream

The early 20th century saw the doughnut transition from a home-baked treat to a mass-produced commodity, and the catalyst for this shift was World War I. In 1917, the **Salvation Army** sent volunteers to the front lines in France to provide comfort and food to the homesick American soldiers. Among the volunteers were a group of women often called "doughnut lassies," led by Ensign Margaret Sheldon and Adjutant Helen Purviance. They prepared fresh doughnuts for the soldiers, using a makeshift kitchen and often frying doughnuts in soldiers' helmets. The doughnut became a powerful symbol of home, comfort, and care. The soldiers would return home with a deep love for the pastry, creating a huge demand.

The Doughnut Machine Revolution

This massive demand could not be satisfied by hand-rolling and frying. The solution came from a Russian-born immigrant named **Adolph Levitt**. In 1920, Levitt invented the first successful automatic doughnut machine. This remarkable device could mix, cut, fry, flip, and dispense perfectly cooked doughnuts at an astonishing rate. It was a true marvel of the machine age, and it was displayed at the 1934 World's Fair as the "World's Most Perfect Food." The machine allowed doughnut shops to produce hundreds of doughnuts per hour, making them affordable and accessible to everyone. The doughnut was no longer a home-cooked specialty; it was a modern, mass-produced marvel.

The Rise of National Chains

The automatic doughnut machine paved the way for the rise of national doughnut chains. Two names dominate this era: **Dunkin' Donuts** and **Krispy Kreme**.

- Krispy Kreme began in 1937 when Vernon Rudolph bought a secret yeast-raised doughnut recipe from a New Orleans chef and opened a shop in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He started selling to local grocery stores, but the smell of fresh, hot doughnuts was so irresistible that he cut a hole in the wall to sell directly to passersby. The "Hot Now" sign that signals warm, fresh doughnuts is a legendary part of the brand's allure.
- Dunkin' Donuts was founded by William Rosenberg in 1950 in Quincy, Massachusetts. Originally called "Open Kettle," Rosenberg renamed it to "Dunkin' Donuts" in 1950. He focused on serving a wide variety of doughnuts alongside coffee, creating a convenient, quick-service experience that became a cornerstone of American suburban culture. The brand's focus on efficiency and a huge selection of over 50 varieties made it a national powerhouse.

These two chains, along with countless independent shops, turned the doughnut into a staple of American life. It was the perfect breakfast for commuters, a quick office snack, and a beloved weekend treat.

The Doughnut in Popular Culture

By the mid-20th century, the doughnut had firmly rooted itself in American popular culture. It became a favorite Simpson, who carried on the pink, frosted, tablow-sprinkled doughnut is a running gag on *The Simpsons*. The doughnut also became synonymous with police officers, often portrayed as the quintessential cop snack with a cup of coffee. It appeared in classic films, from *It's a Wonderful Life* to *L.A. Confidential*. The doughnut was no longer just a food; it was a symbol of comfort, routine, and simple pleasure.

The cultural cachet of the doughnut also became a powerful tool for marketing and branding. **National Doughnut Day**, celebrated on the first Friday of June, was established by the Salvation Army in 1938 to honor the doughnut lassies of WWI. It has since evolved into a day of celebration and free doughnuts, further cementing the pastry's place in the public heart.

The Modern Renaissance: Artisanal and Global

In the 21st century, the doughnut experienced a remarkable renaissance. The rise of gourmet and artisanal food trends, driven by social media and celebrity chefs, transformed the humble doughnut into a blank canvas for culinary creativity. A new wave of "boutique" doughnut shops emerged, offering flavors that would have been unthinkable a generation ago.

- Gourmet Flavors: Bacon-maple bars, matcha green tea glazed, salted caramel, lavender-honey, and even savory options like chorizo and cheddar began appearing on menus.
- Unique Shapes and Sizes: Doughnuts were compressed into cronuts (a croissant-doughnut hybrid), stuffed with ice cream, or served as towering creations with entire cakes on top.
- Social Media Appeal: The visually stunning nature of artisanal doughnuts, with their vibrant glazes and impossible toppings, made them perfect for Instagram and other visual platforms. A beautifully crafted doughnut was as much a photo opportunity as it was a snack.

This trend was not limited to the United States. The doughnut has gone truly global. In Japan, you can find matcha-filled and mochi-based doughnuts. In Australia, a popular chain called "Doughnut Time" fueled a national obsession. In Canada, the "Timbit" (doughnut hole) is a national treasure. The doughnut has adapted to local palates while maintaining its core identity as a fried, sweet treat. The globalization of the doughnut has also led to fascinating cross-cultural fusions, such as the **Korean doughnut** (twisted and often filled with red bean paste or cream cheese) and the Mexican **churro-donut** hybrid.

The Science of the Perfect Doughnut

Part of the modern love for the doughnut is the ongoing quest for perfection. The science of the perfect doughnut involves a delicate balance of ingredients and technique. The temperature of the oil is critical: too hot, and the outside burns while the inside remains raw; too cool, and the dough absorbs too much grease. The dough itself can be either **yeast-raised** (like Krispy Kreme's classic glazed), which is light and airy, or **cake-based**(like Dunkin' Donuts' traditional varieties), which is denser and sweeter. The glaze, usually a simple mixture of powdered sugar and milk, can be flavored in countless ways. The modern doughnut artisan is part baker, part chemist, and part artist, constantly pushing the boundaries of what is possible within the ring.

Conclusion: The Enduring Appeal of the Doughnut

From the oily cakes of early Dutch settlers to the glittering, unicorn-themed creations of today, the doughnut has traveled an extraordinary path. It began as a practical solution to an undercooked center, became a symbol of home for soldiers in a foreign land, was perfected by the machines of the industrial age, and has been reborn as a canvas for culinary art in the modern era. The history of the doughnut is a testament to human creativity, adaptability, and our universal love for simple, delicious pleasures.

Its enduring appeal lies in its perfect

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