

FUNNEL CAKE ADVENTURES

By David "Sumoflam" Kravetz

It all started with a tweet from @AceWeekly. (Translation: It all started with a Twitter message from the editor of Ace Weekly.) Then came more tweets about #Funnelcakeseason disappointments. There were no Funnel Cakes in Lexington on Mother's Day.

I started looking for Funnel Cakes to appease Ace's palate along with the others.

Next came the Gardenside Fair. Turned out there were Funnel Cakes there, but not everyone could attend.

Then plans were laid to hit the annual St. Elizabeth Ann-Seton Country Fair at the big church a block from my house. That's when I thought "Hmm, another opportunity to do a photo essay on something everyone else overlooks." So, I volunteered to be there with camera in hand to get the first Funnel Cake bite of the season.

As everyone who attends a fair or a carnival knows, the food sold in those little stands is half the fun of going (the other half being the rides). The gyros, the sausages, the blooming onions, the corn dogs, the cotton candy and yes, the Funnel Cakes, among a growing list of absolutely unhealthy but joyful goodies.

Most people get their Funnel Cakes without thinking a bit about where they came from and why they are so-called "fair fare." But, I set out to get the inside scoop on things.

According to my research, the actual Funnel Cake that we know and love was created by the Pennsylvania Dutch in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. Called Drechter Kuche (yes, that is German because the Pennsylvania Dutch are actually the "Pennsylvania Deutsch"). The vintage recipe from the "Pennsylvania Dutch Cooking" cookbook is printed below.

During the late 1800s and into the early 20th century, the Pennsylvania Dutch folk would

have these for special harvest celebrations. They were a treat and not a normal part of everyday fare. But, as tourism increased, the Drechter Kuche were served in cafes and restaurants in the area and many tourists, mainly in the Midwest, carried this concept back with them.

But the history of "fried dough" foods actually goes way back into European history. In Finland they enjoy tippaleipä which looks very similar to Funnel Cakes.

Ingredients

3 eggs
2 cups milk
1/4 cup sugar
3 to 4 cups flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons baking powder

Instructions

Beat eggs and add sugar and milk. Sift half the flour, salt and baking powder together and add to milk and egg mixture. Beat the batter smooth and add only as much more flour as needed. Batter should be thin enough to run thru a funnel. Drop from funnel into deep, hot fat (375° f). Spirals and endless intricate shapes can be made by swirling and criss-crossing while controlling the funnel spout with a finger. Serve hot with molasses, tart jelly, jam or sprinkle with powdered sugar. ■



The history of tippaleipä goes back to the 1700s. German recipes for Drechter Kuche go back to 1879.



Finnish tippaleipä

These treats are typically unleavened (don't use yeast). But attendance at fairs and carnivals can also bring out the leavened fried breads such as "elephant ears" in the US and "beaver tails" in Canada. Other similar snacks would include "Fry Bread" as found on the Navajo Indian Reservation in Arizona, zepole in Italian areas and sopapillas as found in New Mexico and Texas. At fairs in Arizona you can get savory Navajo Tacos, fried bread covered with refried bean and taco fixings, etc.

But back to St. Elizabeth Ann-Seton. I had already done some early scouting and transmitted photos of the Funnel Cake stand on the premises.

I met Susan Chafin and her husband. They are from New Port Richey, Florida and have run "fair fare" stands for over 30 years. In all of these years they had never once been interviewed or asked about their Funnel Cake business. This was a first.

In the past, they had operated pizza stands, taco stands, BBQ stands, and others. They have been doing Funnel Cakes since the 1970s and currently operate three stands out of their Florida base and enjoy the travel and the fun. Their children operate the other two. The Chafins travel with the fairs from May to October and pull their stand with them. They stay in a travel trailer during their tours.

I asked Susan how many Funnel Cakes they sell a year and she had no idea. But, she did agree that they sell thousands every year.

Accompanying Susan and her husband were three other individuals. Two were from Florida and one was from Somerset, KY. They put in the hours, getting in at about 10:30am for a 12 noon start. Since they make the Funnel Cakes as they are ordered, they do need to premix their dough and have plenty on hand. By evening time they are pumping out hot Funnel Cakes by the dozens, working in a human conveyance system. Susan's husband drops the dough through the funnel



and into the oil and cooks them. Susan grabs the finished product and stacks it near the sales windows where the others put on the toppings ... mainly powdered sugar, but also honey, and even chocolate sauce.



Susan Chafin

Ace readers/writers/and editors gathered for the official "first bite of the season." . Needless to say, all were happy (and relieved) to finally have fresh, warm, sugary Funnel Cakes ... even me. ■



"I'll take mine with chocolate sauce, thank you."

Other Lexington Summer opportunities for funnel cakes typically include: July 4 festival; Lions Bluegrass Fair on Masterson Station; Woodland Arts Fair; and sometimes Oktoberfest. Always check with the organizers first.

Hoodwinked again?! #funnelcakefail

It was a sad day when there were no funnel cakes in Lexington for Mother' Day, despite a map outlining their prospective location, posted to Ace's Facebook page the week before.

First, torch-wielding villagers had to be assembled. Second, everyone wanted to know if Mayor Newberry and CentrePointe were somehow to blame for this debacle? (No evidence suggests they were.)

The Readers had to be allowed to grieve.

1. Denial

There must be funnel cakes. Maybe they've just moved them?

2. Anger

Where's our motherfu...nnel cakes?!

3. Bargaining

What do we want?!

Funnel cakes!

When do we want 'em?!

NOW!

Look, just give us the funnel cakes and nobody has to get hurt.

4. Depression

Sigh....

Time to take to our collective beds.

5. Acceptance

Ace will just make our OWN funnel cake. Maybe the Biggest Funnel Cake in the World. ■

—from the Ace Blog