

The Twisted Story of the Pretzel

The Catholic Church played a leading role in the early history of the pretzel. Pretzels, made of a simple mixture of water, flour and salt, were an ideal food to consume during Lent, when all types of meat, dairy and eggs were prohibited.

The first pretzels were baked as a soft, squishy bread, like the soft pretzels of today. The popularity of these twisty treats spread across Europe during the Middle Ages. Seen as a symbol of good luck, prosperity and spiritual fulfillment, pretzels were also commonly distributed to the poor, as a way of providing them with both spiritual and literal sustenance.

Pretzels—or those who made them—took a particularly dramatic turn in the spotlight in 1510, when Ottoman Turks attempted to invade Vienna, Austria, by digging tunnels underneath the city's walls. Monks baking pretzels in the basement of a monastery heard the enemy's progress and alerted the rest of the city, then helped defeat the Turkish attack. As a reward, the Austrian emperor gave the pretzel bakers their own coat of arms.

When did pretzels make their way to America? German immigrants certainly brought pretzels with them when they began settling in Pennsylvania around 1710. In 1861, Julius Sturgis founded the first commercial pretzel bakery in the town of Lititz in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Sturgis also claimed credit for developing the first hard pretzels—or at least, for being the first to intentionally bake hard pretzels (rather than leave the soft ones in the oven too long by accident). The crispy snacks lasted longer in an airtight container, allowing them to be sold further away from the bakery itself and to stay on shelves longer. Eventually, hard pretzels would come to be arguably even more popular than their soft counterparts.

Until the 1930s, pretzels were still manufactured by hand. But in 1935, the Reading Pretzel Machinery Company introduced the first automated pretzel maker, which enabled bakers to put out some 245 pretzels per minute, compared with the 40 per minute an individual worker could make by hand.

Today, Pennsylvania remains the American pretzel-making capital, as a full 80 percent of U.S.-made pretzels come from the Keystone State.

