

July 4, 2007

The Best Chip? The First One Out of the Bag

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

WHY would a man with miles of ocean shoreline to explore spend part of his vacation studying potato chips?

Jack Pretre, who was driving through Massachusetts in June, gave up the beach to spend a morning touring the Cape Cod Potato Chips factory in Hyannis. Granted, it was a rainy day. But still. What was he doing inside, watching a crew of young locals armed with garden rakes pull sliced potatoes through a steel vat bubbling with canola oil?

His answer was as simple as the magical combination of potato, hot fat and salt. “I love chips,” he said.

There is a little bit of Mr. Pretre in most of us. The humble, affordable potato chip engenders a special kind of loyalty among Americans. That devotion is most evident on the Fourth of July and Memorial Day, the biggest chip-eating days of the year. (The winner often depends on whether Independence Day falls near a weekend.)

For people who prefer to crunch numbers, potato chips generate more than \$6.3 billion in sales a year. Almost two-thirds of Americans have a bag in the cupboard right now, according to the NPD Group, a market research firm. Forty-six percent of Americans will eat chips in the next two weeks. Compare that with the poor tortilla chip, which will be consumed by only 27 percent of the nation in the same period.

There is just something about the potato chip that beckons, a fact confirmed last week when members of the Dining section spent three days tasting them. Keep a few dozen bags on your desk and suddenly everyone’s your new best friend.

But who can blame the chip hound? Opening a fresh bag of chips is a deceptively simple wonder. There is such promise riding on the rush of potato-y air. The crunch of that first salty chip, crisp and unblemished by moisture and oxygen, is one of life’s most underrated great food moments.

Jim Leff, who helped start the food-obsessive Web site [chowhound.com](#), fried his first chip at age 9. He figures he has tasted more than 400 chips, and he has written extensively on his methodology and results.

“Even mediocre potato chips are pretty good,” he said. His favorite is a brand seldom seen outside of Hawaii, the Original Maui Kitch’n Cook’d potato chips. The large mahogany chips are delicious, but getting a bag requires sending a check and hoping the family that makes them has extra chips to ship off the island.

Despite such glorious examples of the genre, the ubiquity of the chip works against it, Mr. Leff believes. The same is true of the corn flake, another food he adores.

“They’re so delicious when you’re eating them, but then you forget about them right after you’re done,” he said. “Trees are the same way. Trees are just really, really beautiful, but no one looks at them.”

Although several cultures have their own crisp, starchy chip, the potato chip began as an upstate New York specialty. In the mid-1800s fried potatoes were on menus in the resorts around Saratoga Springs. One day in 1853 a customer at Carey B. Moon’s Lake House complained that the potatoes were soggy and tasteless. The cook, George Speck Crum, became angry and sent out extra-salty, thinly sliced potatoes so crisply fried they crunched. That’s one story.

Mary Ann Fitzgerald, the Saratoga Springs historian, who last year starred in a German public television special on the potato chip, said another version of the story was floating around. This one involved the chef’s sister, Catherine Speck Adkins Wicks, who was frying doughnuts and slicing potatoes at the same time. A slice fell into the fat and the chip was born.

“What do I really think is the truth?” she said. “I think that there are more people involved than we realize. But this story comes down to us through oral history. There were no cameras recording it. So as much as I would like Kate to be the winner, it does sound like something George would have done.”

Regardless, picking up a paper cone of chips became a regular part of outings to the recreation and resort areas near what is now Saratoga Springs. Word spread, and over the next 80 years people all over the country began making potato chips. Perhaps no other common food possessed so many regional identities.

Change came in the 1920s with the invention of the mechanical potato peeler and the continuous fryer, whose conveyors and paddles moved potato slices through a river of hot oil. In the 1930s Herman Lay, a snack salesman from Nashville, turned his attention to potato chips. A decade later his company was making them on a mass-market scale and producing the first potato chip commercials for television. The next thing you know, Frito-Lay is contracting with growers for 3.2 billion chipping potatoes a year and people in 40 countries are buying versions of Lay’s.

But the original style, making batches in vats of hot oil, was not to be denied. In the 1980s, riding a wave of renewed interest in handcrafted regional American food, a few artisans gave new life to the kettle-style chip. Among the first of the genre were Cape Cod in Massachusetts, Tim’s Cascade in the Northwest, Zapp’s in Louisiana and the aptly named Kettle Brand in Oregon.

The kettle chip requires the same, low-moisture, low-sugar chipping potato as a conventional chip, which some call a picnic chip, but it is sliced more thickly and the slices are not rinsed, two moves that keep more starch on the surface. That starch, the slightly thicker cut and a lower oil temperature give the chip a serious crunch. The style is called hard-bite. Since 2004, hard-bites have been far and away the fastest growing potato chip category.

One new fan is Mr. Pretre, the retiree from Hernando, Fla., who toured the chip-making facility on his vacation. After eating sample bags of Cape Cods, he became something of a convert. But the kettle-style chips did not compare to his beloved Gibble’s, a potato chip fried in lard. He gets them from a neighbor in

Florida, who gets them from a small chipper in Chambersburg, Pa.

In such lard-happy parts of that state, the rush to trans fat-free oils, like sunflower and canola, was met with a shrug. Lard has a tiny amount of naturally occurring trans fat, but is free of the harmful trans fat that comes from partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. Still, lard can have more than twice the saturated fat.

In the Dining section's tasting, four of the brands sampled were made with lard, and all four had a heavy piggish flavor that flattened the potato taste. "You get very local tastes," said Jeremy Selwyn, a software engineer in Cambridge, Mass., who runs taquitos.net, a Web site for snacking enthusiasts. "You go to parts of Pennsylvania where everything is fried in lard and they hate a cottonseed chip. You take those lard chips somewhere else and they will think they are completely disgusting."

Oils laden with trans fat are even celebrated at some regional chippers. Jays Foods, an 80-year-old company in Chicago, uses trans fat-free corn oil for most chips, but reserves partially hydrogenated oil for a kettle-style chip labeled "old-fashioned."

"That's the taste I remember growing up with," said John Weller, the Jays Foods plant manager, who talks about chips with trans fat the way a bootlegger might describe a favorite batch of hooch.

Although chips are deceptively plain, they are powerful reminders of childhoods and hometowns. That's why families send soldiers in Iraq their favorite local chips in care packages. Grow up in Detroit? It's all about Better Made and a ginger soda pop called Vernors. In Ohio people claim Mike-sell's chips as a birthright.

Jean Fuller is 71 and lives in Dallas with her husband, Dale. Anyone who visits from Iowa, her home state, must arrive with a bag or eight of Sterzing's, which markets itself as the maker of "the most popular potato chips in southeast Iowa." Cartons arrive for Christmas. Mr. Fuller got a supply for Father's Day.

Mrs. Fuller can't describe why the flavor compels her so. Sterzing's are just a pleasantly salty, old-fashioned picnic-style chip with a flavor that reminds her of home.

But of course, there is the practical application. "My husband likes them with his sandwich for lunch," she said.

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