

In search of an old-fashioned doughnut

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Classic diner, classic doughnut

But I didn't find what I was looking for until I followed a recommendation from Bambi Hoadley of Hyde Park, a devotee of the doughnuts at the Wayside Restaurant on the Barre-Montpelier Road in Berlin.

Hoadley couldn't put her finger on exactly what it is about the Wayside's doughnuts that draws her family on a once a month outing to stock up their freezer with breakfast treats.

"They just taste good," she said. "And they don't leave a filmy greasy layer on your palette like some doughnuts."

The Wayside! Of course. A diner that prides itself on serving Vermont classics, including Thursday night salt-pork-and-gravy, is just the kind of place to find a doughnut from the past.

I ordered a dozen, six plain, six sugared, to be picked up early in the morning by a friend who commutes from Plainfield to Chittenden County.

That this was a different doughnut was clear from the moment I opened the box in a Colchester parking lot.

All the previous plain doughnuts we'd tasted had had rough exteriors, the result of dropping liquid batter into hot oil. These doughnuts had a smooth mahogany surface. On the other hand, unlike batter doughnuts, they had irregular shapes. They had odd bulges. Their center holes looked like a child's wobbly attempt to draw a circle. Inside, the dough was so speckled I thought it might be whole wheat.

My teeth crunched through the crust into an interior much firmer than other doughnuts. Flavor flooded my mouth. The combination of texture and a spice I couldn't name transported me back to the 1950s.

I ate a second. Then I called Brian Zecchinelli, owner of the Wayside with his wife, Karen. Sure enough, these are different doughnuts.

Early each morning, Wayside bakers mix a buttermilk doughnut dough, not a batter. This is not the yeast-raised dough used to make puffy glazed doughnuts. This dough is raised with baking powder and baking soda. It is rolled out and each doughnut is hand cut and individually stretched a bit to enlarge its center hole, hence the irregular shapes. The doughnuts are deep-fried a dozen at a time in canola and corn oil.

And that elusive spicing?

“Mace,” Zecchinelli said. “There’s cinnamon and nutmeg in there, but mace is the kicker, the key ingredient. It is expensive and I can’t explain it, but it is required to give that unique flavor.”

The perfect accompaniment, he said, is a tall glass of cold milk.

Zecchinelli was modest about the recipe. “I don’t think it is anything unique,” he said. “They’re buttermilk doughnuts the way my grandparents made them.” Likely, he said, it is the same recipe the Wayside’s owner used when the restaurant opened in 1918.

“It is an amazing, labor-intensive process,” Zecchinelli said. “The temperature of the oil is critical. There are days when things don’t go right and we have to start over.”

There is one exception to following the old recipe, he added: “The old days of lard are long gone. We are using a zero transfat cooking oil.”

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