A donut (or doughnut) is a fried dough confectionery or dessert food. Sweet, delicious, and able to be eaten on the go, they are one of the most popular foods of all time. Over 10 billion donuts are now made (and consumed) in the US each year. There are more donut shops per capita in Canada than anywhere else in the world. Canadians eat more donuts than any other nation’s citizens, making it Canada’s unofficial national snack.

The origin of the donut itself is heavily debated. Frying dough transcends cultural boundaries. There is evidence that frying various forms of dough occurred between 8000 and 5500 BC, after the invention of pottery allowed for oil to be heated in pots. The Japanese truly refined the art of deep-frying, from where it went to China around 600-700 BC.

Perhaps the earliest written mention of fried dough is in the Bible. Leviticus 7:12 specifies that “cakes mingled with oil, of fine flour, fried” is an offering worthy of God. In ancient Greece and Rome, cooks would fry strips of pastry dough and coat them with honey or fish sauce for eating. A reference to a honey glazed sweet made from dough fried in olive oil comes from Athenaeus in the 3rd century CE. Archaeologists believe that prehistoric American Indians in the Southwestern US also had a fried cake.

Fried pastries became very popular in Germany, the Netherlands, and England during the 1400s. As fat and oil were costly, frying indicated a party. In medieval Europe, fried dough treats were eaten during Carnival, the feast period before the 40 days of Lent. Medieval Arabs also had similar fried dough sweets they would dip in sugary syrup. Then, between the 1440s and 1530s, the Portuguese were largely responsible for the worldwide spreading of Oriental techniques of deep-frying dough, under the flag of their discovery and colonizing activities.

Modern donuts are generally traced back to the Dutch olykoek (oil(y) cake). A recipe for olykoek, calling for frying dough balls filled with a mixture of almonds, raisins, chopped apples, and cinnamon, was published in 1667 in the Dutch cookbook The Sensible Cook. Dutch settlers to New Amsterdam (early New York) brought these to America in the 17th century.

The word origin is also a matter of debate. The word ‘doughnut’ seems to have originated in Hertfordshire in northeastern England around 1750, when the first known recipe calling it a doughnut appeared in print in The Country Housewife’s Family Companion. Residents of Hertfordshire would make donuts for Fat Tuesday, while the rest of England celebrated Carnival by making pancakes. Immigrants from Hertfordshire and surrounding areas were among the first to colonize New England, bringing the recipe with them. Other early mentions of doughnuts were in the 1803 English cookbook The Frugal Housewife, by Sussannah Carter, which has an appendix of American recipes and in Washington Irving’s 1809 publication, A History of New York.

As for the meaning of the word, some believe it refers to the nuts that were often added to the dough to add flavor, or in the center of the dough as that part seldom cooked properly. Another possibility is that the name is related to the shape; the dough was often tied in a knot, and ‘dough knot’ evolved into ‘doughnut.’ The simplified, shortened Americanized spelling of “donut” has been around since at least the late-19th century, but it really caught on in the late 20th century. French airy fried dough fritters are even called pets de nonne, which translates to “nun’s farts.”

Today, donuts come in a wide variety of toppings, centers, and decorations. After frying, ring donuts are often topped. Yeast donuts are usually covered with a glaze or icing. Cake donuts can be glazed, covered with powdered sugar, covered with cinnamon and sugar, or iced (top side only). Filled donuts are flattened spheres injected with cream, custard, fruit jelly, or other sweet filling, and often dipped into powdered sugar or topped with frosting. Iced donuts can be sprinkled with coconut, chopped or sliced nuts, sprinkles, or other edibles.
According to legend, the ring-shaped donut was invented in 1847 by Hanson Crockett Gregory, a 16-year-old American ship captain who worked aboard a lime trading ship. His mother Elizabeth used his ship’s spice cargo of cinnamon, nutmeg, and lemon rind to make tasty fried dough treats for the crew. She stuffed hazelnuts and walnuts in the center to compensate for how they would not cook evenly through to the center. One version of the story states that Gregory was unhappy with the greasiness of donuts twisted into various shapes and with the raw center of regular donuts, so he punched a hole in the center of the dough with the ship’s tin pepper box so that the dough could fry evenly. Another version says that in a storm, he needed both hands to steer the ship, so he jammed one of his mother’s treats onto a spoke of the wheel. Contradicting this common origin legend, however, is the 1846 appearance of a recipe for a ring-shaped donut in _The Skillful Housewife’s Book_ by Mrs. L.G. Abell.

By the mid-19th century, the donut was considered a thoroughly American food and had the look and taste of today’s treats. Donuts were traditionally yeast-risen and time-consuming to produce, but in 1829, chemical leavening agents like pearlash (a precursor to baking powder) became widely available. This enabled the American invention of the faster, chemically raised cake donuts and easier making of donuts in homes. By 1870, donut cutters shaped with two concentric circles began to appear in home shopping catalogs. The American fervor for donuts and funnel cakes was further solidified when they became fashionable at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair.

Donuts became so popular, and such an icon of America, that they were given, along with blankets, by the Salvation Army to immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. This was, literally, their first taste of America. During World War I, American Salvation Army volunteers (‘Doughnut Lassies’ or ‘Doughnut Girls’) would bring donuts and coffee to soldiers in the trenches of France to cheer them up and remind them of home. This practice continued, with the Red Cross joining in, from World War II (‘Lassies’ then called ‘Dollies’) and through the Vietnam War.

In New York City, Russian-born immigrant Adolph Levitt created the first automated donut machine in 1921. His Wonderful Almost Human Automatic Doughnut Machine churned out 80 dozen donuts an hour, fresh from the fryer and ready to eat. By 1925, the machine was earning him $25 million a year, as it was a fixture in bakeries across the country. The machine-made donut was a hit of the 1933-34 Chicago World’s Fair, and donuts were given the lofty title “Hit Food of the Century of Progress.” Because the automated machines made donuts quickly, they were fresh and cheap and became a staple of the working class during the Depression. They were often sold with a paper that read “As you go through life make this your goal: Watch the doughnut, not the hole.”
In the 1930s, the Doughnut Corporation of America established the National Dunking Association to increase consumption and promote dunking donuts in the beverage of your choice. Even though the idea of dunking donuts was considered déclassé (Emily Post said it was not proper, then changed her mind), people across the country went wild for it. In 1937, a popular song proclaimed that you can live on donuts and coffee if “you’re in love.”


The stereotype of the donut-loving police officer is well established. It originates from the fact that cops work odd hours, and in the years after World War II, donut shops were among the few establishments open late or through the night. Officers would stop by to do paperwork and have a snack. A reciprocal relationship developed as the shop owners welcomed the police presence and protection.

The largest sized donut ever made was done at Winchell’s Donut House in Pasadena, CA in 1998; it was 95 feet wide and weighed 5,000 pounds. The largest in mass was made by Donut King in December 2007 to celebrate the release of The Simpsons Movie on DVD. It was made from over 90,000 donuts, over half a ton of pink icing and 66 pounds of sprinkles; totaling over 18 feet in diameter and 3.5 tons in weight. The largest box of donuts ever made was in Kuwait on May 30, 2009; it was a Krispy Kreme box weighing 297 pounds, 10 ounces which contained 2,700 donuts. The box was 19’4” by 13’5” and 2’10” deep.

The world’s most expensive donut was made by Krispy Kreme in the UK as a part of a 2014 Children’s Trust charity event. The $1,400 decadence was decorated with a gold dusted Belgian flower, gilded leaves, and edible diamonds.

National Donut Day is celebrated annually in the US on the first Friday of June each year. It succeeds a 1938 donut event created by The Salvation Army in Chicago to honor its members who served donuts to soldiers during World War I and to raise money to help those in need during the Depression. National Donut Appreciation Day is celebrated annually on November 5.
### Fried Dough from Around the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>You tiao</td>
<td>A twisted piece of eggy deep-fried dough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Africa</td>
<td>Akara</td>
<td>Fried dough made of pea flour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda/Tanzania</td>
<td>Mendazi</td>
<td>Deep-fried ball or square of flour, water, salt and sugar.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Chruściki</td>
<td>Crispy, fried flat dough sprinkled with confectioner’s sugar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indians</td>
<td>Bannock/fry bread</td>
<td>A flat piece of deep-fried dough found in American Indian cultures across North America.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Churros</td>
<td>A thin colander of deep-fried dough lined with ridges owing to it being piped out of a star-shaped bag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Sata andagi</td>
<td>A ball-shaped deep-fried dough, similar to a donut but without the hole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Touton</td>
<td>Leftover bits of bread dough, deep-fried, a staple in Newfoundland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Namak pare</td>
<td>Deep-fried ribbons of pastry. Often savory, flavored with cumin seeds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia and Central Asia</td>
<td>Boortsog</td>
<td>A sweet, deep-fried mound of dough.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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