

Food Detective: Perfecting Paczki

By David Hammond

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If you eat jelly doughnuts, you've eaten something like paczki (pronounced poh-nch-key). The Polish pastry is traditionally enjoyed on Fat Thursday (tomorrow!), a few days before Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras - an indulgent snack before a period of abstinence. Dobra Bielinski owns and operates Delightful Pastries, a Polish-influenced bakery with three locations - 5927 W. Lawrence, 1710 N. Wells and at the Chicago French Market in the Loop.

I've had her paczki on several occasions - they're fabulous - and so I asked Bielinski to describe the perfect paczek (pronounced poh-n-check, the singular form of paczki).

"The perfect paczek has just the right ratio of dough to jelly: 4 to 1," she says. "The dough is not too sweet and has body so that it doesn't collapse into a pancake with one bite. After frying, it has a gorgeous hazelnut color, not the pale gold of a Krispy Kreme. The doughnut should be subtly flavored with orange and lemon oil."

Unlike regular doughnut dough, paczki dough is cut into big pieces, then put on a screen to rise for a while - but not too long - before frying.

If the dough is allowed to rise for an extended period of time, Bielinski warns, "The paczki collapse when you fry them or get stuck to the frying screen." She also cautions that the oil must be kept at 375 degrees, or "the paczki will absorb the oil and become greasy."

Paczki are glazed right out of the fryer. Once they cool off, "we fill them with, for instance, rose petal jelly," she says.

Bielinski knows my weakness. Rose petal jelly is my favorite filling, somewhat flowery but also sweet for an excellent contrast to the not-so-sweet dough.

Though she's too modest to say so, one secret to Bielinski's paczki is her high-quality fillings. Going cheap on the filling is how potentially great paczki slip to mediocrity.

Here's how Bielinski makes her paczki even better: She likes to slice a paczek like a bagel and "smear one half with powidla (plum butter), and put a bunch of whipped cream and chopped fresh strawberries on the other half. I eat it like a sandwich."

Like most bakers or chefs, Bielinski gets cagey when I ask about her recipe for paczki. "My mom makes the paczki dough," she says. "The original recipe comes from Warsaw. She keeps the recipe to herself."

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