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# Hungry for Home

GOING THE DISTANCE FOR A TASTE OF IOWA

BY RENEE BRINCKS

**T**he day I opened my California mailbox and found a package of Dutch Letters from Pella's Jaarsma Bakery, I nearly kissed my mailman.

A pastry that perfect is impossible to re-create, and it certainly doesn't exist in any West Coast sweet shop I've visited. Even if a bakery here made the twisty treat as well as the Jaarsma crew does, something would be missing. Dutch letters, after all, spell Pella — each bite brings about a sugar rush mixed with memories of tulips in the town square, bonfires at Red Rock, and Central College football games.

Iowa cuisine may not regularly fill the pages of major culinary magazines. Still, our stomachs and our spirits insist on the nourishment of venerable favorites. Headed across western highways on a chilly winter morning? Warm up with loaded hash browns at the Otho Pub. Missing Grandma's fresh berry desserts? A slice of cherry pie from Indianola's Crouse Cafe just might serve as substitute. Craving a classic Iowa burger? One gigantic, juicy Gunderburger is enough to halt your hunger — and, at that size, the hunger of your three closest friends.

For Iowa residents, that taco pizza from Happy Joe's is just a short drive away. Iowa expatriates, however, sometimes go to extremes to enjoy their favorite Hawkeye State foods.

Take one friend of mine, who went to college in Iowa and now lives in Oregon. On a recent summer visit, he emptied clothes from his carry-on suitcase and stuffed it full of sweet corn straight from the stalk. When

he arrived at the airport, the kernel-crammed bag weighed in at 55 pounds. Still, he carted it through his connecting airport and shared it with friends upon arrival in Oregon.

Was it worth the effort? Definitely, he affirms. And he's timing future trips to coincide with next summer's sweet corn harvest.

He is not alone.

Acquaintances from Atlanta to San Diego, Denver to Washington, D.C., swear Iowa corn is tastier than that of any other state — whether in the form of corn chowder, as one Forest City family makes whenever another of my friends is home, or fresh from the field and sold off the back of a truck. Local growers even peddle the coveted corn on eBay. Those ordering Iowa's bountiful bushels live as far away as Alaska and Hawaii.

Looking for a snack to go with the sweet corn? Try Sterzing's Potato Chips, made daily from sliced, slow-cooked potatoes in Burlington.

Customers have been crunching Sterzing's since 1930. The company started sending bags overseas when local servicemen headed to the Vietnam War. Since then, Sterzing's shipments have reached destinations across the U.S., Europe, the Middle East, and Egypt.

Closer to home, Sterzing's fans simply stock up, as does my former roommate who buys a bag when she goes home to Fort Madison. Her aunt, now living in Illinois, is even more enthusiastic. She purchases the chips by the case and freezes them so she can nibble whenever she pleases.

With all these Iowa indulgences to enjoy, my real vice is still ice cream. I sampled scoops while living in Spain, Alaska, Australia, and now California, but I believe Decorah's Whippy Dip serves the best.

The 1950s-style stand is only open when the snow melts, and it stays

busy all summer. Kids crave the cool cream following a splash at the swimming pool. After evening baseball games, lines are long with players and parents. It's a popular stop for visitors, and every area teenager has headed there on at least one first date.

Of course, we all have a favorite Whippy Dip delight. Mine is the Peanut Butter Cup Tornado, and I plan at least one trip home each summer so I can savor the smooth ice cream and sugar-dipped candy chunks. (Sorry, Mom and Dad, if you thought I was coming home to visit you.) The sweet treat costs me a few dollars plus a cross-country plane ticket, but it's worth every cent.

I might time my Iowa trips differently, if only someone could find a way to mail a side of Whippy Dip with my Dutch Letters.

If that ever happens, my mailman is getting a smooch for sure. ♣

— Renee Brincks ([www.reneebrincks.com](http://www.reneebrincks.com)) is a freelance writer who lives in Monterey, California, but her heart — and palate — remain in her native Iowa.

We encourage readers to share their own essays on Iowa life — past experience, present insight, future vision. Last Word submissions of original material should run approximately 900 words and may be accompanied by photos. Email to [editor@iowan.com](mailto:editor@iowan.com) or mail to *The Iowan*, 218 6th Avenue, Suite 610, Des Moines, IA 50309. Due to large volume, we are unable to return submitted material. *The Iowan* pays \$100 following publication.

