

"The Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies" Transcript

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

I knew, you know, from growing up in Baltimore that, you know, these cookies are just kinda its, I mean, there's no state cookie per se, but if you know if you were to ask somebody what which cookie was the state cookie, you know, it would be the Berger Cookie, for sure.

Local Farey Tales music begins

NORA VETTER

Welcome to Local Farey Tales. I'm your narrator, Nora Vetter. What IS a local farey tale? It's the story of a fare, f-a-r-e, that can only be found in certain regions, states, cities and so on... Each tale will be told with the help of the voices that know it well; historians, creators, servers, festival organizers, super fans, etc.

Today's featured fare...Berger Cookies. You just heard Ross Nochumowitz, owner of Baltimore in a Box speak about their regional impact. Now let's meet the rest of our Berger Cookie tale-tellers...

Tale-Tellers Intro

My name is Joseph Able, Membership and Development Manager at the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance; Charlie DeBaufre, I'm the President of DeBaufre Bakeries, which manufactures Berger Cookies here in Baltimore, Maryland; Rodney Henry, Founder and Owner of Dangerously Delicious; Dean Krimmel, Public Historian Museum Consultant; Ross Nochumowitz, Owner of Baltimore In a Box, I'm Andrew Reiner and you're listening..

DEAN KRIMMEL

...you're listening to the local...

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

...the local farey tale...

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

...local farey tale of Berger Cookies...

RODNEY HENRY

...farey tale of Berger Cookies...

JOSEPH ABLE

...tale of Berger Cookies.

1:50 - Music transition

"The Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies" Transcript

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

I'm Charlie DeBaufre and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies. Most of the local people know it, but every now and again, there'll be a person in Baltimore who hasn't heard of them. And people can't, people are amazed. "What do you mean you've never heard of Berger Cookies? How have you not heard of Berger Cookies?"

ANDREW REINER

I guess it depends on the circle of people you're running with. There are people that will say, "Oh, it's not, they're not Bergers Cookies, regardless of what it says on the package." And some people will say it's Berger Cookies. Some people will make a point of saying kind of like, AHA, so you really don't...you're not in the now on this,

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

Either way, with or without the "s", you're still going to get the same product. Umm, and people just have their preference of how they refer to it.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

It's like Berger Cookies...like, that just sounds weird. Like, what is this supposed to taste like a hamburger, a cheeseburger, like what is that?

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

Well, I think the taste would be described as heavenly by most.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

I've been kind of a lifelong fan and supporter of Berger Cookies, ya know, ever since I was probably eight, nine or ten years old.

DEAN KRIMMEL

I've raised my own kids on Bergers. I have a package right here. Will probably bite into. Umm, I've been an ambassador for Bergers and taken them on trips and businesses and things.

ANDREW REINER

So I'm in College, and the first time I remember having Berger Cookies was with a girlfriend at the time and the place that she had a job, they always had, like a summer work party. And at this work party, they always had a big crab feast. And they would go to this crab house that was down the street from their business. And that's, crab houses in Baltimore are kind of a standard thing, ya know. Like, every neighborhood, every place has its local crab houses. And crab houses are where you go and you get steam blue crabs.

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You sit at long tables covered with brown paper wrapping, and they empty out large buckets, ya know, like small barrels, of these steaming blue crabs. And then everybody just kind of picks from them. A lot of times you drink beer. And so I remember at the end of the crab feast, a couple of people start breaking out packs of Berger Cookies, and I'd heard about them, but I never had them. And what I would learn, I learned that night, and I would learn many times over is that that's a Baltimore tradition. Is that a lot of Baltimoreans at the end of crab feasts is they would break out Berger Cookies as kind of the coup de grâce at the end of the crab feast.

DEAN KRIMMEL

I grew up here and don't remember eating a Berger Cookie until I was probably an adult. Maybe I was in College. So maybe that's one of the reasons some of us are crazy, more crazy in love when you find something later in life you go, "Oh, my God", this speaks to us. And umm, it's just all ours. You know, you don't find it anywhere else. So I think that local pride always comes through.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

You gotta to like chocolate. If you do not like chocolate, you're not going to like my cookie. Uh, it is basically a vanilla wafer, which is the vessel for a mound of chocolate.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

So it's a very soft cookie kind of has, like, a chewiness to it. Uh, you know, a soft, short bread cookie with really rich chocolate fudge kind of caked on top.

RODNEY HENRY

Not like short, like a shortbread cookie but kinda similar to that, but real heavy duty. And that chocolate is like, that fudge is intense.

ANDREW REINER

Some people compare it to a Black and White, which its only like a Black and White in the sense that you've got, like, a dome shaped kind of vanilla, cakey vanilla cookie that you know, instead of having black and white icing thinly coated on top, that's the only similarity is the cookie, because the coating on top is very different.

JOSEPH ABLE

Physically, it kind of looks kind of almost looks like a little black and white hockey puck. You know and it's almost got this texture of that, yeah, just dense and thick.

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ANDREW REINER

What's on top of that dome shaped cakey cookie is a very imperfect, wonderfully, imperfect, giant glob of hardened chocolate kind of frosting cream.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

That's basically the cookie. It's not pretty. You look at it and you go like, "Huh". It's kind of nondescript. But then once you bite it, I got you. You'll love it.

DEAN KRIMMEL

We've left them as gifts, like in hotels, for bar mitzvahs and little packages. So we always put a note on it, "Hey, this is the famous local cookie." Well, it's a cookie. It's an excuse to eat fudge. Do not, just, you know, go slowly. It will be really sweet and do not eat more than two. You can eat one, maybe stop. Don't eat more than two. It's just sweet. It's overpowering. It just fills the mouth with chocolate flavor and sweetness.

RODNEY HENRY

The first time I had it, and I got to tell you, I wasn't super a big fan of it. I thought Berger Cookies were a little too much. And but, you know, then after I had it, it's weird. It's like, you know, when you have something and sometimes it doesn't always connect right off the bat but then you also Jones for it. It's kind of like that. So...

JOSEPH ABLE

It came off as very, almost cloying sweet at first, but then you, you get pretty used to that real quick.

ANDREW REINER

And so Berger Cookies were something that as much as I love the idea of them, because I've always been a sweets person. It took me a while to acclimate because the amount of chocolate kind of cream. It's almost like a frosting on it, like a fudgy frosting. Was so thick and heavy that it just, it was kind of like this kind of overwhelming experience, you know, of just ponderous amounts of like, you know, cocoa and chocolate and sugar just hitting you. Like, in your, it felt like you just getting hit in your face.

DEAN KRIMMEL

I guess the other thing I always say is we would always it ain't subtle. It's like Baltimore. I mean, it just hits you right in the face. Boom. That's it. Simple. Unaffected. Boom. That's it.

JOSEPH ABLE

The cookie itself is actually quite mild in comparison to the chocolate, I think. That's probably, if I had to choose one or the other, I think I would pick the cookie over the chocolate on it.

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ANDREW REINER

Often when you get Berger Cookies, they come out of the pack in two conditions. You get that Berger Cookie and the dome shaped cookie on the bottom almost always is still pretty soft and still fairly moist. But you're going to receive the chocolate in two different states. You see, they're going to be fairly fresh and it's going to be very soft, as if somebody just took a glob of chocolate frosting that's very soft and moist and put it on top. And you can literally just take a finger or your tongue and just take off that soft kind of glob of chocolate frosting. The other condition it comes in is much harder, which I, sometimes, sometimes I actually prefer it that way because it will actually be kind of a, umm, this may sound unappetizing, but it's really not. It may be a little bit more stale, but, but there's a lot you can do with the condition of that more stale kind of frosting that you can't do with the softer version of it. So often with Berger Cookies, it's one or the other you know, when you're getting that topping, it's either very soft, very pliable, or it's going to be harder. And it's gonna have the consistency of, like a cake that has been sitting out for a couple of days.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

Some people do like to freeze the cookies. Some people like them frozen better, umm...

DEAN KRIMMEL

Right, are you in Camp Freezing or Microwaving?

ANDREW REINER

Everybody in Baltimore has, you know, people who grew up with these have great stories about how they eat them. One of my favorites was that I was interviewing a gentleman who was the general manager of a very old school Steakhouse in Baltimore called the Prime Rib. So he shared with me that his wife would take this really small spoon, and I forgot what kind of spoon it was. But she would take a really small spoon and she would just kind of dip it onto the chocolate and just eat the chocolate. One little tiny scoop at a time. She would eat the chocolate. And then other times take all the chocolate off with that little spoon. And then she would put it in a little bowl and put it in the microwave. And then if I remember correctly, once it was melted, she would dip the rest of the cakey wafer cookie into the melted chocolate.

DEAN KRIMMEL

I'm more either straight out of the package. And then when they do get hard, I uh, I microwave, I'm Team Microwave to soften it, and other people say, oh, no, you have to freeze it. I microwave to get it softer, gooey, messy.

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ANDREW REINER

I honestly don't mean this at all to sound contrived, but I really do meet Berger Cookies out of respect the way that I do people. I try to meet them where they are when I open the package. And I mean that in all sincerity, because I thought about this, you know, and this is the way I do it. As I told you before, when you open that cellophane, you're going to be getting that Berger Cookie in either a very fresh state or slightly stale state. And again, even stale, the cookie is still fresh, it's just that the chocolate frosting on top is tricky. You know, it's very idiosyncratic and you're not sure what you're going to get. So when I open up the pack, depending on the state of the cookie, depends on how I'm going to approach, how I'm going to eat it. You know, if the frosting is still very soft on top, I have this way of eating it where I'll kind of sink my top front teeth into the soft icing and gent-, very gently and very kind of umm, consistently pull back on the icing. So like, the first half of it slides off the cookie. And I'll just kind of eat that. And then I'll eat the cookie by itself. And then I'll do the same thing with the second half where I'll take my front two teeth very carefully and slowly kind of slide it off into my mouth because once you get it in your mouth, it melts. I mean, how great is that, right? You never know what you're going to get when you open that pack. It's part of the excitement, you know. And so I open it up. If it's hard, I'll just kind of bite into it and just eat it the way it is like cookie and the cream together. But once in a while, I'll try to do the same thing with my front teeth. If I can get some purchase in the top of the chocolate, if it gets a little bit melted, then I'll try the same thing and get it off. It's always like a challenge because I'm always trying to do it without breaking the cookie, because when it's hard like that, it's easy to break the cookie underneath. So if I do do it the same way, I have to be really careful, make sure it gets a little bit soft. And then I'll try to slide it off without breaking the cookie. So it's kind of like a little challenge to give yourself.

JOSEPH ABLE

When we get them it's basically just dive right in. There's no uh, there's nothing fancy about it. Yeah, open the package and go to town.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

And um, you know, I find them really delicious. Honestly, it's probably my favorite cookie to eat you know, out of really any cookie I've ever had before.

13:06 - Music transition

JOSEPH ABLE

I'm Joseph Able from the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies.

I always assumed that it was a fairly old snack, but honestly, I really didn't know until I started looking into it. It's origins traced all the way back to the late 1800s.

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ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

I mean, I know, I know that the family is from Germany. Um, it was the Berger family, I think that brought it over here and started making the cookies here.

ANDREW REINER

You know, the people who supposedly founded the bakery were these two German brothers that came over to Baltimore in like the early to mid nineteenth century, about 1830.

JOSEPH ABLE

Looking at the census records, German immigrants. They were actually the largest foreign born immigrant group in Baltimore, starting, I think, starting by the at 1780, 1790s and well into the 18 hundreds, they made up the largest contingent of immigrants in the city.

DEAN KRIMMEL

A historian of immigration told me like 30 years ago, that the old idea of melting pot that with German immigration, they weren't Americanized Germans, Germanized America. There were that many. The influence was so massive because of numbers, and it wasn't like it is a monolithic population, but because of the timing of the immigration, these different periods, when they were just massive numbers of Germans 1820 to 30, then 1848, then after unification, and then German Jews, even from the 1851. And it just had a massive influence on culture, on politics and in Baltimore, the statistic that was thrown out, I don't know if it's accurate when the city is half a million people live here by 1901 in four people are either German or German parent culturally culturally, really pretty heavily there's.

JOSEPH ABLE

There's a website. It's called German Marylanders.org. The website has hundreds and hundreds of little short profiles based on census records and city directories and stuff of different Germans and their contributions large and small to the city and the state.

DEAN KRIMMEL

The Berger story as we have come to know it in Baltimore is about a German immigrant named Henry, who moves to the US in 1835 with a brother...

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

Berger. George and Henry Berger back in 1800s, 1835. It's as far back as we can get.

ANDREW REINER

And this was not a really highly successful, well known, established kind of venerable Baltimore bakery.

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I mean, the only reason anybody even knows about these two German brothers is because over the past 40 or 50 years, people have been eating Berger cookies a lot in Baltimore

DEAN KRIMMEL

And Henry is the centerpiece of the story. The company lore goes, he started the bakery, and he had three sons, George, Henry and Otto. The tale is that the sons following in their father's footsteps and become bakers as well. I think what struck me reading it was it's one of those hero classic like tales in the newspaper. They started a long time ago, and they're still doing it, even though it's different owners, same recipe, same hand dipped, same craft, kind of old fashioned way.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

My father used to work for, as he referred to it, "Old Man Russell". And that was the Russell for lack of a better term, Number One. And then his son was Russell Number Two. And then his son were Russell Number Three. At that point, my father and my uncles purchased Bergers that they used to work at. They purchased it. And then I am second generation. My sons are working the third generation. But prior to Russell was actually Berger. So it's been around a while. Stood the test of times.

ANDREW REINER

You know Charles DeBaufre, he's not exactly sure. No one's exactly sure, really when the cookie came into fashion.

JOSEPH ABLE

It seems so decadent like a treat that would be hard to come by for people at the turn of the century or whatever.

ANDREW REINER

When you look at you know, recipe books, early American recipe books. You really don't see cookies being mentioned in cookbooks, you know, until really, I think it was probably the late 19th century, you know, early 20th century, 19th early 20th. So these brothers were not making this cookie right off the bat. This is not something that they brought over from Germany because they really are few, if any, recipes for cookies from that period of time. So I hope you don't mind. I just wanted to kind of add that in. I just thought that was interesting, extra wrinkle historically.

DEAN KRIMMEL

I'm thinking ya know moving into folklore, folkways kind of mentality of like, yeah, there's people who make it and then they take on these, I don't know these, they have a presence that get popular and then people call them different things and then right.

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And then it hits the like, so what the 1953 Advertisement says "Berger Cookies, Baltimore's favorite" was that an attempt to brand it then? Umm, did it need that. It's always a question why people do things at a certain time. Umm is it because it's a wider audience or because nobody else you never even had to call it. Oh yeah, let's have some of your special cookies. Yeah. So everybody knew everybody it. But I don't. So I really yeah. It's just really intriguing, too, for me, because they're so well known and so emblematic. I'm going to get it all like folklore wonky like, there's a reason these guys, they packaged it. They became bigger and better known than others. But God got all these bakeries had. If you look at the directories again, there's hundreds of bakeries, and everybody's cranking out cakes and cookies and other kinds of baked goods so Berger Bakery exists in this ecosystem of many, many different bakers. So if nothing else, we can go, man, these guys survived. And you know, the chocolate cookie. And I know getting hungry aren't we?

ANDREW REINER

The Berger Bakery itself never was wildly successful, never became really well known. All anybody really knows about is the legacy of the Berger cookie. And so, you know, that has been really difficult to even pin down. There's just been so little. And I do remember one of the ancestors of the Berger family. I don't remember who it was, but finding something that he had written something with you know, it really was just a lot of conjecture.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

It's a lot easier now to research, but it wasn't at the time. And I'll be honest with you, I didn't do it. A woman who lived in Maryland was married to a guy named Berger, and she thought it would be absolutely great that if he was related to the original company, the owners. So she did research and found that he wasn't. But she became interested and just started following that. And she's the one that went back 1835.

DEAN KRIMMEL

I read over the years some of the articles in the newspaper about Berger history and accepted it thought, okay, that's fine, that's fine. And now, now I'm starting to look into the origins. Here's what I've been doing. The story. The official story is just a sketch, so I don't go in. I never, I didn't go into this going, oh, I'm gonna debunk something, but I do when I start to look at the origin to do some research, I go well what do we know? And I know it takes a long time to figure things out, but what is documented. And so what I did was I said, okay, well, first off, there's lots of bakers. When we start seeing their names show up, and can I figure out where they are? And if they're selling in the markets based on some of the records from the city directories, which are people think of as kind of a pre phone books, but their listings for people by addresses and used by residents and businesses. Umm are they in the directories? Are they in the census records? Now, when you go into census records, if I go into a census, it's online, 1900 or 1880. Plug in the name Berger, B-E-R-G-E-R.

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Living in Baltimore. You know how many hits I have? 800! So now if I go into a city directory, there might be 35 or 40. So these historical records are always have their limits. But the directories are great because they pinpoint somebody's name and address, like, where are they? And then there's what is the family dynamic with Henry and his sons? And are they advertising in the newspaper or are they in the records of the public markets?

JOSEPH ABLE

Public Markets. Were just gathering places for farmers, fishermen, livestock traders, peddlers, you name it. These were the places where you went. These were the main source of food for the overwhelming majority of Baltimoreans. This is where you went to get fresh food at a time before where reliable refrigeration and preservation and that sort of thing. You wanted to buy your food fresh and get it from the source. There's a little bit of confusion on where the first public market in Baltimore was. Both of them still exist. There's Broadway Market, which is on the east side, which would have been and what was basically the sort of downtown area in the 1780s in Fells Point area. And then on what was then the far west side of downtown today was the Western Precinct Market, which is now known as Lexington Market.

DEAN KRIMMEL

These Public Markets were all over town, the east and west, north and south. If anybody listening has ever been to Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia and Baltimore Lexington Market, you see there's individual stalls. A hundred years ago or more there would be a thousand stalls. Now we're used to like, 20, 30 to 50 to 60 go to little marketplaces. These were sprawling places that were like two or three block long sheds with dealers, food dealers, some of them farmers, many of them just retailers on the street with the wagons that they'd moved. So they're almost like farmers markets that we think of today on the street. But then under these sheds, these low roof sheds, there were just a series of stalls one next to the other.

JOSEPH ABLE

There were a lot of folks who either rented or purchased their own stalls in the marketplace that they could have them week after week. But the market, quote, unquote, wasn't confined just to these sheds. Once they were built, they also extended out into the neighborhood with street vendors and hucksters that would come and take advantage of the fact that all of these farmers, trades people, fishermen, whatever are all coming into town two or three times a week to sell their produce...

DEAN KRIMMEL

With 100 butchers under the same roof and bakers usually like a handful. There are not many bakeries in the market, but there's hundreds there's hundreds around the city.

"The Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies" Transcript

Probably every neighbor had a couple. So you really do have to put all these sources together to know who is who. Cause you never wanna, you always want to follow the evidence. You don't want to let a story lead you astray. And what I found was what I think is a new version of the old story. First off, the head of the Bergers, the first in line, the person named Henry, who came over in 1835. I couldn't find any in Census city directories newspaper searches online. I just didn't see a Henry Berger who's arriving at least as an adult or so in the 1830s and forties. But what I did find were two men who were bakers who arrived in the US a little bit later, 1848 and 1850. So these two men that I find, I don't know if they're related. I just can't tell they're within five years of each other. So they show up in the 1840s in the US. The names are George Berger and Martin Berger. They first appear in Baltimore in the 1850s in City Directories. So it doesn't mean they weren't here before that, but it's generally speaking, once you're here for pretty brief period of time, if you are umm, well, especially if you're white, I mean, there's definitely racial prejudice. So if you black, your harder to find. And a lot of people were not in directory. So I should put that out there. Somebody will listen to this and say the directory missed a lot of people, but for our sake, George and Martin Berger are bakers in Baltimore. George from the early 1850s on, Martin from the late 1850s on, and they settle here. George on the west side of town, and Martin in an area called Old Town. George is active as a Baker for about 20 some years middle 1870, and then suddenly his directory listings are identified, his occupation of the flower and feed dealer, and from the 1870s on until he dies in 1911, he's identified as such and not as a Baker. So that bakery story seems to end with him. Umm with one wrinkle. He has a son also named George goes by George M, who is identified along with his father in one census, in 1900, when the son is in his late thirties and the father in his 70s, they're both identified as bakers. Meanwhile, every other city directory states they're in flower feed and so forth. So very confusing, and they don't represent themselves as bakers in their business dealings in the news in the directory. So I see that line that it ends. It's not the bakery story that is our Berger Cookies, Bergers Cookies and Berger Bakery of today. So moving to Martin, who is five years older than George, he lives in Baltimore for 46 years, and he dies at age 80, having produced a family of bakers. He and his wife, Christina, have either ten or twelve children. The records are a little inconsistent, and almost all of them, about eight, survive into adulthood. And Martin's eight children include six sons who become bakers, and three of those sons who figured big in the story who echo the origin story of the Berger Cookie business are Henry, George and Martin. You might recall that the Berger story says there's a brother named Otto, and I didn't find an Otto. There's an Otto Berger that is a musician but I'm pretty sure that the person people called Otto is probably Martin. And then again going with the story in the late 1890s, Martin dies. And for me, that might be the piece of the story that is told as Otto one of the brothers Otto dying around 1900. So to me it's close, fairly close, and maybe that's it. By this time Henry is off kind of on his own, he has market stalls. He has addresses that he's moved out of the family house he's married.

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He has a stall in City Market, and then his brother George follows suit when he comes of age in the late eighteen eighties and early nineties. He also has a stall in Lexington Market early on that's specified. After Martin's death, I focus more on Henry and George to see when they were going to see if one of them led us to the Bergers cookies business today. And what I found is it's pretty clear that George Berger a younger brother of Henry. Is the one who connects us to Bergers Cookies that the DeBaufres run today. It's George's business that is much more prominent. He advertises in the papers as his having stalls in Lexington Market and Hollins Market and Beller Market at one point, and it's just called George Berger Baker and George Berger in these market stalls from the 1890s to the early 19 hundreds and into the 1920s past the time Henry the older brother retired. George Berger dies in 1928. In his, just his early 60s. The business goes on in his name George Berger in the market stalls, and I don't see any other location, any other retail locations. So it seems to be only in two or three markets at different times. His wife Emma, his daughter Helen, son George, and another son, Herbert, are the ones who are named as owners in the 1930 end of the 40s. And Herbert, who would have been in his 20s when his father died, is managing the bakery. And then by 1940 he's described as the owner in the census. So he's 40 years old. He owns and its George Berger Bakery. So it's at that point at Hollins and Lexington Market. And at Lexington the George Berger or shortened to Berger, the Bergers Bakery stall is listed where their advertisements showing the merchants that are in the market in the 1950s. There's a new market that's built after fire. Bergers is one of six bakeries into the Sixties and Seventies there's Bergers Bakery. It's not called Bergers Cookies, but it's Berger, not George Berger anymore. And that is, that's where the trail connects us, I believe, to the Bergers Cookie that we that we know and love today and syncs up with the DeBaufres and the people that the DeBaufres bought it from the Russells who worked with the Bergers and so forth. That's where the echos come from and you go, you're like, oh, I get it. There's always truth to the lore, but the details end up getting confused over time. So there's often I should say not always but often a nugget of some kind of truth then that then because things were a little vague. The details get filled in over time over generations and they change. And then the story gets a little uh, either it gets muddles or gets very simplified. In our case, with the Bergers it just got really very simplified.

31:32 - Music transition

RODNEY HENRY

Hey my name is Rodney Henry and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of the Berger Cookie.

It's a wild scene over there. They're like, they're total Baltimore people, you know. I mean, they're just, like, real cool still like run, they have stuff everywhere. But it's such a small, you know, family run sort of deal. You know, it's pretty wild.

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CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

I've been doing this for, ooh, wow, God I'm old, 50 years now, umm and I still love it. Still love it.

ANDREW REINER

I don't at all mean this to sound the slightest bit patronizing. I found it really charming that something that has such a cult following is still being very intentionally made in a way that you clearly, it was probably done 50 or 60 years ago. Everything was done by hand. And I just thought that was wonderful. You know, I really did. And and there was something really charming and something really comical about it, too.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

But I can remember I started working when I was eight years old at the bakery. I used to just scrub the bathrooms. There's a way to earn a couple of Bucks. And so I scrub the bathrooms. And then that was the end of my day. I just sat and read books, magazines. And then we go home.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

You know and what's really interesting about Berger Cookies, to me is that no one cookie is really the same because they're not made by a machine. They're handmade cookies. I've watched them make these cookies in the factory. They're all hand dipped cookies. So I've seen cookies with a little bit of chocolate, a lot of chocolate, a medium amount of chocolate. I mean..

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

And we produce, let's see about 30,000 cookies a day, and they're all made by hand. People don't understand that every one of that cookies or the chocolate is applied by hand. The cookie itself comes through a machine, the waver and then bakes. But the chocolate is applied by hand. So it's a lot of chocolate to be applied by hand. That's an average. You know, Christmas time obviously, it's more and there's spurts during the year where everybody experiences that. Oh, my goodness. We're busy. That's nice. And then oops where did everybody go?

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

They're just there to do their job and go home at the end of the day.

"The Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies" Transcript

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

There is no store. We don't want you coming up. And the reason being is we don't. We don't have a store. So we don't have a store front. We don't have a clerk. So if you come to buy something, I will sell it to you. But what happens is the person who is waiting on you has to take their gloves off, wash their hand, take their jacket off, their cloak, and then wait on you and then wash their hands and re cloak and then put gloves on. So if you came in and bought 12 hours worth of cookies, it probably cost me 25 hours just to let somebody wait on you. So the only way we'll serve you here is if you call and place an order, let me get the order up. It's boxed up. It's ready to go, and somebody in the office can handle the transaction. It doesn't stop production.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

They're never trying to make a splash. They're never trying to do anything really different from what they've been doing for the past several decades. And to be quite frank, they don't have to. I mean, they don't have to advertise. They don't have to market. Their cookie is just so already ingrained in the minds of so many people who grew up here who live here, who moved away from here, and that's like priceless.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

Invariably, people find out who I am and they go like, oh, do you have any cookies? You know, like you carry them around with you. You know what I mean? Like and really, if they were in my pocket, would really want one.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

I mean, how many companies are out there that don't have to spend an arm and a leg constantly trying to get in front of customers. They don't have to do that. They don't. They've already got their base, which more than I think, does the trick for their operation.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

We have 23 employees, including seven drivers. So seven are they drivers they have nothing to do with production.

ANDREW REINER

Distribution is very limited. It is very much a local fare food. It really is. It's very much a localvore kind of a thing. You can get them through out Baltimore pretty easily, and you can now and over the past I'd say, I think nine years you've been able to get them in the DC market.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

We're in almost every retail grocery store in Baltimore, in Maryland, Northern Virginia, Southern Delaware, Southern Pennsylvania by Shrewsbury.

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We have Wise, which is a supermarket that's in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Giant Food, Safeway and a host of independents.

ANDREW REINER

But even though it's from Baltimore, you can't, for instance, go throughout the state of Maryland and easily find them the way you can in Baltimore. So, for instance, you could go into 7-11s. You could go into convenience stores, grocery stores throughout Baltimore, and you'll pretty much be able to find them. But once you start really kind of getting to other areas, like, I live about an hour a little bit more than an hour from Baltimore, and it's not that easy to find them out where I live at the beginning of Western Maryland. And one of the reasons they haven't gone much farther is because Berger Cookies are delivered in these vans that in the summer are retrofitted with these small air conditioning units in the back. So it's not this van that it's like they literally have to customize and retro fit these vans. So there's an air conditioning mechanism in the back because they would find that when they didn't do that, the cookies would melt.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

I wouldn't mind going a little bit more, just a little bit. I don't want to get to the point where I have to ship them, because then the cost is just ridiculous for shipping. And then also because we have to ship it refrigerated. So no. That's another obstacle in the Summer, melting.

ANDREW REINER

So that's another interesting wrinkle about them that keeps them very much a local, you know, a local thing.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

Production starts around six in the morning and then it's around two to 3 o'clock, depending on you I can't air condition a bakery with ovens, obviously. So the hotter and more humid it is, the slower people tend to move, which I understand I did this for a long time. I know exactly what the heat'll do to you, especially when it first starts. You know later into the Summer you're kind of used to it a little bit more. But you get that first really hot, humid day and it just slaps you in the face a couple of times. So that's why it would vary. And then also you know you have labor uhh you know people don't show. So instead of four people dipping cookies you have two or maybe just three or somebody who's not as fast is just learning. There's some variables going...

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

But they've kind of always stuck to their roots. Their history has always just been this one single short bread cookie with chocolate fudge on it.

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CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

There's a bowl of chocolate. Someone tosses the cookie into the chocolate and then the person dips it into the chocolate, holds it up and kind of like spatulas a little excess off so it doesn't drip down and puts it on the pan. And then they set so that the chocolate hardens. Otherwise they would all stick together and you just have a glob. And then the packaging.

ANDREW REINER

The packaging hasn't really changed much in about 30 years or so. The package is very simple and very old school. It's small. It's a very thin cardboard, that's rectangular and it has just like a logo Berger Cookies on the side. Very simple and it's brown. And then there's like a cellophane wrapping on top of it.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

Aww geesh, it changed colors back in the Sixties, it went from red and Brown. So from the 60s til now its been the same.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

You know, these cookies are supposed to weigh a certain amount according to their packaging. And I find it funny that like every package of cookie, you know can weigh very different amounts you know based off what's read on the packaging there.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

It says 15 ounces. But it is way over that because when weights and measures come in, we don't want any problems. So we actually reduce the printed weight. So what used to be 16 we made it 15. So, you know, it doesn't matter if I tell you you're getting 2oz of cookies and sell you 15oz of cookies as long as I'm not telling you you're getting 15oz of cookies and sell you 2oz of cookies. I'm okay.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

And as far as I know, the cookie has always kind of remained the same. It's been pretty much that same recipe from all the way back when and...

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

You can imagine it made some changes only because, you know, pricing and the FDA. But the basis of the recipe hasn't changed. But there had to be some changes due to the fact that the FDA comes out and says, you know, whatever is not good for you. So we're going to eliminate, like, trans fat was the big one recently. So there has been some changes, but most not to the basic recipe.

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ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

He eats a cookie every single day, you know, to kind of just always test the quality of the cookie.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

Every day I will walk out into the finished area and I will grab a random cookie from anywhere. They are sitting to be packed and just take a piece of it and taste it. Just quality control it's to make sure the chocolate is up to snuff that the amount of chocolate on the cookie is correct and that the cookie itself. The wafer is good. So that's the best way to tell if the product, you can look at something, it looks pretty and it doesn't taste good. I'm sure we've all had that at some point.

ANDREW REINER

And I love the fact that Berger Cookies are still such a small operation, and they still by virtue of the fact that there's these limitations in place, that they're not bending over backwards to change. But they're really trying to keep it very much a local commodity. And I just think there's something wonderful about that.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

Pretty cool, because I do take pride in this. I am proud of it, that it's as iconic as it is that helps.

43:03 - Music transition

ANDREW REINER

I'm Andrew Reiner, and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies. I saw that somebody was blogging with King Arthur Baking about doing like, a replica Berger Cookie. And I looked at it, and that was probably the closest I came to wanting to replicate it myself. So this is funny. I sat down. I read over it a couple of times, and then I'm going to come back to this. When I was doing the research. So after I finished the research and finished the piece, I went back to this blog piece and looked at everything, looked at, you know, the ingredients, looked at the way to do it. And I remember reading it and thinking and they made a point saying the really tricky part is not the cookie itself. It's the topping. You've got to get the consistency and the texture just right, because a lot of people were saying, I've been trying to do this and I keep getting the texture all wrong. And I thought, you know, what the hell was this! I'm just going to go out and buy, I just went out and bought some. You know, that was my brush with baking Berger Cookies. I did. I just went out and bought them.

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ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

My mother had made them herself, for a lot of dinner parties and things like that that she's hosted, and they're really nice looking and they taste good, but it's definitely not the same. There's definitely something different about the Berger Cookie, and it's very hard to imitate.

DEAN KRIMMEL

No, I've never.. we bake a little bit. We cook a lot. I've cooked for years. Baking always, obviously is a little harder, and I've never thought of it. And I suspect if it did come up, the answer in my house would be somethings you just let let other people do and enjoy it. We're not going to replicate it, but we're not even going to try. Let's just buy the package.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

We have a lot of people who come into our store in Hampden, and a lot of people have really are not from here. They're either visiting family or friends, or they're in town for a wedding.

ANDREW REINER

So my wonderful mother in law, always incredibly thoughtful. At the wedding reception, she surprised me. And for the grooms cake had a platter of Berger Cookies because A, she knew how much I love them and B, just kind of like a cute little representation of representing Baltimore and what I was bringing to the family, that kind of thing.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

And they'll come into the store and they'll be like, they don't know a lot about Baltimore. And, you know, I'll show them some things around in the store and show them the Berger Cookies in particular. And oftentimes, if I can clearly tell somebody's never been here before. Has no experience with the city at all. And it's just kind of like exploring and learning for the very first time, I will give that person who walks into my store a free pack of Berger Cookies. And I will say like, this is Baltimore right here. Like you have experienced Baltimore once you've had these cookies, so you need to take this pack. Just take it with you. I don't want your money. Just take it, enjoy it, eat it. And this is what you will remember most about Baltimore. You need to be able to tell people that you've had a Berger Cookie in Baltimore because that is part of the experience I think. Especially for people that are not from here.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

There's a organization here called Casey Cares, and they help families of children who are being treated for cancer at Hopkins, and they help them find places to stay and and help the siblings of the sick child ya know find something to because their kids. One of the kids, I guess they had kind of like, Grant a Wish a birthday. What do you want for your birthday? All this kid wanted was Berger Cookies, which I thought was pretty cool. Wow. You can have anything you want for your birthday. And this is what you pick?

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ANDREW REINER

I remember, one guy was sharing the story. He was probably in his 60s at the time, and he was sharing a story about how he grew up in a Jewish family and his relatives when he was a boy would come over and they were from the old country, and they would have dinner. After dinner when the family would be together, somebody would bring out Berger Cookies. And it wasn't that they were necessarily a way that they were showing that they were acclimating as Americans. But they were, this was a way that they could acclimate as Baltimoreans, which I thought was really, really neat.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

We work with a lot of people who own Airbnb units, and they gift our gift boxes to their incoming tenants who really oftentimes don't have any experience with Baltimore at all. And they're just kind of here for a short stay, and then they're on their way, and we work with a handful of those kind of customers. And of course, every single of those boxes certainly has pack of Berger Cookies in them.

RODNEY HENRY

I did most people start saying, oh, you're coming out here to California or Texas, some place, like, bring some Berger Cookies with you. I was like, for real? So of course I did. I didn't realize, you know I got to tell you, I never really noticed where it was. I know in DC, Baltimore you could get them. And I was really not even thinking, I mean, I know how there's a lot of stuff like that in different parts of the country. So it wasn't really that noticeable. I know there were people that were from here were fans that I knew they couldn't get him wherever they were living outside of Maryland or DC ya know.

ANDREW REINER

A lot of people do order them online. A lot of people who left the area who love Berger Cookies will order them online. They have a pretty robust online business. They really do, because when I was doing that article about Berger Cookies for The Washington Post a while back, I remember going online onto chat boards and looking to see what people were saying and write about them for foodie blogs or chat rooms, King Arthur Baking to see what they were doing about it. And a lot of people would say that they're from Baltimore. They miss Berger Cookies and blue crabs, and they can't get the crabs, but they do order the cookies.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

There is one customer who every Christmas orders cookies for his daughter in South Africa.

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ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

These cookies are the most important thing to my boxes, actually, because without them, I really feel like I don't have a box because they're literally picked in 95 to 99% of our Baltimore in a Boxes, you know, and I feel like if we didn't have them as an option, customers wouldn't order the gift box if they did not include Berger Cookies in that.

RODNEY HENRY

Okay. This is crazy. So we had this dude, he's a writer. He worked for us for a while. Ariel Winter. And he uh he worked at the shop. He was a killer employee he worked the front. He did everything. And they were pregnant. And his wife loved Berger Cookies. So Ariel went home and he kept working on this crazy thing. It was like, it was just this Berger Cookies, butter... It was just Berger Cookies and butter. It was, it was you could see that it was gonna be, it could be something cool. But it was really uh, it was awesome. I never, never really tasted anything like it. It was really buttery, like super buttery. And then we just like started doctoring it up a little bit, and we had no name for it. Just this pie we invented. And then I went to a car show. And this kid, he's like 15 years old ya know. He's gangly. He's like worked on his dad's car and stuff. You can tell he's a real cool kid. He had the whole pies worth of Baltimore Bomb. At the time it was just, I don't remember what we called it, Dangerous Pie, something like that. So I said we just started doing this pie. What would you call it? And he goes, "I'd call it 'The Bomb'." And I was like, because he was just like, this is the bomb. That's where you got it, it's Baltimore Bomb now.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

So we have two flavors that highlight Berger Cookies. One we call Bawlmer Cookies and Cream, and the other one, we call Salty Balty. And the Salty Balty is actually my favorite out of the two because it also combines Goetze's Caramel Cream. So it's a salted caramel based ice cream with ground up or chunks of Berger Cookie in them. And it's just a really unique flavor. And then the Bawlmer Cookies and Cream is your regular vanilla based cookies and cream type ice cream. But instead of using Oreo, we're obviously using Berger Cookies in our ice cream. So we work with a company called Cream Cruiser. They manufacture our ice cream for us. We came to them with this idea for the ice cream. And they're the ones who kind of put the recipe together, manufacture the product, package the product. And it's been a really unique and fun little side business that we've been doing in addition to the gift box business.

RODNEY HENRY

Pretty awesome pie though. I mean, it's like people dig it so much. The vinegar is very subtle, but it's there. So when you take a bite out of it, you get a really awesome crispy version of of a Berger Cookie that's attached to the bottom. It's custard in it, like coats real nice. You get into it. It's super buttery, like, almost like a toll house cookie a little tiny bit. But it's the vinegar.

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When you bite into it, it hits you back by the ear hole, you know, like, right there by the end of your jaw. Just a tiny little bit, very subtly. It's not overbearing. It's kind of like butter milk, but it's just vinegar. There's no butter milk in it. So it's kind of a really interesting flavor. Very vanilla, chocolate, a little vinegar. That's the jam.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

Yes of course, we definitely wanted to include the Berger Cookies. I think they were pretty much the top two flavors that we sell. And the very first flavors that we came up with were the Berger Cookie inspired ones.

RODNEY HENRY

Yep, they can totally get it from Goldbelly and have it shipped right to their door. We have this thing called that we do out of here at Dangerously Delicious called Pie Valet, where we just deliver in eight counties, Maryland and DC and Northern Virginia.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

And we were originally just selling them out of a freezer in our gift box store. And we've also been selling them to local grocery stores. But recently we opened up an actual scoop shop on the Avenue in Hampden. And again, it features the Berger Cookie ice cream, and we've gone through quite a bit of that already so far. In the short time we've been open.

RODNEY HENRY

But I guess it is kind of special. People say, "Oh we met over a slice of Bomb" ooh that's so cute.

ROSS NOCHUMOWITZ

So we feel we do our part in spreading the Berger Cookie cheer throughout the state and beyond. That's kind of like the crux I feel like of our whole business. It's kind of doing that.

CHARLIE DEBAUFRE

I think about it how it was when I was working with my father. My father was slowly easing out of the business as I'm doing now. Yeah, I think about it. I think about how I felt and try and remember that when my son who I'm sure my father thought I did something stupid. Why are you doing that? That's not how you do it. You know, I try to remember that when my son does something that is not the way I would have done it. I'm not saying it's the wrong way. It's not the way I would have done it. So I try to remember that. But, yeah, it's pretty cool. Just take pride in what you do.

54:42 - Music transition

"The Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies" Transcript

NORA VETTER

And that, is the Local Farey Tale of Berger Cookies.

More information about Berger Cookies and the Berger Cookie Tale-Tellers can be found at [localfarey \(farey\) tales \(tales\).com](http://localfarey(farey)tales(tales).com) and be sure to follow LocalFareyTalesPodcast on Facebook and Instagram to share your tales about Berger Cookies or other local fare.

And if you don't know much about your local fare? Ask! There are tale tellers everywhere. Cellophane wrapped boxes filled with gratitude to Joseph Abel, Charlie DeBaufre, Rodney Henry, Dean Krimmel, Andrew Reiner and Ross Nochumowitz for sharing their time and Berger Cookie knowledge.

Concept, Production and Editing by me, Nora Vetter, Music by Anisha Thomas, and Artwork by Jonathan Reich.

More Local Farey Tales are coming soon so be sure to subscribe on your favorite place to listen to podcasts.

57:05 - End of episode