

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Will the Toll House be the State Cookie?

It used to be that Massachusetts had a state flower, a state tree and a state flag. In recent years, however, the legislature has been adding state specialty items at a rapid clip. Students make it a class project to promote a local item as the Massachusetts dessert - or muffin. You get the picture.

The latest attempt at official designation is the state cookie. This year backers of two cookies with local origins are making their case to be the Massachusetts State Cookie. The Fig Newton and the Toll House Cookie both lay claim to that title. The debate drew the attention of the Nestle company, which wrote to the legislature in support of the signature Toll House cookie.

It makes sense that Fig Newtons were named after the city of Newton, but I had no idea that Toll House cookies were linked with Massachusetts. I even wondered why such a standard recipe came to be designated on the Nestle package as a trademarked recipe. Here is the explanation to the chocolate chip connection.

The cookie traces its beginnings to Mrs. Ruth Wakefield, who served as proprietress of the Toll House Inn in the early 1930s. The Inn, located in Whitman, Massachusetts between Boston and New Bedford, was built in 1709, and long had been a haven for weary travelers in search of food, drink, or a change of horses. During Mrs. Wakefield's tenure, she created delectable desserts, which attracted crowds with a discerning taste to Whitman. While experimenting with ways to enhance the popular Colonial recipe, called the Butter Drop Do, Mrs. Wakefield made baking history. As she obviously liked chocolate, she decided to make a chocolate version of this cookie.

Chocolate chips did not exist at the time. Maybe Mrs. Wakefield was trying to save time when she skipped the step of melting the chocolate for her cookie dough. She simply chopped up a bar of Nestle semisweet chocolate and added the bits to the dough, thinking they would melt all through the cookie. Instead, the chocolate bits retained their shapes, softening to a delicately creamy texture. This delicious discovery was dubbed the Toll House Cookie!

With Mrs. Wakefield's permission, Nestle added her cookie recipe to the wrapper of their semisweet chocolate bar. As the popularity of the Toll House Cookie continued to grow, the company looked for ways to make it easier to bake. First, they produced a special, scored chocolate bar that could easily be divided into small sections. Then they began offering tiny pieces of chocolate in convenient, ready-to-use packages - and that's how the first Nestle Real Semi-Sweet Chocolate Morsels were introduced.

The Nestle letter closed saying, "Indeed, the entire country remains grateful to the fine state of Massachusetts, for it is apparent that the people in Massachusetts and throughout New England recognized a brilliant discovery when they tasted the very first Toll House chocolate chip cookies!"

What do you think? Does the history of Mrs. Wakefield's baking innovation merit naming her cookie as the Official State Cookie?