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Oreo
Origins



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THE ART OF THE OREO

BY A. J. SCHENKMAN

The classic cookie originated at today's Chelsea Market in New York City.

Watching a student dunk an entire Oreo in a carton of milk, much like I did as a child, led me on a fact-finding mission about the world's most famous cookie. People have strong feelings about how to eat the delicious dessert. Some people dip them in milk; others twist them apart, separating the creamy sides—a proper art form. From here, you might eat the cream or the cookie first. Just for the record, Oreo believes you should always use the twist, lick, and dunk method. Some simply devour them whole. No matter how you enjoy them, the story of Oreos is as fascinating as how people eat them. The delectable cookie with the cream center—a worldwide favorite—traces its origins to New York City. To better understand the origins of arguably the most popular cookie in





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Above: *National Biscuit Company Factory, New York City*Left: *Uneeda Biscuits were sold in special packaging designed to keep the cookies fresh, 1931.*

the world, we must go back 135 years.

In 1890, eight large eastern bakeries had merged to form the New York Biscuit Company. According to *The New York Times*, also in 1890, the New York Biscuit Company started building “a Romanesque-style complex of six-story bakeries on the east side of 10th Avenue, running from 15th to 16th Street.” New York Biscuit’s biggest competition, the American

Biscuit and Manufacturing Company, was based in Chicago. These two companies merged in 1898 and collectively became known as the National Biscuit Company, or Nabisco. The new mega-bakery was referred to as a “Cracker Trust” by those who disapproved of it.

Adolphus W. Green, who became the president of Nabisco, showed what a powerhouse this new company would be by inventing the Uneeda Biscuit on September 6, 1898—the very first product released by Nabisco. This was a game-changer in the industry because of a special packaging designed by Green to keep the biscuits fresh during a time when most crackers were sold in large

barrels and were often stale and unsanitary by the time consumers bought them. The company continued to use this technology to enhance the freshness of future products, including Barnum’s Animal Crackers in 1902. The circus-themed animal crackers debuted around Christmastime, featuring a gold and yellow box with a string handle for hanging as a Christmas ornament.

Green’s innovative company continued to grow. As its product line became even more popular, Nabisco had to expand its existing factories to handle the increased volume of its bakery output. The bakeries, which were close to the Meatpacking District, dominated the Chelsea area of New



A collie making a special delivery of Uneda Biscuits, 1916



Wagons being loaded at the National Biscuit Company factory



National Biscuit Company Building, New York, New York, 1913



Little Red New York Delivery wagon

York, in buildings now part of Chelsea Market. This ensured a steady stream of lard, used in early cookie recipes. The company quickly dominated the market by introducing treats like Lorna Doones, Fig Newtons, Mallomars, and Nilla Wafers.

Although the bakeries were in New York City, the Nabisco corporate headquarters remained in Chicago until 1906, when it relocated to New York City, which was the financial and food center of the United States. At this time, Nabisco was the only factory with New York Central Railroad lines running through its plant to pick up and deliver freight. The company also used electric cars to transport products and materials within its factory complex.

By 1912, Nabisco was considered the largest bakery in the world. The Oreo officially made its debut on March 6, 1912. Unfortunately, how exactly it was invented has been lost to time, though the Oreo is commonly believed to be partly a copy of a well-known cookie called Hydrox, created in 1908 by Nabisco's rival, the Sunshine Biscuit Company of Kansas City,

National Biscuit Company wagon



COURTESY OF JAMESTOWN

Oreo packaging



COURTESY OF JAMESTOWN

Missouri. But what made Oreos unique was their superior taste and instantly recognizable look. The first Oreos were slightly larger than what we are used to today. The design included a wreath along the edge of the cookie with the word "Oreo" embossed in the center. Initially, they were called Oreo Biscuits.

Considerable debate surrounds the origin of the name Oreo, which many believe is probably lost to time. It may have come from the French word for gold. Some food historians derive the name from the bulk tins in which the cookies were initially sold, as they were prominently gold-colored. Still others have postulated that the name's origins are in the Greek word for "mountain" or in the hill-like shape of the first Oreos. In 2002, a spokesperson for Oreo, Larry Bauman, shared a more recent explanation of the name's origin. He believed that "Oreo" resulted from taking the "re" from the word cream and the "o" from the two cookies that held the cream.

On April 6, 1912, the first Oreo cookies, with their sweet vanilla cream, were shipped from the New York City bakeries to Hoboken, New Jersey. The following year, Nabisco filed for a trademark on the Oreo, which was granted in 1913.

The 1920s were a busy time of innovation for Nabisco; it launched its first advertisement, which appeared on trolley cars, showing the "twist" method of eating the cookies. The "twist" was meant to show consumers a fun way to eat the cookies, instead of just pulling them apart or biting into them.

Hoping to capture an even larger market and capitalize on the popularity of the Oreo, the company introduced a flavor change. In 1920, the same year the name Oreo was changed to Oreo Sandwich, a lemon-cream Oreo was introduced. Perhaps consumers



Oreo advertisement, 1951



NABISCO
BAKES BETTER COOKIES!

"Wish I had a million **OREOS!**"

Who can blame him? Creamier fondant filling...richer chocolate wafers—make **OREO CREME SANDWICH** sheer eating joy! For **NABISCO** has been putting extra goodness in cookies for generations. So when you buy cookies—any kind—in regular or cellophane packs—always look for the red **NABISCO** seal.

this seal on the outside means better flavor on the inside

NATIONAL BISCUIT COMPANY
175
1952

Oreo advertisement, 1952

In 1952, the original look of the Oreo was updated to include a more ornate design with serrated edges and the name OREO in the center, along with the Nabisco logo.

did not like the new flavor or its yellow color because the Lemon Oreo was discontinued four years later. One more change also occurred during this decade—the face of the cookie was updated to include a circle surrounding the cookie's name and a more complex wreath.

By 1932, the Nabisco factory included seventeen buildings on three blocks in New York City. The packaging was once again updated to promote freshness. According to promotional materials, consumers could get the "soft, smooth, creamy filling with two crisp chocolate flavored cookies to hold it ... in packages—or by the pound." During this time, the company changed the name again to the Oreo Cream Sandwich Cookie.

The name and packaging we are familiar with gradually emerged over the 1940s and '50s. Oreo packaging was yellow until 1940, when it was updated to the more familiar blue. In 1952, the original look of the Oreo was updated to include a more ornate design with serrated edges and the name OREO in the center, along with the Nabisco logo. This is the Oreo cookie we see today.

Nabisco left New York in 1957, when a broader trend of de-industrialization was affecting city neighborhoods. The company modernized its facilities and expanded production, moving to Fair Lawn in Bergen County, New Jersey.



Oreo advertisement, 1963

According to recent Oreo-makers, over 450 billion Oreos have been sold since their inception in 1912. So many are made each year that they could circle the earth five times. In 2002, the iconic cookie got its own street—Oreo Way—on 9th Avenue between 15th and 16th streets.

Since 1995, the Chelsea Market has become an iconic culinary destination. It is a large food and retail marketplace in the heart of New York City, where people come to shop, eat, or buy meat, produce, and even fish. It has always been the center of New York

City's food industry, especially the meat industry. Many tourists and locals alike do not realize that when they are entering Chelsea Market, they are walking into the place where the Oreo cookie was conceived and baked for over four decades. But the origin story is not lost on the Chelsea Market. Last year, on National Oreo Day (March 6), many businesses in the market honored the cookie by serving Oreo-themed delicacies.

Again, for the record, I eat them whole while my wife crumbles hers up in milk. ■

As a seventh-grade social studies teacher, many of my ideas for articles originate with my students. This article's genesis was watching the previously mentioned student in the cafeteria enjoying an Oreo for dessert. It made me wonder about the origins of this most delectable cookie, a favorite in childhood and adulthood. Where to start the research? The Greenwich Village Society for Historical Research holds oral histories of the area, images of the factories owned by Nabisco, and amazing maps of the area at different times. Duke University's Rubenstein Library holds scrapbooks related to Nabisco history. A representative of Chelsea Market provided some historic images of the factory.

A. J. Schenkman is the historian for the town of Gardiner, New York, and the author of *Patriots and Spies in Revolutionary New York* and *Unexpected Bravery: Women and Children of the Civil War*.

For more by this author, see "A Very Good Boy," Spring 2022.