



Dutch Letters

http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods/stories2.htm

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It would be hard to find anyone living in Iowa for more than a month or two who hasn't been introduced to Dutch letters, those crispy, flaky, butter pastries filled with almond paste, covered with large, crunchy sugar crystals, shaped into an "s," and baked until golden. Turns out these addictive treats are available only in Iowa and in Holland at Christmas time (Millie Rahn, Heritage Partnerships/New England, email communication). Following generations'-old Dutch family recipes, bakeries in Pella produce the "letters" as well as *bankets* (sticks) year round and supply them to groceries and convenience stores around the state.

While Dutch letters follow pretty standard northern European marzipan-filled puff pastry recipes, this delicacy is very much identified with Iowa, and particularly with its areas of late 19th-century Dutch settlement. According to the St. Nicholas Center website (www.stnicholascenter.org), the custom of edible letters dates back to the Middle Ages and Germanic tradition, when babies were given a letter made from bread for good luck. Pastry letters appeared in still-life paintings by the Dutch Masters of the 16th and 17th century (Still life with Letter Pastries, Peter Binoit, ca.1615, Groninger Museum), notes that same site. In Holland today, bakers and butchers respectively produce almond-filled pastry (*letterbanket*) and sausage letters for the holiday.

Dutch immigrants to Iowa were intent on keeping their family and ethnic traditions alive, and butchers, bakers, and others set up businesses to serve their communities in Pella and Orange City. In 1899, Herman Jaarsma, great-grandfather of current co-owner, Kristi Jaarsma Balk, opened his bakery in Pella, Iowa, where he made a variety of traditional Dutch baked goods, including buns, cookies, rusks, and Dutch letters. The bakery first offered Dutch letters as a seasonal specialty for Sinterklaas Day on December 6. These are now a year-round treat for Iowans.

Jaarsma's specializes in making traditional Dutch baked goods from scratch; they also make and sell American-style cookies, breads, and doughnuts. After four generations and three bakeries, the family-based business, now under the ownership of David and Kristi Jaarsma Balk, continues to follow family recipes for their Dutch letters, *bankets* (puff pastry logs filled with three times more almond filling than the letters), *speculaas* (Christmas spice cookies), *butter koek* (almond butter cake), white walnut bars, and a variety of other baked goods. Dave, a business major at Central College, has worked at Jaarsma's for 20 years; he learned the trade from Kristi's parents and is the head baker. Kristi, who grew up in the business, remembers when her grandparents, father, and uncle ran the shop. A school teacher for 13 years until she and Dave purchased the business, Kristi is a people person and prefers to work the front and interact with customers. The couple's 13-year old twin daughters also help out.

Jaarsma's is especially busy just before Thanksgiving through the Christmas season as well as in May for the town's annual Tulip Festival. In late November and December, the bakery makes Dutch letters every morning. To meet this demand, the Balks brought in an engineer a few years ago to mechanize the process of rolling and filling their Dutch letters. This innovation enabled them to produce both more and lighter pastries. Every letter is still formed by hand, however. Kristi Jaarsma Balk takes great pride in running a continuously-owned family business that produces traditional Dutch pastries for her community.

Pella is lucky enough to have not one but two family-owned bakeries, unusual in a town its size. Jeff Wichhart, who recently purchased Vander Ploeg Bakery, just down the street from Jaarsma's, on the Square in Pella, grew up eating and then working in at this bakery during college, when he learned to make Dutch letters. Wichhart is now in the business of selling the local specialty, as well as a host of other items including Sinterklaas cookies (traditional Dutch spiced cookies), white walnut bars (made with black walnuts, white raisins, and hone) as well as sugar cookies, apple rings, *saucijzenbroodjes* (pigs in a blanket filled with sausage from neighboring Ulrich's Meat Market), and more.

Previous owner, Garret Vander Beek, and son, Dan Vander Beek, purchased the Vander Ploeg Bakery in 1980 from the descendants of the original owners, who started the bakery about 100 years ago. Tradition as well as innovation are points of pride for Vander Ploeg's; the bakery's sugar cookie recipe comes from Garret's wife's grandmother while the fried puff pastry fruit pies were his brainchild. Garret, who continues to run the bakery's ovens, sold the business to Wichhart in November 2006. Wichhart jumped at the opportunity to buy and continue this Pella tradition.

According to Garret and Dan, who grew up in the business and is in charge of rolling out all the puff pastry dough, that dough is at the heart of this bakery. Using the Vander Ploeg's original Dutch recipe, dough is used for letters and *bankets* as well as for *saucijzenbroodjes* (aka "pigs") as well as for Garret's fried apply and cherry pies.

Vander Ploeg's makes the dough for one day's Dutch letters the day before. Once the ingredients are mixed together, Dan Vander Beek flours the dough, rolls it out into large rectangles, flours it again, makes a tri-fold of the rectangle, and puts it to rest for ½ hour. He repeats this process two more times, and then runs the dough is run through a mechanized sheeter to produce ½" to ¾" thick sheets. Dan cuts those large sheets into 4"x 6" rectangles and refrigerates them overnight. Close inspection of the rectangle edges

reveal the multiple layers of dough, which, when baked, produce the characteristic flakes of puff pastry.

Early the next morning, Jeff takes the rested dough and rolls it out into long strips. He takes balls of almond paste, rolls them into ropes, and places each on a strip, which is then folded over the filling and rolled out into a long, filled rope, which is then cut into four pieces. Those pieces rest for 5-10 minutes, and then are rolled into 18” ropes, placed on a baking sheet, brushed w/water, sprinkled w/sugar, formed into S shapes, and baked for 25 minutes at 300 degrees F.

Jeff, Dan, and Garret all derive great pleasure from producing a good product every day. Gratification is instant; they don’t have to wait six months to produce something and then wonder if they got it right. As Dan put it, “I see the fruits of my labor on a daily basis, and then another shot at it the next day.” They are all pleased to be able to ensure the bakery’s continuity.

While neither Jaarsma Bakery nor Vander Ploeg Bakery will reveal its secrets, recipes for Dutch letters are available in any Pella cookbook as well as on line www.astray.com. Ingredients include butter, flours, ice water, whole eggs, egg whites, almond paste, sugar, and vanilla. But Dutch letters, like any homemade baked good, are time-consuming to produce.

Luckily, both Jaarsma and Vander Ploeg bakeries sell Dutch letters, ring bologna, spice cookies and other goods locally, via fax or phone, and online. Both bakeries would purchase locally sourced ingredients if they were available, such as black walnuts or fruits for pastry fillings. Unfortunately, except for the butter, there is no dependable yearround local source. Regardless, almond paste-filled, puff pastry letters are so identified with Iowa’s Dutch communities in terms of tradition and ethnicity, the Pella specialty can’t help but qualify as an Iowa place-based heritage food.

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