

ODE TO THE PANCAKE

By Fred Hobbs

Griddle, griddle
Big or small
What's the tastiest dish of all?
Round and fluffy
Golden and brown
With lots of syrup
With which to drown;
You eat it; you love it
For goodness sake
You know what it is?
Why, it's the pancake!

This little bit of doggerel will never win a poetry prize, but it serves as a humble and sincere tribute to one of the world's most popular menu items.

Archaeological evidence suggests that varieties of pancakes are among the most widespread of cereal-type food eaten in prehistoric times. Flour made from carbohydrate-rich seeds was mixed with milk and possibly eggs, then baked on hot stones or shallow earthenware pots over an open fire.

While Americans prefer round pancakes, the shape, size and even the structure varies throughout the world. In Germany they are often made with potatoes. France offers the crepe, a thin savory variety made from buckwheat in a special pan.

Crepes can be filled with seafood, fruit and topped with various sauces often served for special or fancy occasions. Here in the U.S. kids love it when Mom (and sometimes Dad) creates a pancake with the first letter in their name or in the shape of a favorite animal.

Quality is most important, of course, but the focus on pancake quantity also is a source of curiosity and some pride in both fact and fiction. The record for consumption of the most pancakes in one hour belongs to a hungry man in St. Petersburg, Russia who downed 73 in 60 minutes. The Guinness Book of Records cites the biggest pancake ever made (unless someone has topped it since August 3, 1994.) On that date, a flapjack weighing 2.95 tons, measuring 493 feet three inches in diameter was poured and flipped on a giant griddle on the streets of a village in Greater Manchester, England.

And, then there is the legend of the giant Minnesota lumberjack, Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe. Paul's kitchen covered about ten miles of Northwoods territory. The stove was an acre long and when fired up melted the snow for twenty miles around.

When making flapjacks, four of Paul's young helpers would tie a side of bacon to each of their snow shoes, and skate around the griddle to keep it greased while "Cookie" and seven other men poured the batter from a huge kettle. The crew flipped them over when they were just right and served up on Paul's gigantic plate.

Now we know some of the fascinating history of pancakes; we know they are so popular that records for their consumption have been set; and that pancakes are famously part of folklore.

So, as a closing tribute, how about a bit of pancake humor? This from the legendary comedy actor, W.C. Fields: "The laziest man I ever met put popcorn in his pancakes, so they would turn over by themselves."