

Pretzels twist way into new snack potential



SHERRY LUCAS

The golden brown glory that is the pretzel twists the night away as a bar snack, twists travel hours away in airline freebies and twists the grocery aisles away by buddying up with fellow snacks.

It showed up in a pretzel bun for Wendy's for a limited time. I enjoyed it as a pretzel croissant on my sandwich from Whole Foods recently. Last night, I considered the back of a bag of Pepperidge Farms Goldfish as I munched away and saw the pitch for a pretzel species of the little smiley crackers.

Is there nothing this little knot can't do?

Saturday is National Pretzel Day, so declared by former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell in 2003, to commemorate the pretzel's importance to the culture and economy of his state, which is considered the birthplace of America's pretzel industry. Credit its large population of German immigrants.

Two full-service pretzel places — Wetzel's Pretzels and Auntie Anne's — in Northpark mall keep shoppers there in good munch graces. At Wetzel's, there's buttered and non-, sour cream and onion, cinnamon and almond crunch, baked cheese pretzel selections and Wetzel Dogs. Auntie Anne's also spices up pretzels with cinnamon sugar, jalapeno and roasted garlic Parmesan as well as pepperoni, sweet almond, raisin, pretzel dogs and more.

Some may prefer the giant soft and chewy version, but I like mine with a cracker-snap crunch and the coarse salt

sprinkle.

They can be sweet, too. I've never explored that side of the snack, but a bit of investigating makes me think I ought to.

"Practical Baking," a textbook from a class I took at Hinds, describes Sugar Pretzels, a combination of puff pastry and chocolate short doughs for contrast. Sounds heavenly. A Bon Appetit recipe for Sweet Pretzels calls for a sweet dough and pearl sugar, a specialized chunky sugar that doesn't melt easily. That, too, got my curiosity up.

But who says you've got to choose? A Bon Appetit recipe for Dark Chocolate Pudding with Pretzels offers, its says, "more proof that salt makes any dessert taste better."

But for run-of-the-mill snacking, salty guys are still my go-to. I apparently fall

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into a long line.

"Pretzels are believed to be one of the world's oldest snacks," said Valerie Traynor, vice president of marketing for Snack Factory Pretzel Crisps, which just introduced a few new twists of its own with honey mustard and onion, sea salt and cracked pepper and, for bite-size snacking, original and cheddar minis for 17 flavors. The pretzel crackers can hold their own or hold a topping, snackers' choice.

Pretzel origins are debated, but the pervading story settles on German monks who rewarded children by baking strips of leftover dough into a shape resembling arms crossing the chest in prayer, Traynor said.

“In Switzerland, pretzels were used as a marriage knot, and couples would pull on either end of a pretzel on their wedding day — that’s where ‘tying the knot’ comes from!”

Here in the U.S., pretzel snacking is commonly associated with sporting events, carnivals and festivals. Pretzels were associated with Lent and Easter because ingredients could be eaten during fasting. “For children, pretzels were hidden on Easter morning just as eggs are hidden today,” Traynor said.

Now, there’s an upward trend in pretzel bread at retailers, and pretzels have perked up gourmet menus around the country, she added. “Pretzel rolls are replacing buns for a chewier and shinier texture. Chefs are experimenting with the salty crunch of pretzels and twisting them into their favorite classics.”

Some examples: Pulled pork and braised beef on pretzel rolls at Seattle’s Bitterroot BBQ; breakfast egg sandwich on a soft pretzel roll at Colorado’s Snooze; pretzel-crusted fried squid at Florida’s Prato; soft pretzel bread pudding with dark chocolate, vanilla bean and chocolate-covered pretzel ice cream at Chicago’s Nightwood; pretzel croissants at New York’s City Bakery; and New York Prohibition Bakery’s pretzels and beer cupcakes using pale ale and Nutella.

“Most of our research shows that pretzels have very few limits,” Traynor said. “With two claims of origin, one with the Egyptians and another with a monk in 610 AD — I think that says a lot about its enduring ap-

peal.”

Given the boost in consumer interest in healthier snacks, pretzels as a baked snack can gain more ground, with 30 percent less fat than potato chips, she noted. Plus, pretzel crisps weigh in at 110 calories.

Saturday is Healthy Kids Day, too. Maybe a play date’s in order.

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WHITE BEAN SPREAD WITH CRISPY SAGE & POMEGRANATE SEEDS

12 Original Pretzel Crisps
 1 (16-ounce) can cannellini beans, strained and rinsed
 1 clove garlic
 Juice of ½ lemon
 2 scallions, rinsed and minced
 Salt and pepper to taste
 1 pomegranate, halved and seeded
 14 fresh sage leaves (12 for sautéing, 2 for white bean puree)
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 2 tablespoons butter

Add butter and olive oil to a sauté pan over medium heat. When oil is hot, add sage leaves (soft side down). Cook for about 30 seconds on each side or until slightly brown. Remove and place onto paper towel. Sprinkle with salt immediately. Set aside.

Purée cannellini beans, garlic, 2 sage leaves, lemon juice and scallions in a food processor. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Assembly: Place one crispy sage leaf on each Pretzel Crisp, add a dollop of white bean spread and top with pomegranate seeds.

Source: Snack Factory Pretzel Crisps

SHRIMP PO’BOY WITH REMOULADE

12 Honey Mustard and Onion Pretzel Crisps
 12 medium-size shrimp (buy already peeled, deveined and cooked)
 1 cup plain Greek yogurt
 2 tablespoons sweet relish
 2 tablespoons stone-ground mustard
 1 teaspoon capers
 ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
 Salt and pepper to taste
 1 teaspoon olive oil
 6 cherry tomatoes, sliced
 1-2 chives, chopped

Purée yogurt, relish, mustard, capers and cayenne pepper in a food processor. Add salt and pepper to taste. Sauté shrimp in olive oil just to warm up (about 15 seconds each side).

Assembly: Add one or two slices of tomato to each Pretzel Crisp. Top with a dollop of remoulade. Place a shrimp on top, another small dollop of remoulade and garnish with chopped chives.

Source: Snack Factory Pretzel Crisps





White Bean Spread with Crispy Sage and Pomegranate Seeds dress up Pretzel Crisps. SPECIAL TO THE CLARION-LEDGER