



FOOD AND DRINK

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Must Consume: Thunder Bay's Unexpected 'Persian' Connection

When in Thunder Bay, be sure to get a nibble of something sweet, pink and uniquely local

By Bonnie Schiedel | Billy

Ottawa has the BeaverTail, Paris has the macaron, Lisbon has the pastel de nata – and Thunder Bay has the persian. When you visit Thunder Bay, it won't be long before someone asks, "Have you had a persian yet?"

The city's signature pastry is a sweet roll much like a cinnamon bun, but the special twist is that it's topped with pale pink icing lightly flavoured with strawberry or raspberry jam. If that sounds like an awesomely over-the-top sugar bomb, it is. Occasionally you hear of some American purveyors that have "persian buns" topped with chocolate, but Thunder Bay proudly claims the pale pink persian as its own.

No one's completely sure how the persian came to be, but a leading theory has it that the name is a corruption of "Pershing." General John "Black Jack" Pershing, who led American forces against Germany in the First World War, is thought to be involved somehow; the name could derive from a patriotic wartime rechristening of bismarcks, which are round doughnuts filled with jelly or custard.

Danny Nucci, owner of Thunder Bay's [The Persian Man](#), says the version he has always heard is that in the 1940s, Art Bennett of [Bennett's Bakery & Deli](#) was mixing some sweet dough when General Pershing came in (apparently he was in the area by way of Duluth, Minnesota). They started talking and Bennett ended up naming his pastry creation a "persian." Pershing would have been in his eighties by that point, but, hey, it's a good story. Nucci's late dad, Mario, who bought Bennett's in 1961, is credited with popularizing the persian through his bakeries.

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Generations of T-Bayers have grown up raising their blood sugar levels with persians. They're sold at schools as fundraisers and have been known to be served at kids' birthday parties and weddings in lieu of cake. Persians even star in their own Facebook memes, such a picture of a drone carrying a bakery box with "Taste the Pink" emblazoned on the side.

While there's no such thing as a persian delivery drone (yet), departing T-Bayers have made the pastries fly. Wistful former residents on a visit home often make a special bakery trip to get one last persian fix or stock up when they return to wherever they're living. "I've sent them to Toronto and people have paid the overnight courier rate of \$50," Nucci says. "I've shipped them to California and Hawaii – we put the icing on the side – and I know people who have taken them on the plane back to England. It's just feel-good food and it's a tradition that reminds them of home."

Artists are inspired by the persian too. [Ian Phillips](#), who is originally from Thunder Bay and now lives in Toronto, creates pop art images of the persian combined with Thunder Bay landmarks, like the Sleeping Giant, the Kam River or the Royal Edward Hotel. They're a pink-hued shout-out to the area's LGBTQ community (the painting above is his). Betty Carpick, a multidisciplinary artist, has been intrigued by the persian for years, creating everything from an installation at Urban Infill (a local Nuit Blanche-like event) and a four-minute pseudo-documentary film, to textile versions of persians, including a bra and dry-felted mini persians.



Courtesy The Persian Man

What makes the persian such a compelling muse? "The ethereal colours, shape and the idea of the sugar-buzz-inducing pastry appeal to me. The name itself seems remote from anything that one would typically associate with northwestern Ontario," she says. "As with many sweet, pleasurable and indulgent treats, the persian appeals to people of all ages and I like that."

Nucci says that in a year, his bakeries sell about 80,000 dozen persians. That works out to almost a million in a city with a population of about 110,000, and that doesn't take into account the other bakeries throughout the city that make them, which include [Holland Bakery](#), [Current River Bakery](#) and [5 Star Bakery](#). You can also find them in local grocery stores. It's an easy, decadent way to try a slightly quirky and authentic Thunder Bay delicacy – especially at somewhere around \$9 a dozen.

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