

Belgian Waffles a Sweet Sensation at 1964 World's Fair

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NEW YORK (AP) — The notion of introducing a new food to the American public is almost inconceivable in an era of TV chefs, global cuisine and foodie websites.

But that's what happened 50 years ago at the 1964 New York World's Fair in Queens, N.Y., when a family from Belgium introduced Belgian waffles, topped with fresh whipped cream, powdered sugar and sliced strawberries.

Once Maurice and Rose Vermersch and their daughter MariePaule began serving the delicacy, there was no turning back the crowds.

"From the moment we opened there was a line. We couldn't see the end," recalled MariePaule Vermersch, 66, who helped her parents serve an average of 2,500 waffles a day during the fair, which opened 50 years ago on April 22, 1964. "It was wild."

They were supposed to be called Brussels waffles — named for the Belgian capital, where they were a specialty — but her mother soon realized many Americans didn't know where Brussels was.

The Vermersch family first served the treat two years earlier at the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle, and for years after they made the waffles at the annual New York State Fair in Syracuse. But it was at the 1964 event in New York City that the waffles became a sensation.

Compared to American waffles, the Belgian treat was light, crispy and fluffy. To this day, baby boomers fondly recall the memory of enjoying them at the fair.

Vermersch said that for years she ran a coffee shop, MariePaule's Authentic Belgian Waffles, in her current home of Albuquerque, New Mexico, that featured a picture of the 1964 World's Fair.

"People would look at the name and see the picture and say, 'I ate those waffles at the World's Fair,' and they'd pick up the phone and call their parents," said Vermersch, who is in New York to attend the fair's 50th anniversary celebration this month, and also to care for her 95-year-old mother, who lives in Queens. "I couldn't believe how often that would happen."

What made the waffles so good? Vermersch cited a special cast-iron pan that heats up to 500 degrees. "As soon as the batter touches the grill, it gets crispy on the outside and soft on the inside," she said. "You don't want to put anything syrupy on it or it will turn it into a sponge."

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They served the waffles with whipped cream, adding hand-sliced strawberries for color.

Waffles in the United States date back to the Pilgrims, who were familiar with them from time spent in the Netherlands, which has a similar waffle culture. And during the latter part of the 18th century, "waffle parties" were all the rage. Today, a version of the Belgian waffle can be found in diners and restaurants across the country.

Vermersch said she vowed never to create an instant mix because the recipe requires fresh, carefully prepped ingredients: pure vanilla, fresh yeast or self-rising flour, melted but cooled sweet butter, and eggs at room temperature, with egg whites added at the end.

But that's as much information as she'll divulge. About 12 years ago, she sold the Maurice Authentic Belgian Waffle recipe to a Syracuse family on condition that it be served only at the New York State Fair. The exact recipe, she says, is a secret.

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