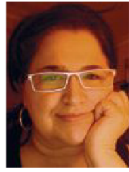


A MOSAIC IN FLOUR AND SUGAR

Ethnic bakeries add to the mixing bowl of our eclectic Canadian culture



I've done a lot of moving around, settling in many neighbourhoods defined by a specific culture. I've lived in what's known as a Polish neighbourhood, although Ukrainians and Lithuanians were noticeably part of the mix. The bakeries were unmistakably Eastern European. Two area green grocers were both Chinese.

Recently, I've been living in a Portuguese neighbourhood. Two dominating bakeries are both Portuguese, one a highly successful province-wide franchise called Nova Era. The area's green grocer is, well, interesting. They're Chinese, but because they come from Peru, they're also fluent in Spanish.

It's disconcerting at first, and then a beautiful discovery, a reminder that the first significant wave of immigrants to Peru in the mid 19th century was Chinese, followed by the Japanese 50 years later.

In the coming weeks, I'm moving into a predominantly Caribbean borough, which makes me think of Bob Marley singing *One World*. Our world, Canada, is changing. So is our food. So are our bakeries.

The 2006 census, Statistics Canada's most current available data, claims that one in five Canadians was born somewhere else – 19.8 per cent, in fact, the largest proportion in 75 years. Just over 58 per cent come from Asia (more on what "Asia" means in a minute); 16 per cent come from Europe; and neck and neck for third place at just over 10 per cent each are Central and South America, the Caribbean (that's one group) and Africa.

A few words about "Asia." The United Nations recently made some changes to what we might call the region formerly known as the Middle East. It deemed the moniker "Euro-centric" and went instead with "West Asia." Its largest cities are Istanbul, Tehran, Baghdad, Riyadh and Ankara. Of these countries, Iran is the

bakery standout, but it's best identified as Persian. That way, we're not caught thinking about a rogue state.

In North Vancouver's Little Persia, you'll find Laleh, in Calgary, Orchid Pastry, in North Toronto, Shirini Sara Pastry House, and in Montreal, Nocochi Café Pâtisserie, each with varying degrees of sophistication. While Laleh scales up home-style baking, Shirini Sara masters the art of the miniature, providing a sophistication that speaks to exotica-loving foodies.

Another way to draw the cultural map of our current mosaic is to follow an ethnic specialty. I looked for *alfajores*, pronounced alfa-hor-eh, the sabley sugar cookie filled with *dulce de leche*. Although they're said to originate in Argentina, Venezuela stakes a claim to them, and Latins generally think of them in the way that we think of the butter tart – it's ours.

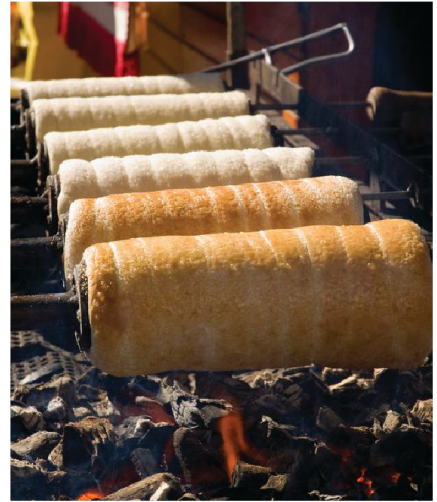
Calgary's Coco Karamel specializes in

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alfajores, sexing them up with chocolate and extra icing. Think of it as a butter tart *crème brûlée*. At the other end of the spectrum, at Raviolini in Vancouver, *alfajores* share counter space with biscotti, tiramisu, Peruvian pastries and Italian savoury foods, matching the owners' dual origins.

Latino baking is beginning to get noticed. Edmonton's La Monarca is hugely successful. Winnipeg's La Fiesta Cafecito wants people know they're Salvadoran. Toronto keeps Las Palmas, La Rosa Chilena and Pancho's busy. Elsewhere across the country, though, Latino sweets are primarily found in restaurants, such as La Chilenita and Barros Luco in Montreal, and Café Aroma Latino in Halifax. Ethnic food service seems to follow this path: first comes the specialty market, then the restaurant and then the bakery.

One new specialty to Canada is *kurtos kolasc*. It translates roughly as "chimney cake," stands a foot high and is made by wrapping a sweet dough around a perforated cylinder. It's cooked in the



To make these chimney cakes, sweet dough is wrapped around a perforated cylinder and baked on the outside while steam-cooking the inside.

bakery equivalent of a rotisserie, baking on the outside and steam-cooking on the inside. When it comes out of the oven, it gets covered in caramel and rolled in chopped nuts. Transylvania Traditions is the Vancouver bakery specializing in this sweet. Owners Alexandru and Narcisa Stoian arrived from Romania in 2007 and quickly opened shop. Narcisa is a second-generation baker. Her technique is as dramatic as the finished product, intended to be shared over coffee (Alexandru's specialty). Eastern Europeans have always enjoyed a strong café culture.

We have to be careful with what we call our sweets. A foodie message board took exception to *kurtos kolasc* being called Romanian – it's clearly Hungarian, more than one enthusiast pointed out. You might say it's the Transylvanian butter tart.

Looking ahead, Statistics Canada has made some important projections. By 2031, the agency says, 25 to 28 per cent of the population will be foreign born; 55 per cent will be from Asia. The foreign-born population will grow four times faster than the rest of the population. The number of Arab and West Asian immigrants will triple and be the fastest growing of all ethnic groups. Welcome all and get baking. / BJ

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