



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN LISTENING SERIES

No Restraint – Berger Cookies and the City of Baltimore

By Katie Marquette

Woman's Voice: You know when you look at a Berger Cookie, it's this kind of soft cookie base with a big huge glob of chocolate frosting on top.

Man's Voice: The cookie was just a delivery mechanism for the icing itself. The icing outweighs the cookie by an impressive margin.

Woman's Voice: And it's kind of "what you see is what you get," you know that you're going to bite into it and your teeth are going to feel the sugar granules and everything. And I kind of feel that way about Baltimore – like the people here, I talk to strangers all the time – people are really "what you see is what you get;" there is a real genuineness to the community here.

Man's Voice: I don't keep Berger Cookies in my house only because I'm constantly watching my girlish figure, however when friends come to visit we always get them, because it is a Baltimore thing to do. It's also fun to see people react when they take their first bite into their first Berger cookie because – the level of delight, all the sugar just rushes to their brain – it never goes down, it goes up – it goes right up into their head and to their brain. They are a joy to behold as they are beholding their first Berger Cookie.

Woman's Voice: My sister-in-law keeps them in her freezer at all times, and so every time I see her, she asks me to bring her boxes, and she lives in Colorado. So she has, I think, three or four boxes right now in her fridge. And I know when she runs low, because she'll text me, "Heidi, next time I see you, bring me more boxes." I know, she and her fiancé ration them out, so they will eat the cookies when they deserve them, but there are boxes stored in their freezer. I told her, they freeze really well, not only are they delicious – insider tip – you can freeze them.

Man's Voice: When you live in Baltimore, they find their way to you, no matter where you are or who's trying to keep them away from you.

Katie Marquette: Hi, I'm Katie Marquette with The Big Pond. Here in the city of Baltimore a few of our culinary claims to fame include crabs, Old Bay seasoning, and Berger Cookies. Berger Cookies elicit extreme responses. There is absolutely nothing subtle about them. A small vanilla wafer topped with an obscene amount of fudge, they are a Baltimore staple and the perfect post-crab feast dessert. While we don't know much about their history, we do know they have their origins with a German immigrant family, the Berger family. German immigrant Henry Berger moved to the US in 1835 and soon opened a bakery in East Baltimore. While Berger cookies' roots may be in Germany, their taste is unlike anything from the home country. My fellow producer, Melissa Gerr, traveled to Germany recently and brought some Berger cookies along with her. Her friend Kate is an American, but her husband is German, and they are raising their sons in Germany.

Kate Brenner: My name is Kate Brenner, and I'm here with my sons, in Ravensburg, Germany and we're about to try Baltimore's Berger Cookies for the first time.

[Kate unwraps the Cookie]

Melissa Gerr: What does this taste like to you? Did you like the Berger Cookie?

Young Boy: Yes, yes, yes, very much! Because it's very chocolatey, it's like a brownie. It's a little bit like a brownie, I find.

Melissa Gerr: And would you eat a second one if you had one in front of you?

Young Boy: Yes, yes, yes, yes!

Katie Marquette: How many more?

Young Boy: One thousand.

Katie Marquette: I really like them.

Young Boy: I love them, *[German]* ich liebe sie!

Boys *[German]*: Vielen Dank für die Kekse!

Katie Marquette: This reaction is pretty typical when trying a Berger cookie for the first time. Although I grew up eating the cookies, I never realized how unique they were to the Baltimore area. It wasn't until I traveled around after college and met people from different parts of the country that I realized what a unique dessert we had here. After World War I, George Russell, a young man who worked for the Berger family, took over the business. Another switch happened when the DeBaufre family, who worked for the Russells, bought the business in 1969. Berger cookies are owned by the DeBaufre family to this day. I went to go visit the current owner, Charles DeBaufre at the Berger bakery in the Cherry Hill neighborhood of Baltimore City. Located next to the train tracks, the building is unmarked and unassuming. When you walk inside, you are greeted by the hum of ovens and the smell of fudge.

[Machines running]

Charles DeBaufre: My name is Charles DeBaufre, and I am the owner of the DeBaufre Bakeries which owns Berger Cookies. I am second generation; my father and my uncles

owned it previously. Prior to that, we were a family of Russells for two generations, and the actual Bergers for I know at least two generations, maybe three. You're not going to take to something that's not good – and the fact is they are good. You got to like chocolate, if you don't like chocolate, you're not going to like them. But you got to like chocolate. They are handmade, and they are around. I don't toot my own horn. This is it, this is my job, this is what I do, I love my job. I would never have changed anything.

[Sounds of wire cut machine]

Charles DeBaufre: This is a wire cut machine – so it's literally a wire there, and it cuts the dough. It's low tech; out of everything I have, this is probably the lowest tech, but yet it's still the thing that's more fun to watch than everything.

Katie Marquette: Yeah, it is. It's very satisfying to see these neat little rows of cookies come out.

Charles DeBaufre: You can see how many it produces in seconds. It's just the second step – the first is mixing it – that's the second step – then you bake it – then you dump it – you know, but again, they've been doing it. And at Christmas, it's a whole different animal. Can you imagine doing this five days a week for nine to ten hours a day?

Katie Marquette: It's hard work! So we have one guy, he's got the wafers, and he's handing them to two folks here, and they're kind of scooping the fudge onto the cookies.

Charles DeBaufre: He's tossing these in to the chocolate, and the idea is to get it flat part down, it holds the chocolate better than the rounder part.

Katie Marquette: This is, you know, why each Berger Cookie is unique.

Charles DeBaufre: They're not all the same. It's almost like a snowflake.

Katie Marquette: Some have more fudge, some have less fudge. I mean, they all have a lot of fudge.

Charles DeBaufre: Some have a fingerprint in them. Because it didn't come off their finger correctly. That sounds bad, but they are wearing gloves. That fingerprint in it just sounds bad.

[Sounds of plastic wrapping on conveyer belt]

Katie Marquette: Can you describe what we're looking at here? It's kind of like a conveyer belt.

Charles DeBaufre: This is the overwrap machine. They load the cookies in the package, in the trough there, it comes up, and it goes through the paper and it seals it, top, I mean sides and bottom, and it comes through, and it also throws the date on the bottom of the package.

Katie Marquette: So what's coming out here are these two-packs of Berger Cookies.

Charles DeBaufre: Yeah, these are the snack packs. There's two cookies in each pack. They typically sell for about 2.50.

Katie Marquette: I see these a lot. I've gotten these a lot as wedding favors.

Charles DeBaufre: Yes! That's a big, that was a big plus finding this. Not the reason we found it, but it's a big plus to doing it. It's perfect to put in the welcome bags.

Katie Marquette: After saying goodbye to Charles, my bags stuffed with his generous gifts of Berger Cookies and Berger cakes, I wanted to learn more about why Berger Cookies are so synonymous with Baltimore. I get in touch with Andrew Reiner, lecturer at Towson University and self-proclaimed Berger aficionado. He wrote an article in the Washington Post back in 2012 explaining the mixed feelings he had when Berger Cookies started showing up in posh neighborhoods of DC.

Andrew Reiner: My antenna was up with the whole DC thing. I'm from Baltimore, and as with a lot of old-school Baltimoreans, we're very kind of, when it comes to DC, we really don't pay a lot of attention in terms of what is going on over there. But my antenna was up, I was in that area, and I found out that Berger Cookies were entering that market. What happened was, I remember now, I had gone to a grocery store, I had gone to a Giant grocery store in Northern Virginia – and that's completely still the DC area – and I saw Berger Cookies. Most people's first thought would be, "Hey this is great, this is something I really love", which I do, but my first thought was: How dare they? What are these doing here? I felt betrayal that Berger Cookies were on a display in the DC market. I felt like I had been betrayed. So what happened was, I did a little bit of digging, and found out that in fact Berger Cookies were really just starting to enter the DC market, and so I thought, these people need a primer, these people need to know what they are getting themselves into, without just saying, oh this is from Baltimore, just take a look at it, this is something that just doesn't cut it for who we are here. And I thought these people need to understand the gift they have been given.

Katie Marquette: Andrew likes Berger Cookies so much he often uses them as a kind of character test. His wife's dislike of the cookie was a big red flag on their first date.

Andrew Reiner: And I distinctly remember driving down, we were going down to Hampden. Hampden is a really cool, funky area of Baltimore. It used to be a very blue-collar area that has become kind of hip and very arts centered. And there's a lot of great restaurants and cafes there, and we were driving down there. And on the drive down, I had a pack of Berger cookies in the car, because my wife is from the DC area – and I said, "OK, as I said to you during a phone-call that we had had beforehand" – this is on our first date – "I kept my end of the bargain, I brought Berger cookies." And she thought I was joking. So I said, "I need you to at least just try one and tell me what you think", and my wife is somebody who, even more so than now, which is saying a lot, because she's still an incredibly health-conscious eater, then was even more scrutinizing, if that's even possible, if you knew my wife. She took a bite of it, and I thought for sure, I thought for sure, she was going to absolutely positively say, "You know what, I'm looking at the ingredients, it's not really healthy, but man, this is good." She took a bite, she put it down, and said, "Thank you very much." You know, I almost lost control of the car. I thought, I literally said to her, "What is wrong with you? Seriously. Are you just doing this because you're trying to yank my chain here?" And she said, "No, it's just a little bit too much, it just doesn't work for me." There's no, she

didn't use the word, but really what she was saying is, there just wasn't enough restraint. There's no restraint in that cookie. And they're not trying to posture that they are.

Katie Marquette: Luckily he got over her distaste for Berger Cookies, and I guess that just means more for him. And like any connoisseur of fine wines will tell you, there is a right and a wrong way to do a tasting. The same is true with Bergers. I brought with me to the interview some Berger Cookies. They - along with some Utz Crab Chips - were the party favors at a wedding I had gone to over the weekend.

Andrew Reiner: OK, so what we have here, and these are not easy to get outside of Baltimore, I don't think you can even get the two pack, is a two pack of a Berger cookie - In typical Berger Cookie fashion, there is absolutely positively no uniformity to the look of these two cookies.

[Cellophane crinkling]

And, so, just going to open the little package here - the cellophane - One of the things that, I don't know that a lot of people probably go for this, but I've always really enjoyed the stale ones. I do, I've enjoyed the stale ones. Because when they're fresh, and they have the fudge on top of them, and they look fantastic, when they're fresh, you can get the fudge off with your teeth, which is a fun way to do it, that a lot of people do like to do it - but when it's stale, you can kind of bite down a little bit, and just really easily extract that, and once it's in your mouth, it kind of gets softer anyway. Some people do bite into them, and as a lot of Berger Cookie aficionados probably will tell you, that's really kind of wasting the whole sensory experience. So, I'm going to do, sometimes I pick off the fudge and just eat it separately, but one of the things I used to do a lot when I first started eating them is that you kind of - I'm already salivating - this is so funny, it's like this total Pavlovian response - I'm going to bite into it, and with my front teeth only, I'm going to kind of slide back some of the fudge. When I sit down to eat these, and really appreciate them, that's kind of the experience I personally try to go for. *[Andrew bites into cookie]* OK, my front teeth are going in now. The trick, when you do this, is to not get the cookie in there too, you want to try to do it without getting the cookie as much as possible, which isn't easy because it's a very soft cookie. *[Andrew smacks cookie]* Haven't lost my touch.

Katie Marquette: Expertly done.

Andrew Reiner: Well, thank you. One of the great things about extracting it this way is that with a Berger Cookie, even though you get that top layer of the fudge-cream icing off, you are still left with a kind of foundation that you don't completely get off. So it's a win-win. I would say, just as good as I remember them, but I just had them a couple weeks ago, so they taste as good as always, really.

Katie Marquette: While the taste may be acquired, everyone in Baltimore agrees the cookies have become representative of the land of pleasant living.

Andrew Reiner: If you go to a Baltimore crab feast, by people who are from Baltimore, you will often find Berger Cookies as the coup-de-grâce. That is typically what a real Baltimore crab feast ends them on. I remember going to, at about this time, when I was in graduate school, and I remember going to a friend's house, and his Mom was from

Baltimore and she had Berger Cookies after dinner – and that is a thing, people will sometimes have them after dinner. And I remember my friend’s fiancée ate one. I was just indignant. I just remember saying, I remember, she was from Maine, and I remember thinking “She doesn’t get this, she does not clearly get this.” And this to me was a much larger commentary on her character. The fact that somebody would agonize so much with one cookie over the calories, over the ingredients, over the amount of sugar, which of course, as somebody gets older, these are things you need to think about a little bit. But at the time, when I was eating those packs of cookies in one sitting, this to me was treasonous.

Katie Marquette: Berger Cookies, like Baltimore, are charming. They are excessive, exuberant, and unique – no restraint, like Andrew said. They are indicative of good food and good times. So grab a box of Bergers, crack open a Natty Boh, and start picking your pile of crabs. I’m Katie Marquette with The Big Pond.

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