

# As American as apple pie

By Pia de Jong

When my Princeton neighbor came home from the hospital after an operation, he was put on a liquid diet for a week. Now he was starving. So I offered to buy him a treat. "What did your mother give you when you were sick as a little boy?" I asked. He looked a little dreamy-eyed and cleared his throat. "Ice cream!" he said. "In a cone, of course."

It turned out that the ice cream cone was invented in his hometown of St. Louis, during the 1904 World's Fair. "St. Louis holds the heat well," he explained to me.

But because it is near the end of the Missouri River, blocks of ice from the Rocky Mountains could be could be floated down the river as far as St. Louis in summertime. St. Louis was one of the few big cities in the country where you could still get ice cream in August.

And because of the large crowds, there was a shortage of cups at the World's Fair. In order to provide everyone with ice-cream, it was scooped up and put in folded-up papers and wafers. His grandmother often told him how she walked with her father around the grounds of the World's Fair, holding an ice cream cone.

My neighbor got a twinkle in his eye. "Do you know the movie *Meet Me in St. Louis*?" he asked. "With Judy Garland?" Before I could answer, he rose from his chair and sang, completely off-key, "Meet me in St. Louis, Louie, meet me at the Fair." I covered my ears with my hands.

Until now, I had always assumed that ice cream cones had arrived from Italy. As a girl in the Netherlands, I had loved my imported gelato cones. They certainly could not be from a sweaty river town in the American Midwest. I told my neighbor that the weather was still



Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

too cool to give him ice cream.

"In that case," he said, "what I would really like is apple pie. My mother always baked apple pie when I was sick. Once that aroma came out of the oven,

neighbor. "Nothing is as American as apple pie," I added, as I placed a checkboard of dough strips on a grid over sweetened slices of apples from Terhune Orchards.

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I sprang from my bed to grab a piece. I was a new man."

The next day I was back in my kitchen, cooking with flour, butter and apples. "It will be just like old times," I told my

But once again he woke me up. "There is little that is American about apple pie," he said. "To begin with, apples are originally not from America. The native apples were crab apples, or wild apples,

which are acidic, and no matter how much sugar you use, or how long you cook them, they remain inedible."

He said that the settlers brought their own apple trees, along with their pie recipes. Apple pie was so wildly popular here that it just seemed to be homegrown.

The legend of Johnny Appleseed, who is portrayed in children's books as a carefree little American boy scattering apple seeds into the soil, contributed to this myth. Apple pie soon became synonymous with American growth and a symbol of American patriotism.

The New York Times wrote in 1902 that eating apple pie two times a week is not enough because it is the secret of prosperity and the basis of the industrial power. "Apple pie is the food of the heroic. A people who do not eat apple pie will disappear permanently from the earth." When soldiers were asked what they were fighting for during World War II, they all chimed in with the same answer: "For mothers and apple pie!"

An hour later, as my neighbor was finishing his second slice of pie, I thought of the metaphor I had learned in school of America as a melting pot. This country is indeed a porridge of cultures. But it's not only people who emigrate. Foods do, too. Along the way there are things added to, adapted to different tastes, or totally changed. The strength of this country lies not so much in inventing new dishes as in the ability to import the best of the world and to put on it a large stamp: Made in the U.S.A.

And don't even get me started about chopped liver.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who moved to Princeton in 2012. Her memoir, *Charlotte*, published in Amsterdam in January, is a top-10 bestseller. She can be contacted at [piadejong.com](mailto:piadejong.com).