



# Hometown Glory

Casey Barber tracks down the best regional snacks in the United States



Like most children, I grew up thinking the world revolved around me. (It was obvious that Mister Rogers was talking through the television directly to me, and that I was the only one apart from Big Bird who could see Snuffleupagus.) So, it came as a tremendous shock when I moved from Pittsburgh to Chicago for grad school only to realize that not every American of my generation had spent their early years on intimate terms with Kandy Kakes and Krimpets.

In this age of corporate conglomeration and instant gratification—not to mention the groundswell of food nostalgia gripping the nation—it's not surprising to see snacks that used to be local-only treasures popping up in supermarkets across the country. Nowadays, a North Carolina transplant just might discover [Cheerwine soda](#) in Utah; a born-and-bred Chicagoan may delightedly devour a bag of Gardetto's snack mix at a Texas rest stop. It's more shocking today to come across a few snack food producers sticking loyally to their core markets, letting their regional legions of believers keep the flame alive. Throughout the United States, you'll still find cult snack foods that continue to use the same family recipes and small-batch production methods that they did in the days of their inception. Here are three of the best.

## Tastykake

Peanut Butter Kandy Kakes—soft and fluffy, like Girl Scout Tagalongs—and bite-size Butterscotch Krimpets are two of the most beloved mini cakes from the Philadelphia bakery that has been cranking out baked goods for almost 100 years. With two or three cakes to a pack and expiration dates prominently stamped on every plastic wrapper and cardboard box, these super-fresh cakes hold legendary status for people from Pennsylvania and its neighboring states. “Before schools had vending machines, you could barter Kandy Kakes or filled chocolate cupcakes for almost anything,” says event manager and Philadelphia expat Christine Galanti, who still makes regular trips home for Krimpets. “They were the MVP of the lunch box.” In fact, Tastykakes are intergalactically popular: Commander Chris Ferguson, the astronaut who piloted the final space shuttle mission, pocketed some for his voyage to the International Space Station.

Supermarkets and convenience stores throughout southern New England and the Mid-Atlantic stock their shelves with Tastykakes, though you can also find them as far south as Alabama and Florida.

## It's-It

On the other side of the country, wouldn't you expect the Bay Area to have one of the most über-local snacks of all? For almost 50 years following the invention of the It's-It in 1928, San Franciscans could only get their fix of this oatmeal cookie-bound ice cream sandwich dunked in a chocolate shell at Playland-at-the-Beach, an amusement park on the city's western edge. After Playland closed in 1972, It's-It put down roots in Burlingame and brought the sandwiches to a slightly bigger slice of the public. Charles Shamieh, It's-It's CEO, notes that the ice cream and cookie recipes haven't changed a lick since 1974. Dense, rich, whipped ice cream, slightly salty oatmeal rounds, and chocolate that flakes and melts with a thin, Klondike-style crunch bring a wallop of nostalgia to Gen Xers who haven't tasted an It's-It since their elementary school days. “You're pretty much indoctrinated as soon as you enter the Bay Area public school system,” recalls graphic designer Ben de Jesus, who joins his friend, writer Stephanie Stiavetti, on her It's-It binges. Though vanilla remains the company's top seller, Stiavetti, like others who just missed the treat's Playland heyday, has a soft spot for the mint ice cream version. “My grown-up palate enjoys the oatmeal cookie way more than it did when I was a kid!”

Savvy retail shoppers can snag an It's-It from store freezers as far east as Denver, but to get them across the Rocky Mountains, you've got to pony up for a FedEx delivery; trek out to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where mint It's-Its have been spotted in Bedford Cheese Shop; or be a Google employee (West Coast transplants in the Manhattan office have been known to be overnighted a taste of home).

## Zapp's

If savory snacks steal your heart, you'd do no better than to seek out Zapp's kettle-cooked potato chips from the lowlands of Gramercy, Louisiana. As the “pioneers of Cajun-flavored snacks,” according to director of sales Richard Gaudry, the company's signature—and memorably named—Spicy Cajun Crawtators bring subtle garlic- and paprika-tinged heat to thick potato slices sizzled in peanut oil or a peanut oil blend.

Zapp's works with local spice companies to source ingredients for its trademark flavors like Voodoo, initially a limited edition flavor—simultaneously sour like salt and vinegar, pungent like spicy Creole tomato, smoky-sweet like mesquite BBQ, and salty like every good potato chip should be. Breakout star Voodoo ended the Crawtators' multidecade best-selling reign in only a year and a half and earned a spot on the permanent menu.

Though Zapp's does “stealth business” in delis and restaurants as far as Georgia and the Carolinas, as well as popping up once again in Brooklyn, at Park Slope specialty food store Bierkraft, “we stick within a 300-mile radius of New Orleans. If our trucks can't get there and back, it's too far,” Gaudry says. Keeping a tightly controlled retail bubble around Louisiana ensures the chips don't go stale on the shelf and can be replaced with fresh product on a regular basis.

But are the days of the truly cult-status snack numbered? With new corporate parents swooping in to finance local companies—within the past year, Zapp's and Tastykake were purchased by Utz and Flowers Foods, respectively—the idea of expanding into a bigger piece of the market can be tempting.

Though it seems inevitable in an increasingly diversified world, to date, the little guys are resisting the temptation of worldwide domination: Zapp's plans to stay a regional product, Gaudry indicates, and Tastykake is building a bigger, better, more [eco-friendly bakery](#) in Philly, though the new owner is based in Atlanta. For the keepers of the company's legacy, it's a question of quality control above all. “We always have plans to expand distribution,” says Shamieh of It's-It, “but we're looking for the right connection. It always has to be someone who believes in the product.”

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Casey Barber is the editor of [Good Food Stories](#), and a freelance writer and recipe developer whose work has appeared in *ReadyMade*, *Time Out New York*, *iVillage*, and more. A lifelong snack food addict, she has even cooked up her own DIY recipe for [butterscotch mini cakes](#) that pay tribute to the beloved Tastykake snack.