

Culinary Traditions Embraced at Lehto's Pasties



Ask the nearest Michigander to name a famous Upper Peninsula food and there is a good chance that they will quickly reply “Pasty!”. Much like poutine in Quebec or tamales in New Mexico, pasties enjoy iconic regional status. And for good reason—the simple filling of rutabaga, onion, beef, and potato baked into a stout crust, pasties can satisfy even the largest appetites.



Pasties claim a history that originates in Cornwall, England when wives of Cornish tin miners fashioned these pocket-meals to nourish their men as they labored in the mines. Deep working depths didn't allow for easy lunch breaks, and the thick crust made these ingenious hand-pies perfect for carrying warm food in their hands without making a mess of things.

Immigrants from Cornwall brought the recipe to Michigan's Upper Peninsula in the 19th century where workers in the vast area copper mines readily embraced the satisfying convenience, making humble pasty into a Yooper favorite.

A Legacy of Taste

Travelers to the area have forever been greeted with Pasties-for-Sale signs upon disembarking this side of the Mackinac Bridge.

Indeed, we didn't have to look very far for an opportunity to sample the storied hand-pie. We took the [St. Ignace](#) exit and headed straight-away to Lehto's, downtown.



For an impressive 77 years, [Lehto's Pasties](#) has been a beacon of flavor and tradition in St. Ignace. Strolling into Lehto's, ready to taste this local delight, we spoke with Laurie Walker, niece of the original owners Johnnie and Cassie Lehto. Walker now owns Lehto's, along with her husband Bill. Scions of traditional yooper cookery, the Walkers are happy to introduce new generations this historical fare.

Laurie Walker filled us in on the Lehto's Pasties story, which originated in a humble kitchen off US 2 where Walker's aunt and uncle first offered their original beef pasty in 1947. She explained how they got their start, "My uncle worked at the fire boat down at the ferry back in the days when there was no bridge. My aunt started making him pasties for lunch. She would go down to the ferry boat and bring him his pasties. And they smelled so good! All the other workers would say, "Well, can I have one of those?" It just flourished into a huge business over the years."



Lehto's continues to offer their beef pasties out of the original US 2 location. Walker shared something interesting about the historic building that has housed Lehto's for so many decades: "The unique thing about the shop is my aunt and uncle's clothes are insulating it! We talked to a contractor about re-insulating the building, but we'd have to tear it down. I don't think our customers would be too happy about that!"

Embrace Tradition

You will find just one pasty flavor at the US 2 location: the original beef recipe. Lehto's also sells their famous pasties from a downtown counter-style eatery across from the Shepler's Ferry Docks.

The downtown establishment caters to a variety of palates with homemade soups (try their award-winning chili!), in-house smoked beef jerky, delectable salads, and even huge homemade cookies. The downtown location offers *three* flavors of pasty: original beef, chicken, and veggie. The best part of the veggie pasty according to Laurie Walker? The raisins!



The Cornish Recipe

The star ingredient, rutabaga (for flavor), harkens back to Cornish roots. The Cornish recipe is distinct, being traditionally made with beef, rutabaga, onion, and carrot, only seasoned with salt and pepper. Like most culinary exports, the pasty recipe changed over time to include regional variations. Pasty places in the Upper Peninsula have experimented with diverse creative additions that would make traditionalists clutch their pearls over the breach of PDO laws.

Walker believes that Lehto's Pasties' allure lies within the meticulous crafting of its crust—light, flaky, and buttery: “In fact, people even ask if they can have more crust because it is so good!” She added, “What also makes us unique is that everything is made fresh everyday. No one gets an old Pasty or a re-heated Pasty here!” With a savory side of gravy, you are sure to leave satisfied!

Tradition Lives On

The legacy of Lehto's Pasties continues to thrive, embracing new chapters while holding steadfast to its roots. If you are interested in sending some authentic U.P. food, you're in luck! Walker informed us that Lehto's ships pasties all over the country. “So people that can't drive up here to the U.P., they get a little bit of love in their box.” Lehto's also sells frozen pasties so you can take a few of these beauties home for inevitable future pasty cravings.

When we visited, dining at the picnic tables outside seemed like a good choice. As we lounged in the sunshiney outdoors, scarfing our veggie pasties (the raisins do indeed add considerable charm), I reveled in both the food and the water-filled views of folks headed to Mackinac Island.

Lehto's Pasties
626 N State St
St Ignace, MI 49781
Phone: 1-906-643-8542