

The Sweet Taste of Childhood—With Coconut on Top

**Reconstructing a recipe for the rolls my grandfather remembers from his
early days in Milwaukee**

BY ALEXANDER ACIMAN JANUARY 2, 2024



Just after sunrise on a Sunday morning in 1943, a 13-year-old could go into the Salinsky family bakery on the then-Jewish west side of Milwaukee, and for a mere 30 cents could walk out with six coconut sweet rolls.

I know this because the 13-year-old in question is my grandfather Fred Wiviott, who still remembers his

weekly ritual after finishing his paper route: “I’d walk past this bakery, and I’d smell them, and I couldn’t resist it,” he told me. Having just delivered the hefty Sunday edition to his 70 customers—a job that brought him a weekly salary of \$5—he’d wind up eating all six sweet rolls on his way home. “We used to call them *schnecks*,” he said.

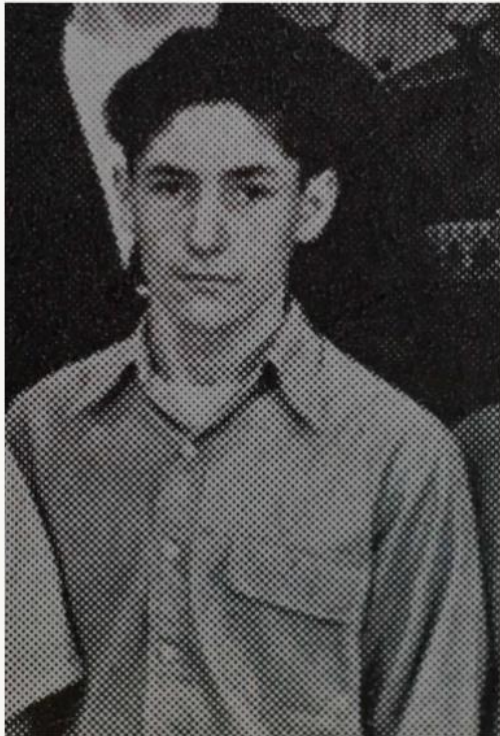
A stranger might look at the various aspects of my grandfather’s life and mistake him for an unsentimental man—a Korean War veteran, half lawyer and half engineer, a weekend golfer, a fanatic of 1950s war films, a carpenter. A Midwesterner in a gray flannel suit. But on noticing his sweet tooth, one will suddenly glimpse a boyish warmth, an unfaltering giddiness, a love of bodily pleasures and the natural world expertly played off as everyday indulgences, a memory so lush and full and molded by the kind of things that I, in my 30s, am only just now beginning to understand. The engineer in him can look back 80 years and recall the exact dimensions of those coconut sweet rolls: each one a yeasted pastry roughly 2 inches wide, and 4 inches long, with cinnamon sugar between each layer, and slathered in a layer of white vanilla frosting and shredded coconut. The rolls came stuck together; one by one, he’d tear into them on his way home.

My grandfather, like most Jews in Milwaukee, left the old neighborhood before the 1960s. The Salinskys closed their bakery. The baker pivoted to selling real estate. Now and then, at one of the few remaining Jewish establishments, a similar *schneck* could be found. But slowly, those, too, disappeared entirely. “Don’t think he doesn’t ask all the time,” my grandmother Esther said to me. “But nobody ever has them.”

This Sunday ritual easily explains my grandfather’s lifelong love of coffee cake—in particular, Entenmann’s cinnamon swirl buns, which from his description of *schnecks*, seem like a distant cousin of the thing he knew from his childhood. The problem with cinnamon swirls, however, is that the dough itself is too sweet, whereas the coconut sweet rolls were made of a barely sweetened dough, allowing the flavors of coconut and cinnamon to stand out. And none of these other rolls ever seems to come with coconut on top.

In the course of my many and ultimately failed attempts to divine some recipe for these coconut sweet rolls as a surprise for my grandfather, I trawled the internet, badgered the owners of Jewish bakeries for hints, and even had my grandmother see if she could

track down a recipe from the original family. But I'd never imagined that a version of this elusive recipe was in my grandparents' house all along.



The author's grandfather Fred Wiviott as a young man COURTESY THE AUTHOR

The story of *schnecks* goes back far beyond those Sunday mornings in 1943. The word itself likely comes from the German word for snail, *Schnecke*, because of the way the dough is coiled. And one of the only places where you can find a codified recipe for *schnecken* is in a cookbook from 1901 that acts as a compendium of recipes from

the Jewish immigrants who wound up in Milwaukee almost 150 years ago: [*The Settlement Cook Book*](#).

The story of the *schnecks* coils around itself even further than that. The Milwaukee Jewish Mission, founded in 1896 by Lizzie Black Kander and later known simply as “The Settlement,” was started as a social welfare settlement that provided basic aid to the wave of Jewish immigrants arriving in Milwaukee. As it grew—it would later become the

JCC of Milwaukee—The Settlement offered vocational training, health care, bath houses, and cooking classes. These cooking lessons were the foundation of the recipes printed in *The Settlement Cook Book*. Conveniently, the 1903 edition happened to be available for Kindle on Amazon.

And buried in the 300-page, fine-print, at times incoherently structured tome, is a recipe for what to do with leftover pastry dough: Roll it into *schnecken*. In another chapter there is a recipe for vanilla frosting—a white icing much like the one my grandfather remembered. Kander's cookbook, structured in the form of lessons for burgeoning home cooks, became one of the seminal American cookbooks, and even succeeded at introducing Jewish recipes into the American home. The cookbook was revised well over a dozen times, sometimes even in consecutive years, which meant that the recipes changed over time, and can vary wildly between editions. The 1903 recipe for *schnecken* is drastically different from the 1930s and '40s recipes. I suspect that these changes were made in an attempt by the book's authors to remain a relevant piece of American culture as Jews further assimilated and mingled their immigrant identities

with modern Midwestern American sensibilities. It worked.

The Settlement Cook Book also happens to be one of just two cookbooks on my grandmother's bookshelf. Hers was a 1950s edition that had sat unopened for years, but one afternoon we sat on the phone as she leafed through the index until at last she came across a recipe: *schnecken*. It was, not surprisingly, a completely different recipe from any others I'd looked at.

The sweet rolls my grandfather remembered were very likely a spin on the traditional *schnecken*. In order to arrive at a facsimile of the recipe from the Salinsky family bakery, I had to break down the various components of each recipe throughout the years and adjust them.

The very oldest recipes for *schnecks* in the pages of *The Settlement Cook Book* call for a sugared dough—half a cup for every five cups of flour. However, later iterations seem to leave the sugar out of the dough entirely, and instead use sugar as a dredge for the flattened dough. The biggest difference between the canonical *schnecks* and those my grandfather remembered was that the

Settlement recipe seems to yield a dough that will end up fluffy but still have something of a firm exterior. However, those from 80 years ago were fluffy, even on the surface, which, to my mind, meant adding more fat in the form of butter than the recipe called for (a common trick at bakeries and doughnut shops to make things taste better than they might at home), and also allowing for a long rise.

In order to make the *schnecks* more oblong, I had to make an initial first fold that was almost 2 inches long, rather than rolling the dough into a tightly coiled circle. Before me was a long, flat log, which I sliced into 1 1/4-inch segments and then packed into a baking tray to rise again before going into the oven. Before long, the vaporous smell of cinnamon flitted across my apartment.

I ruined the first batch almost immediately. In my excitement, I slathered room temperature frosting onto the rolls as soon as they came out of the oven, which caused the frosting to separate and run down into the bottom of my pan into a translucent mess that no amount of toasted coconut shavings could hide.

Ahead of the next batch, I put the icing in the freezer, and applied the hard, cold glaze directly to the warm rolls. This time, the frosting glided effortlessly over the rippling hot layers of cinnamon-covered dough, leaving behind a trail of pristine, sugary stalagmites. I sprinkled on the toasted coconut, and sent a photo to my grandparents (my 90-year-old grandmother learned how to text last year).

Unable to resist, I tore one of the fully dressed rolls from its mates. It was not Sunday morning, but rather a Tuesday afternoon, nor was I in Milwaukee, nor was it 1943, but for a moment I tried to imagine myself there, half a century before I was even a germ of an idea, standing on the streets of an old neighborhood I'd hardly ever visited, when all that mattered was quelling the hungry, bleary fatigue of early morning. Is this what he felt all those years ago? Was this symphony of heat and sugar the same as the one he knew so well—the one that drew him back to that bakery week after week?

I ordered packets of dry ice and insulated shipping containers. Thirty-six hours later they arrived on my doorstep. How strange it is that the modern convenience of two-day shipping aided in my

attempt to transport someone to a time when commercial air travel was still something of a novelty.

I do not think that the original architects of this recipe would have imagined that a thing sold for five cents could have left such an impression on a young boy that his grandchildren would hear about them almost a century later. Or maybe it is the nature of these deceptively simple things that they are, by design, intended to surprise us, that they leave an imprint where we least expect, and remain a lone fossil, a tether to the nearly forgotten and to the should-have-been-forgotten, and that when there is no more bakery, no more paper route, no more Jewish west side even, what remains is only the elusive sweet vapor of an early Sunday morning.

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The Recipe:

INGREDIENTS

- **3 ¼ cups all-purpose flour**
- **2 sticks unsalted butter (room temperature)**
- **4 egg yolks**
- **1 cup whole or 2% milk**
- **1 tablespoon sugar**

- **3teaspoons instant yeast (or a packet, and then a pinch)**
- **A pinch of salt**
- **3cups confectioner's sugar**
- **1teaspoon vanilla extract, or about 1/8 of a teaspoon of fresh vanilla**
- **1/4cup cinnamon sugar**
- **A cup of sweetened toasted coconut shreds**

PREPARATION

- **Step 1**

Mix the yeast, the tablespoon of sugar, the pinch of salt, and the flour together.

- **Step 2**

In a separate large bowl, mash the butter down until smooth. This can be done in a stand mixer using the paddle attachment, or with a hand mixer.

- **Step 3**

Add the egg yolks to the butter and combine them. Once combined, add the flour mixture and mix together until you have a crumbly, barely cohesive dough.

- **Step 4**

Put 3/4 cup of milk into the microwave and heat for 30 seconds. If you are using a hand mixer or a stand mixer, slowly stream the milk into the dough as you mix on low. If working by hand, use a spatula to incorporate the warm milk, and stir until the dough is fully incorporated, then begin kneading. (NB: The dough will

appear too soft and sticky, almost concerningly so. Don't panic. As you knead the dough, it will slowly begin to come together.)

- **Step 5**

Once the dough lifts off the side of the bowl effortlessly, cover it and set it aside to rise, roughly doubling in size. This can be done in a cool room for about 4-5 hours (a warm room will melt the butter in the dough), or in the fridge overnight, with a brief rise on the counter for about an hour.

- **Step 6**

On a large work surface (I used a large baking sheet), roll the dough into the shape of a rectangle, roughly half an inch thick (thinner is also fine).

- **Step 7**

Sprinkle the whole surface of the dough with the cinnamon sugar.

- **Step 8**

Begin folding the dough onto itself. To do this, take the end of the dough, and make an initial fold that is about 2 inches long. Fold that onto itself until you reach the end.

- **Step 9**

Slice the dough log into segments that are about 1 1/4 inches long. Place each piece, cut side down, into a baking pan. Put

each piece so that it is no more than 1/8 of an inch away from the other.

- **Step 10**

Cover the pan and let it rise for about 30 minutes.

- **Step 11**

Preheat your oven to 350.

- **Step 12**

While the dough is rising, heat 3 tablespoons of milk until they are boiling, remove it from heat, and mix in your vanilla.

- **Step 13**

Add three cups of powdered sugar to the milk mixture, and stir until it comes together in a smooth frosting. Refrigerate it.

- **Step 14**

If you aren't able to find toasted coconut, take your shredded coconut and put it on a baking sheet in the oven for about 5-10 minutes, monitoring it until it just starts to turn brown.

- **Step 15**

Once the buns have risen, put them in the oven for about 20 minutes, or until just beginning to turn golden brown around the edges (another tell is the smell of cinnamon wafting through your house).

- **Step 16**

Remove the buns from a pan and immediately scoop out a tablespoon of frosting and dress each roll, and sprinkle coconut on top once the glaze has softened.