



## Iconic Snacks and Sweets Out Here

The unique and delicious traditions behind eight famous regional treats

By Erin Brereton

Today, you can find saltwater taffy in seaside gift shops across the country.

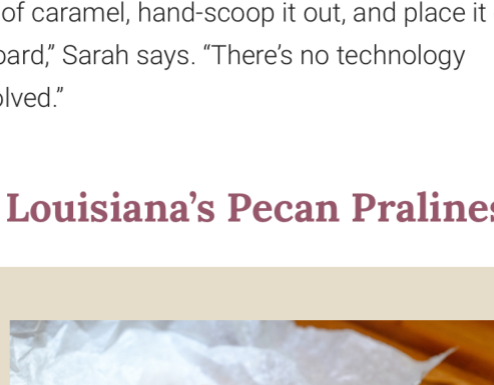
The sweet, chewy candy, however, has a distinct origin: It was born on the boardwalks of the East Coast. As the story goes, the ocean washed over a vendor's taffy supply, inspiring the saltwater taffy we know today, according to Beth Kimberle, author of several books, including "[Candy: The Sweet History](#)."

"Whether that was Maryland, New Jersey, or Coney Island, [saltwater taffy] has become a universal treat," Beth says. "You'd be hard-pressed to find any American tourist town that doesn't have saltwater taffy."

Whether regional treats have grown to national popularity or remain hidden favorites among locals, they have a special place in the cuisines of our country's diverse states.

Discover the stories behind seven other iconic regional sweets and snacks—some you've likely heard of, and others that may seem totally foreign.

### Kentucky's Modjeskas



*Modjeskas are made from marshmallows covered in buttery caramel. Images courtesy of Muth's Candy.*

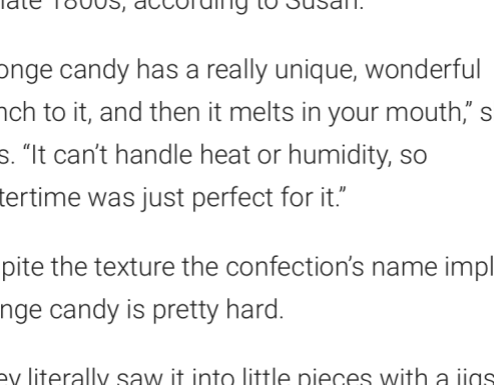
This caramel-covered marshmallow candy was created in Louisville, Kentucky, by Anton Busath in the late 1800s. He named it the modjeska to honor Polish actress Helena Modjeska.

When a fire damaged Anton's store in 1947, nearby [Muth's Candy](#) let him use its kitchen to fulfill his Christmas orders that year. As a thank-you, Anton gave his modjeska recipe to the owner of Muth's, which continues to sell the candy today, according to Sarah Blazin, a fourth-generation family member who helps run the store.

In fact, modjeskas are Muth's No. 1 seller, outpacing even the classic Kentucky old-fashioned bourbon balls. During the last holiday season, the store made more than 65,000 modjeskas.

And Muth's continues to use Anton's original recipe. "We still hand-dip each marshmallow, drop it into a pot of caramel, hand-scoop it out, and place it onto a board," Sarah says. "There's no technology involved."

### Louisiana's Pecan Pralines



*Pecan pralines are a New Orleans institution.*

Settlers introduced the French praline—a patty made from caramelized sugar with nuts in it—in Louisiana in the 1700, according to Susan Benjamin, owner of [True Treats Candy](#), a unique candy store that researches sweets from biblical times through the mid-1900s, located in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

Since colonial times, the praline's gotten a makeover with American ingredients. "Originally almonds were used in France," Susan says. "Pecans are from a native North American tree; and there were plenty of them around."

Today, pecan pralines remain a classic New Orleans treat.

### Sponge Candy from the Northeast



*Despite its name, sponge candy is hard and crunchy.*

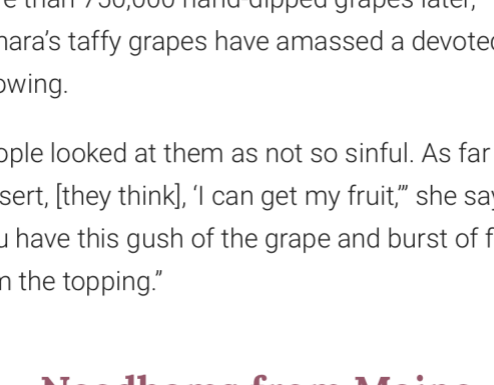
Also known as sea foam and honeycomb candy, sponge candy—sugar or corn syrup mixed with baking soda for volume and sometimes covered in chocolate—trickled down from Canada into cold, northern areas of the U.S., like Buffalo, New York, in the late 1800s, according to Susan.

"Sponge candy has a really unique, wonderful crunch to it, and then it melts in your mouth," she says. "It can't handle heat or humidity, so wintertime was just perfect for it."

Despite the texture the confection's name implies, sponge candy is pretty hard.

"They literally saw it into little pieces with a jigsaw," Beth says. "You can't just crack it or warm it; it gets really sticky, fast."

### MoonPies from Tennessee



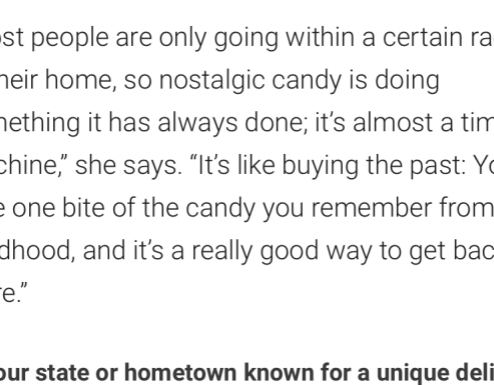
*Today, MoonPies are made in a variety of flavors, including chocolate, banana, and salted caramel. Image provided by MoonPie, Chattanooga Bakery, Inc.*

MoonPies fall into the category of treats that have hit nationwide appreciation, but the sandwich cookie treat remains a point of local pride in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

According to [Food & Wine](#) magazine, MoonPies, which consist of alternating layers of graham cracker cookies and marshmallow dipped in chocolate, were invented in 1917 by traveling salesman Earl Mitchell. One legend states Earl set out to satisfy the hunger of coal miners with a tasty, filling treat. When Earl asked a miner how big the snack should be, the miner pointed up to the sky, and responded it should be as big as the moon.

Over the past century, [Chattanooga Bakery](#) has taken the Southern treat to national fame, adding new flavors like banana, vanilla, salted caramel, and mint.

### Ohio Buckeyes



*Ohio buckeyes are made from peanut butter fudge dipped in chocolate.*

The popular Ohio candy is "a peanut butter cup that doesn't have a top, rounded so it literally looks like an eye," Beth says. The buckeye is so beloved locally that one of the state's county's visitor and convention bureaus designated an [Ohio Buckeye Candy Trail](#), featuring more than 30 spots that sell it.

One of the suggested spots, [Wittich's Candy Shop](#), sells white, dark, and milk chocolate buckeyes.

"They are wildly popular," says April Hoffman, who helps run the 180-year-old Circleville store. "It's peanut butter and sugar, for the most part, rolled into a ball and dipped in chocolate. The combination is good, but it's also an Ohio specialty candy, which makes it fun and unique."

### Taffy Grapes in Northern Illinois



*Tamara Brown offers various flavors of her taffy grapes. Image courtesy of Nadia's Gourmet Grapes.*

In 2011, when former caterer Tamara Brown realized the grapes dipped in vanilla coating and crushed nuts she'd made for a luncheon were a huge hit with guests, she launched [Nadia's Gourmet Grapes](#) in Chicago. She expanded the flavors of her grape desserts, creating margarita and banana pudding versions, and her customers began calling them taffy grapes.

More than 750,000 hand-dipped grapes later, Tamara's taffy grapes have amassed a devoted following.

"People looked at them as not so sinful. As far as dessert, [they think], 'I can get my fruit,'" she says. "You have this gush of the grape and burst of flavor from the topping."

### Needhams from Maine



*Needhams are made of coconut-potato squares covered in chocolate.*

These chocolate-covered coconut-and-potato starch squares became a popular New England candy in the late 1800s, Susan says.

"Needham was a minister. Apparently, he loved coconut so much he either made the needham for everybody, or everybody made it for him. It still is really regional to Maine," she says.

Like a number of other local sweets, people outside the state may never have had—or heard of—the candy. Yet to residents and in-the-know visitors, getting traditional treats such as needhams can evoke fond memories and an escape into the past.

That's one reason, Beth says, especially as Americans have sheltered in place in recent months, locally produced treats have served a special purpose.

"Most people are only going within a certain radius of their home, so nostalgic candy is doing something it has always done; it's almost a time machine," she says. "It's like buying the past: You take one bite of the candy you remember from childhood, and it's a really good way to get back there."

**Is your state or hometown known for a unique delicious treat? We want to hear about it! Send us a description at [OutHere@TractorSupply.com](mailto:OutHere@TractorSupply.com).**

#### About the Writer

Erin Brereton is a freelance journalist who has written about food, agriculture, and other topics for more than 20 years.

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