

37. Mmmmm . . . Donuts . . .

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The Hungarian mathematician Alfréd Rényi said that, “a mathematician is a machine for turning coffee into theorems.” Had Rényi visited The Institute of Optics, I suspect that he would have concluded that its denizens are machines for turning donuts into Progress in Optics.

Each Wednesday at 3:44 p.m., you’ll find a scraggly and sugar-starved crowd in Wilmot 116 impatiently waiting for the clock’s second hand to reach the top of its arc. They’re there because 3:45 is Donuts Standard Time, the moment when it’s fair game to dig into the spread of donuts, along with bagels and cream cheese, fruit, and drinks, carefully arranged on the front table. The next few minutes are a blur of frenzied activity; I can only liken them to scenes in National Geographic documentaries of cheetahs chasing down and devouring a zebra on the plains of Africa. By 4:15 or 4:30, people diffuse out of Wilmot 116 and head back to work, leaving with twitchy smiles on their faces, a glazed look in their eyes, and a cloud of powdered sugar in their wake.

This visceral and somewhat barbaric ritual can be traced back to 1971: New assistant professor Carlos Stroud fondly remembered the afternoon teas from his graduate-school days in the physics department at Washington University in St. Louis, when students and some faithful faculty members got together each day to chat about physics and whatever else was on their minds. Professor Stroud lobbied the Institute’s Graduate Committee to establish such a tradition here. Director Brian Thompson felt that a daily get-together was too often but kindly offered departmental funds to support a weekly “optical smorgasbord” (using the description from the Fall 1971 *Image* alumni newsletter) on the colloquium day, whether or not there was a speaker scheduled. In the years since its inception, the weekly Donuts seem to have drifted away from its roots as an informal get-together towards a sugar-coated feeding frenzy, but it remains a valuable and treasured part of The Institute of Optics experience.

Beyond the continued support and generosity of The Institute of Optics, Donuts is made possible by the help and dedication of the younger graduate students. First-year graduate students are dispatched each week to get the food, set up the spread, and clean up the carnage afterwards. The Institute’s Junior Graduate Representative, typically a second-year graduate student, coordinates the weekly schedule with the first-year students. I served as the Junior Grad. Rep. in the 1995–96 academic year; I saw firsthand the seamy underbelly of the entire Donuts ritual, and while it was a pleasure to serve the Institute in this role, it was over a year until the nightmares had subsided and I could eat a donut again.

In the last decade or so, there has been a surprisingly tumultuous history of where we get our beloved donuts. In the early 1990s, the Genesee Bakery on Mt. Hope Avenue supplied us with our weekly fix. After a falling out with them, we turned to the Wegmans grocery store for our sugary treats. During my stint as Junior Grad. Rep., a brewing disagreement with Wegmans over the University’s purchase-order system culminated suddenly in Wegmans



David Aronstein finishes his Ph.D. with the help of a few donuts and a little Inglenook.

terminating our standing order. I scampered to contact numerous bakeries in town to see which might be a suitable replacement. Over the next seven weeks, we sampled food from each of the places vying for our business, and I polled the students on which goodies they preferred. (At the time, I touted the process as “Donut democracy” and perhaps fancied myself as a Donut liberator, freeing the Institute from the crime of crummy crullers. In hindsight, I fear that instead I played the role of a Donut dealer, a sort of “sugar daddy,” getting the students hooked on a deep-fried high and spiraling them down into addiction.) We ended up going with Calabrese’s Culver Bakery, who made us wonderful treats for about a year until they raised their minimum

order for delivery above what we could possibly digest. Kathleen Youngworth, then at the Junior Grad. Rep. helm, resumed the hunt for the perfect donut and arranged for Tony & Lou’s Fast Food and Variety Bakery to serve us up their finest. My connections on the inside tell me that it might soon be time to shake this up yet again, so I anticipate that there will be an even more complicated bakery saga to share with you for the Institute’s hundredth anniversary.

In these troubled financial times, on the heels of a three-year bear market on Wall Street and in the midst of a ballooning deficit in the Federal government, it is natural to worry about the continued fiscal solvency of our revered ritual. The Institute certainly stands firmly behind Donuts and appreciates how it brings us together and nourishes our community (even as it fuels our gluttony), but it has to steer through a maze of University rules to keep the tradition alive: Donuts cannot be funded from College funds, and the unsung heroes in the Institute’s administration have found ways to pay the bills through discretionary funds. Donuts could be freed from the financial ebbs and tides of our uncertain times and from the vagaries of the University’s bureaucracy by setting up its very own endowment—if our esteemed Donuts rested on a nest egg of perhaps \$50,000, the Institute would be able to keep it going forever. If you hear the call to join the Donut Liberation Front, to be part of founding such a Donuts endowment, we urge you to contact The Institute of Optics for more information on how you can help; the fate of Progress in Optics (and of the arteries of its practitioners) may well be at stake.

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