Lizzie Ehrenhalt: We’ve all heard that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. But you may not know that Minnesota has played a major role in producing the foods and technology we’ve come to associate with this daily ritual. In this episode, we’ll explore the Minnesota-grown innovations—and innovators—whose pioneering spirit helped make breakfast what it is today.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, American breakfasts were meat-heavy affairs designed to use up leftovers from last night’s dinner. It took the cooperation of the vegetarian and health food movements, backed by religious groups like the Seventh Day Adventist Church, to shift the breakfast spotlight to a different staple: cereal. Minnesota’s flour milling companies were only too happy to profit from the switch, adding quick-cooking grains to their product lines and marketing them specifically as breakfast fare. The Minneapolis-based Pillsbury Company led the way, introducing such now-classic offerings as Vitos and Farina. B&G Foods began producing Cream of Wheat at its Minneapolis factory in 1897. And in 1919, Owatonna miller John Campbell entered the fray with Malt-O-Meal, a blend of farina and malted wheat.

When consumers began to prefer ready-to-eat cold cereals to their hot counterparts, Minnesota companies took notice, producing an array of wheat-, oat-, and corn-based options. One of the most enduring is Wheaties, famously advertised by General Mills as “the breakfast of champions.”

Legend has it that in 1921, a worker at a Minneapolis health clinic spilled a drop of gruel onto a stove. The gruel sizzled on the hot surface, resulting in a crispy flake. The worker took his creation to nearby General Mills, where head miller George Cormack standardized the recipe. Not bad for burnt gruel.

Of course, the story of Minnesota and breakfast isn’t just about cereal. After World War I, when improvements in electrical wiring technology joined forces with Minnesotan ingenuity, it was only a matter of time before something new popped up.
In 1919, Stillwater factory worker Charles P. Strite was tired of eating burnt toast in his company’s cafeteria. Convinced there had to be a better way, Strite came up with own design: the world’s first automatic pop-up toaster. He received a patent for his invention, the Toastmaster, in 1921. After teaming up with the Waters-Genter Company of Minneapolis, Strite sold thousands of Toastmasters to restaurants, and eventually home consumers, during the 1920s.

Adam Scher: Prior to the development of the modern-day toasting machines, toast was made over an open fire. You sliced the bread by hand, and you would either put it on a hot stone, or you could put it on a stick and toast it over the fire, or you could use a device like this. This is an early eighteenth century cast-iron toaster and you would put the bread between these fences and put it near the fire. In the nineteenth century, wire racking was applied to pans. This allowed you to more evenly toast the bread over an open fire or on a stovetop.

The first electrical appliance to mass-populate American homes was the electric toaster. This was introduced about 1908. It was a very simple affair—not much more than a metal housing, some hinges and some wires—but it also had this new-fangled chromium-nickel resistance wire which applied the heat. Now, these were very, very manual. Everything had to be done by hand. You had to put your toast in a little door or in a rack here and you had to flip it manually. And the problem was that you had to watch it constantly, because if you didn’t, your toast would catch on fire and the house would burn down. Some of them had very ingenious mechanisms for flipping the toast, but you still had to do all of this by hand.

Luckily, in 1925 a redesign of Charles Strite’s Toastmaster was introduced which could not only toast both sides of the bread simultaneously, it had an automatic temperature control which would turn off, and it would eject the toast. Now, the golden age of toasters really wasn’t complete until 1930, when the Continental Baking Company introduced pre-sliced bread.

Ehrenhalt: Young and old, famous and unknown, Minnesotans understand the importance of breakfast. We eat it wherever, and however, we can: on mountains and in forests; at airports and at school; by ourselves and in crowds. Sometimes, we even make art about it. Whatever new foods and machines change our breakfast habits over the next hundred years, Minnesotans are sure to play a part.