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The pies of summer

By Eve Thorsen
Correspondent

Summer brings a frenzy of fruit picking in Vermont: first rhubarb and strawberries, then raspberries and blackberries, followed by blueberries, and a grand finale of apples. And fruit picking always leads to fruit eating. But what about fruit pie making: Is this one of those traditional New England arts doomed for the endangered list? Apparently not in Essex.

About a dozen women are busy making as many pies as they can to sell online and at their annual church garage sale Saturday. Pies will include strawberry, rhubarb, raspberry, apple, peach, pecan and mixtures of fruit such as bumbleberry. It's a new idea that came up after several church members noted how few families made their own pies any more, either through lack of time or expertise. But listening to a few of these home bakers, it's evident that making pies is not only simple but also an enjoyable activity that evokes rich family histories.

"My grandmother was a wonderful baker. She was a Severance," said Gail Godfrey, invoking the name of a Colchester farm family. "She'd always have fresh pies or breads or be in the process of baking them, so coming up that driveway and walking into that house, you didn't want to leave. There was a stool right next to the stove, and it was always occupied."

Godfrey grew up in New York, so her family visited her grandmother every few months. In the summertime, the children would go out into the garden and gather the ingredients for whatever they were making.

"It was pick one, eat one, pick one, eat one," Godfrey said. "My grandmother taught us that you always had to have fresh ingredients."

It's also important not to be heavy-handed with sweetener on the fruit, Godfrey said.

"If you put too much sugar on, you get more juice and you can get a soggy pie," she explained.

While Godfrey's Severance grandmother taught her about freshly picked fruit, it was a grandmother on her husband's side of the family -- Edna Godfrey -- who provided her with the pastry recipe she still uses today. The recipe was in a 1968 booklet from Edna Godfrey's North Carolina Church in which church members shared their best recipes.

"Everything I cook from it usually comes out great," Gail Godfrey said. "I use the one in here called 'The Perfect Pie Crust,' and it seems to work very well for me." (See link to recipes at Living homepage.)

The surprising thing about pastry is that while it's a simple concoction of flour, water and fat, each baker seems to have her -- or his -- own version of how to put it together. Like Godfrey, Essex grandmother Donna Holmes, uses boiling water, but her recipe calls for less flour, no salt and a little milk.

Holmes' tip for a nice flaky crust is simple: "Only flip that crust once when you're rolling," she said. "Then it doesn't become tough."

Again like Godfrey, Holmes has fond memories of her grandmother's farm kitchen on Brigham Hill Road.

"My grandmother was a wonderful cook. She had this huge flour bin in the wall. I learned to play with dough with my grandmother," Holmes recalled.

Holmes' mother, Nina Smith, used to work in the summer with her own mother in the hot, wood stove-heated kitchen preparing food for the threshing crews who would arrive to help with the harvest. But it wasn't her mother or grandmother who taught her how to make pastry.

"My mother baked cakes and breads, but she didn't make pies," Holmes said. That gap in Nina Smith's culinary experience became an issue when her daughter became engaged to Larry Holmes. He was from a family of eight children who had pie every day.

"My mother knew he was brought up on pies. She started looking for a recipe for me and found this one," Holmes said. "So I worked at it, and he came over one night. I said, 'I have a blueberry pie for you,' and he almost fell over. I've used that recipe ever since."

The one thing that's changed in Holmes' blueberry pie is the filling. Experimenting, she found that a recipe for a cheesecake topping worked really well; now she frequently uses it.

Another Essex grandmother, Gloria McKeen, also makes blueberry pie, but she uses uncooked fruit, noting that berry pies are very little work. All it takes, according to McKeen, is gently washing the fruit right before using it, mixing with a little sugar, and then heaping several cups of the fruit into the pie crust. To guard against a soggy crust, she recommends sprinkling a little flour or tapioca on the bottom crust before adding the fruit.

"The only fruit I do a lot of preparation for is rhubarb," she said.

When making rhubarb or rhubarb-strawberry pie, McKeen cuts the rhubarb into 1-inch chunks, runs boiling water over it and drains it well. Then she puts the fruit into a large bowl and makes a well in the middle into which she adds 1 cup of flour, 1 egg, 1 cup of sugar and nutmeg. She mixes it and then puts it into the pie crust. The added ingredients help make a sauce so the pie isn't running with liquid.

Dough dos, don'ts

McKeen's pastry recipe is dramatically different to Godfrey's and Holmes'.

"The secret to my pie crust is that before I even start measuring out my flour and shortening, I pour a container of water and drop ice cubes into it. That's the water I use when I start mixing my dough," she said. McKeen learned to make pastry from her father who took ribbons at state fairs for his sourdough biscuits.

"Mom made the hot rolls and breads and baked beans, and Dad made the biscuits and the pies," McKeen recalled.

The most important tip McKeen learned from her dad was to mix the flour and shortening into the finest crumbs possible, either by rubbing gently between thumb and fingertips or by using a pastry dough cutter. She's also adamant that pastry must be made with regular unbleached flour.

"Don't use cake flour: It's far too fine. I use King Arthur flour -- unbleached -- and I think it makes a difference," she said.

McKeen's final advice on pastry making comes from her dad: "Good biscuits and good pie crusts are

really cousins: Don't handle the dough any more than you need to for either of them," she said.

In Ellen Billado's case that means never. She decided years ago to give up the struggle of making a good pie crust from scratch and instead uses a box mix. That leaves her to focus on the filling.

"Pies are my favorite thing to make in the world," said Billado, a mother of three. For her pie filling, Billado picks fresh fruit from her garden -- blueberries, blackberries and rhubarb -- and strawberries from her father's yard. She picks all the fruit as it becomes ripe, and if she's not ready to make pies, that day she'll freeze it in pie-size quantities. Billado recommends at least 4 cups of fruit for a 10-inch pie. She said she uses closer to 5 cups, although she doesn't measure any more because her experience tells her when there's enough fruit. The most important tip for cooking with fruit, according to Billado, is to mix raspberries, strawberries and large blueberries with 2 to 3 tablespoons of tapioca before putting it in the crust.

"It's a great thickener for the juice of the fruit," she said.

She also puts a few pats of butter on top of the fruit before putting the top crust on.

"My mom always made it that way," she said. "It gives it a richer flavor."

Pie making is such an enjoyable activity for Billado that she usually sets aside a couple of hours to work on a large batch.

"The big work of pies is putting them together, so if I'm going to make a pie, I'll make two or three because if I'm going to make a mess for one, I might as well make a lot," she said. "I find it really therapeutic -- having the kitchen all to myself, and I don't have to make meals and feed people, and I can spread out. I like being able to open my freezer doors and see all those pies."

If you go

WHAT: Summer fruit pie and garage sale

WHEN: 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Essex United Methodist Church, Center Road, Essex

COST: \$10 per pie

INFORMATION: Contact Jean O'Connor at 598-5483; pie reservations at mypieonline@gmail.com or 598-5483

Send comments to living@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com.
