



Memories of Holiday Baking Bliss

BY LINDA HUNDT (PICTURED)



I love, love, love this time of year. The spirits of the holidays are thick in the air and you can feel it the people, the places, and especially the food. Nothing can compare to the holiday treats and all of the baking wonders that have come out of family kitchens for generations.

I grew up enveloped with Christmas baking traditions. My dear grandmother from West Virginia would send a much-anticipated frozen chocolate pecan pie up to our family every year, and my sweet mother would make various pies, cheesecake, cookies, stained glass hard candy, fudge, and caramels for family and friends to enjoy. I remember my mother would always let me, my brothers, and twin sister help make the holiday treats, and for me, this was utopia. My memories of this time are lovely, but are probably a bit embellished with age.

Most definitely, Christmas cookie decorating was our family's favorite baking tradition. I remember that at Christmas time in the late '60s and '70s, our family would be happily listening to Nat and Bing while snow gently drifted out our tiny, turquoise kitchen window. I remember my dear mommy somewhat patiently leading us through another treasured holiday tradition, while my daddy read the newspaper in the living room oblivious to the commotion.

The kitchen was chaotic and crowded with all five of us kids crammed in, anxious to keep the Christmas cookie decorating tradition alive and well. Every year it was exactly the same with siblings fighting over cookies cutters, cookies decorated quaintly and imperfectly, and kids sneaking cookie dough from our big, brown chipped mixing bowl with joyous giggles echoing throughout our brick home. Despite the cramped space, the spat and mess, the time together as a family was perfect. Not perfect in the real sense of the word, but perfect because we were together and it was our McComb family tradition.

I implore all of us to continue your own family traditions or start new ones, for it is paramount that our time-honored traditions continue for our children and our children's children. For there is nothing better than having the magic in our hearts as we recall warm, sweet memories of delicious holiday treats, loving family traditions and Santa Claus!

All of my pies at my shop have a story that speaks to the pies' provenance attached to every box. Many pies that I enjoyed growing up meant so much to me. I have included some stories of my favorite holiday pies.

MOMMY'S PUMPKIN PIE

Several years ago, my parents had a house fire in the home they have shared for more than 40 years. Fortunately, no one was injured; however, being out of their home during renovation through the holiday season was difficult. I assured my parents that Christmas would be as special as always and that I would host the dinner. My mother insisted on preparing the holiday ham and pumpkin pies and my sister and I agreed to make the rest of the trimmings. However, because my mother was not familiar with her temporary kitchen, she burned the ham black, while our mashed potatoes were lumpy and the cranberries were frozen. Our only salvation through this disastrous dinner was the anticipation of Mom's pumpkin pies. We were not disappointed. The pies never tasted better--the buttery crust and creamy filling was perfect. They truly made the meal complete. I think my whole family realized at that point, not only how grateful we were to be all together, alive and healthy, but also how much we appreciate good pie. Eat pie and be grateful.

GRANDMA FERRELL'S SWEETIE-LICIOUS PIE

While growing up, my dear maternal grandmother lived nearly 500 miles away, so we were unable to spend the Christmas holidays together. However, my grandma always made it special by sending our family a Christmas box filled with presents and delicious homemade foods. My brothers, sister, and I eagerly anticipated the call that the box had arrived at the bus station. We all drove down together in the family station wagon to bring it home. On Christmas morning, it was always the last box to be opened, yet certainly the sentimental favorite. The gifts were always unpredictable, fun and silly. The food was steadfast, revered and delicious, especially her beloved Sweetie-licious Pie. The flaky crust, toasted pecans, chocolate, and caramel made for a perfect Christmas day dessert and knowing that my sweet grandmother made it just for us made it absolutely unforgettable. Eat pie and keep traditions. □

Linda Hundt is an award-winning baker and a true believer that delicious memories make the world a more meaningful, joyous and loving place. She is also the owner of a bakery cafe in DeWitt, and winner of the 2009 Crisco National Pie Championship Best of Show/Food Network Pie Challenge.

MOM MCCOMB'S PEANUT BUTTER FUDGE

- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- ½ cup of half and half
- 1 1/3 cups of peanut butter
- 1 jar (7 ounces) marshmallow cream
- ¼ cup crushed peanut butter chips,
- ¼ cup of mini chocolate chips, mixed

Boil sugars and half/half for 3 minutes. Add peanut butter and marshmallow cream. Mix well. Pour into buttered 8-inch square pan. Sprinkle with peanut butter chips and chocolate chips mixture. Chill until set and cut into squares.

AUNT ELLA'S CHERRY-BERRY-BERRY PIE

This pie brought me first-place honors at the Crisco National Pie Championships in Florida one year.

Cool: 2 hours. Bake: 45 minutes. Prep: 35 minutes. Serves: 8.

Pastry for single-crust pie

- 1 cup granulated sugar
- ¼ cup cornstarch
- 4 1/2 cups frozen unsweetened pitted tart red cherries
- ¾ cup frozen red raspberries
- ¾ cup frozen blueberries
- 1/2 teaspoon finely shredded lemon peel
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup packed brown sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup butter, cut into small pieces

1. Prepare and roll out the pastry for a single-crust pie. Line a 9-inch pie plate with the pastry. Trim overhanging edge to an even 1 inch all the way around. Tuck the crust under and flute the edge. Do not prick pastry. Put pastry-lined pie plate in freezer while preparing pie.

2. In a large saucepan, mix 1 cup sugar and cornstarch; add cherries. Gently toss until coated. Cook and stir over medium heat until bubbly. Add raspberries and blueberries. Cook and stir until thickened and bubbly. Cook and gently stir for 1 minute more. Remove from heat. Stir in lemon peel, lemon juice and almond extract. Set aside.

3. For crumb topping: In a medium bowl, stir together the flour, 1/2 cup granulated sugar, brown sugar and salt. Using a pastry blender, cut in butter until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Set aside.

4. Transfer the cherry mixture to pastry-lined pie plate. Spread crumb mixture over cherry mixture. To prevent overbrowning, loosely cover pie with foil.

5. Bake in a 400° oven for 25 minutes. Remove foil. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes more or until filling is bubbly and crumb topping is golden brown. Cool on a wire rack at least 2 hours before serving.

Nutrition facts per serving: 728 calories, 26 g fat, 69 mg cholesterol, 446 mg sodium, 120 g carbohydrates, 3 g fiber, 6 g protein.

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