‘Heaven on a Plate’

BY FRED SAUCEMAN

Kingsport cook Betty Jones fries pies using an iron skillet just like her mother did back in Dryden, Virginia.

It’s four o’clock in the morning. Even the early-rising cattlemen haven’t arrived at the Kingsport Livestock Auction. But across the parking lot, Betty Jones has just turned on the lights at Betty’s Stockyard Café.

She immediately heads for the refrigerator, where she takes out a bowl of dough. Along the counter, she lines up cans of fruity pie filling. Then she heats a pot of oil. Betty’s mission, this morning, is to make fried pies.

Long before she opened her homey café just off Highway 93 in Kingsport, Tennessee, she fried pies. Betty grew up in Dryden, Virginia. Her parents had 15 children naturally and adopted another. At age 10, she was given the responsibility of cooking for that large farm family.

Her mother, Margaret Freeman, taught her to make fried pies. Like many Appalachian cooks, Margaret fried hers in a black-iron skillet.

The term “hand pies” is often used synonymously with “fried,” but that would be inaccurate in Betty’s case. Few human hands approach the size of a Betty Jones fried pie.

There are no tables at Betty’s Stockyard Café. Privacy and isolation are pleasantly impossible. Camaraderie and conversation begin when the first customers take seats around the U-shaped counter at six o’clock in the morning.

Despite slabs of fried pork tenderloin, gravy-laden patties of country sausage, or bowls of Betty’s pork-seasoned soup beans with plate-sized sides of fried cornbread, most customers put all resistance and dietary rules aside when they learn that Betty has been frying pies.

“There’s nothing better than making food for people. It’s a primal thing,” says Dale Mackey, whose full-time job is frying pies in Knoxville, Tennessee. Unlike Betty, Dale didn’t develop her love of fried pies on a rural Appalachian farm. She learned to appreciate them in Chicago. But her godmother, Pat McGraw, had grown up near Pikeville, Kentucky.

“I grew up eating a lot of Southern food,” recalls Dale. “It felt like my childhood food, although I was eating it in Chicago.”

After graduating from Iowa’s Grinnell College, Dale went to work for the media, arts, and education center Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky, and then did a stint in community television in Knoxville, Tennessee.

In 2012, at the beginning of the food truck movement, she turned those sweet memories of childhood into a business: Dale’s Fried Pies.

With $400, she opened what she calls “an adult-sized lemonade stand” and stocked it with fried pies. A friend allowed her to use a commercial kitchen free of charge. Within a year, Dale’s business became a full-time endeavor, even though there’s never been a storefront. Dale sets up her pie trailer regularly at the Market Square Farmers Market in downtown Knoxville. And she sells pies via the Internet.

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> ***— Dale Mackey, Dale’s Fried Pies***

While offering traditional Appalachian fried pie fillings like apple, peach, and cherry, Dale also crafts over 60 different pies, both sweet and savory.

“I’m a savory person,” she says. “I love our curried sweet potato pie, which reminds you of an Indian samosa.”

She’s equally ecstatic over pies filled with her own homemade pimento cheese and a little bacon.

“Most of the savory pies have a cornmeal crust,” she says. “And I do a vegan crust, with olive oil instead of butter.”

Among the flavors on the sweet side of the menu are carrot cake and cream cheese, gingerbread chocolate chip, and peanut butter and jelly.

“There are so many opportunities for creativity, because you can basically fill them with anything,” she says. In the words of her theme song, written and sung by Tim Marema, they’re “heaven on a plate.”

Like fried pie makers have done for generations, Dale crimps every pie with a dinner fork.

In Johnson City, Tennessee, fried pies, in rows of eight on a conveyor belt, weave an hour-long, serpentine trek around the second floor of Seaver’s Bakery. By the time they crawl up to the third story, the half-moon-shaped confections are cool and ready to be slipped into glassine packages.

The family recipe and the fillings haven’t changed since Bud Seaver opened the bakery in 1949. He devised a way to mass-produce fried pies, first making them for Honey Krust Bakery and then going out on his own. He eventually outgrew the basement of his parents’ house and constructed the putty-colored building where Seaver’s pies are still made today.

Apple has always been the most popular filling, made from dried, steam-cooked Granny Smiths. The late Richard McKinney, who ran the bakery, once told me that old-timers preferred raisin pies. All of Seaver’s packages are labeled “fruit pie,” even the chocolate.

“Ninety-nine percent of all country women made fried pies,” says Calvin Ward, who once sold Seaver’s pies on store routes across Southern Appalachia.

For the farm or the factory, fried pies are the perfect lunchbox snack or dessert. They have a two-week shelf life, they’re portable, and they don’t require a knife and fork.

Route sales went by the wayside long ago, and the Seaver’s business may have, too, were it not for the regional grocery chain Food City, based in Abingdon, Virginia. Each store is now stocked with a full line of Seaver’s pies.

All the wrappers, even for the chocolate pies, say “fruit pies” at Seaver’s Bakery in Johnson City, Tennessee.

“They’re a very popular item with their unique crust,” says Steve Smith, President and CEO of Food City.

No matter the method or the filling, fried pies bring forth memories. At The Market Place in Asheville, North Carolina, Chef William Dissen revives the spirit of his West Virginia grandmother by frying pies filled with Virginia Beauty apples or local cherries.

“My grandmother, Jane Sturgill, from Sandyville, West Virginia, made a crust with lard or bacon grease and fried her pies in a cast-iron skillet,” remembers Dissen. “Once they cooled, she’d dust them with powdered sugar, and they tended to disappear really quickly.”

At a café in Kingsport, on the streets of downtown Knoxville, in a Johnson City factory, and on the tables of a trendy Asheville restaurant, the age-old tradition of frying pies lives on. SML

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Fred Sauceman’s latest book is Buttermilk & Bible Burgers: More Stories from the Kitchens of Appalachia.

Immortality in Green Beans

The Walker Sisters Bean carries the name of the tenacious family that perpetuated the seeds. PHOTO BY FRED SAUCEMAN

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A student in my Foodways of Appalachia class walked in one day with seeds and a story. "Have you ever grown any Walker Sisters beans?" she asked that day.

I hadn't, but the next spring we planted them, and they produced the longest, fullest green beans we had ever seen. I then began to learn more about the people who had kept these prolific beans alive.

The Walker Sisters, who lived on land that would ultimately be incorporated into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, were known for their self-sufficiency. They often told visitors to their cabin that they produced everything they needed except sugar, soda, coffee, and salt.

They were the daughters of John Walker, who fought for the Union in the Civil War, and his wife Margaret. John and Margaret raised 11 children—seven girls and four boys. Of the sisters, Margaret, Polly, Martha, Nancy, Louisa, Sarah Caroline, and Hettie, Sarah Caroline was the only one to marry. After John Walker's death in 1921, the six unmarried sisters inherited the family farm and carried on the tradition of self-sufficiency they had learned from their parents for over 40 years.

Not only were they self-sufficient, they were fiercely independent. As the federal government was making plans for the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the sisters refused to leave their land. The government would eventually buy the sisters' 122-acre homestead. As the park was being established, the government paid the sisters for their land but allowed them to live out the rest of their lives in their cabin through a lifetime lease. The last unmarried sister to live there died in 1964.

The Walker cabin still stands as testament to the sisters' devotion to the mountains and as evidence of their strong-willed character. Their beans live on, too. They are resilient symbols of the Walker Sisters' love of the land and its bounty. For people in Appalachia, green beans passed down through the generations are indeed heirlooms.

Gardens in the Appalachian region yield many varieties of green beans that bear the names of the families who have nurtured them. Seed saver Bill Best of Berea, Kentucky, tells me of a Noble bean that once traveled from West Virginia to Oregon. The great-granddaughter of the man who brought the bean to the Northwest sent Best some seeds that weren't germinating. They had been in a container for about 20 years. Meticulously, Best coaxed six seeds out of 100 to germinate. All of them died but one. From that one plant, Best saved 11 seeds. "If I'm lucky," he tells me, "I will have helped bring this bean back from extinction." Those beans will forever carry the Noble family name.

Bill Best's reputation as a caretaker of beans is such that letters addressed only as "Bean Man, Kentucky" successfully arrive in his mailbox. A native of North Carolina, he takes special pride in the Hill Family Bean, a multi-colored variety that has been around for over 100 years. Cecile Hill, the keeper of the seed, grew up in Haywood County, North Carolina, and was one of 12 children. All of them participated in putting up food for the winter.

Cecile died in 1992 at the age of 89. About 20 years later, her son, Ben Best, found her bean seeds in an open half-gallon jar and planted them. They grew. And, at age 87, Ben Best continues to garden.

"The Hill Family Bean is from my home community and is the first bean I remember picking as a toddler," says Bill Best. "I was fascinated by the colors as well as the taste. Many families in Upper Crabtree still grow it. The Rogers family Greasy Cut-Short is also from my home community and continues to be grown by several families. The Doyce Chambers Greasy Cut-Short is from the Bethel area of Haywood County and is one of the favorite beans on our website, heirlooms.org. It was given to me by a second cousin, Delores Best, 30 years ago."

In Scott County, Virginia, the name Addington is strongly associated with education and county history, but in my wife's family, it elicits detailed memories of green beans. My mother-in-law, Elsie Derting, says beans often carried the name of the family from which you received them. Such was the case with the Mrs. Addington Bean, named for Edla Addington, who lived with her educator husband Ezra near the North Fork of the Holston River.

"The Mrs. Addington Bean was a bunch bean," recalls my mother-in-law, now 94. "It was an early bean, a yellow bean. And we'd try to have them by my husband's birthday, June 25. The bean had a lot of flesh to it, and it was as tender as it could be."

Still today, Elsie Derting shows up at every Fourth of July family picnic and every Labor Day picnic with a pot of long-cooked green beans.

We love our green beans in the mountains. We love them cooked for hours with a hunk of pork. We love them threaded with string and dried as "Leather Britches." We love them canned, frozen, and even fermented as "pickle" beans when the signs are right and the moon is new.

Most of all, we savor their history and recall with every forkful the resourceful people who have cared for them and cultivated them over generations. Walker, Hill, Rogers, Chambers, and Addington—these are just a few of the family names that have earned immortality through the goodness of green beans. SML

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Fred Sauceman's latest book is* The Proffitts of Ridgewood: An Appalachian Family's Life in Barbecue.

The MoonPie turns 100

BY FRED SAUCEMAN

One hundred years ago this summer the MoonPie was born at a Chattanooga Bakery. The world-famous treat has been made there ever since.

FRED SAUCEMAN PHOTO

"And make it about this big," an Eastern Kentucky coal miner told Earl Mitchell as the miner framed the moon with his hands.

Mitchell was the general manager of the Mountain City Flour Mill in Chattanooga, Tennessee, at the time.

According to legend, he was working a sales route and had asked a group of miners gathered at a little country store what they would like in their lunch pails.

Sales in that part of Appalachia had been slumping, and Mitchell was seeking to augment his product line.

That miner, whose name apparently has been lost to time, said he loved melting marshmallow and dipping graham crackers in it.

"And as the legend goes, he didn't say round or anything at the time," explains Tory Johnston, current vice president of marketing for the Chattanooga Bakery. "He said it just needs to be those flavors, marshmallow and graham, and dipped in chocolate."

Earl Mitchell shared the idea at the Chattanooga Bakery, which had been created in the early 1900s solely for the purpose of using leftover flour produced by the mill.

Employees at the bakery told Mitchell that such a confection was indeed possible.

Johnston says someone in the bakery, whose name has also been lost, suggested that it be called a MoonPie.

"Luckily for us, somebody had the foresight and the wisdom to trademark it," Johnston adds.

The first MoonPies passed through the ovens and a curtain of chocolate in 1917, and they have been made in Chattanooga ever since.

Butterette Dainties, Imp Ginger Snaps, Lookout Brand Lemon Drop Cakes, Mace Jumbles, Jersey Cream Lunch Biscuits, and Lookout Bran Biscuits, known as the Cracker of Life, were all produced by the Chattanooga Bakery, but by the late 1950s, all those products had fallen by the wayside, except for the MoonPie.

The Chattanooga Bakery had no marketing person until Tory Johnston was hired in 1997.

MoonPies had always sold well, especially at rural country stores. But sales soared thanks to a song.

"Give me an RC Cola and a Moon Pie (And Play 'Maple on the Hill')" was released on the Decca record label in 1951 by the country music duo Lonzo and Oscar.

At the time, both products sold for a nickel.

Throughout the South, they became known as the working person's lunch.

The pairing of the filling, portable snack and the cold soft drink caught on, although neither company spent any advertising money to promote it.

Having an RC and a MoonPie was a sweet indulgence for a small amount of money.

Together, they became Southern symbols of thrift and abandon.

On the cover of one of its fundraising publications, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi featured a bottle of RC Cola and a MoonPie on the hood of an old blue pickup truck.

On the third Saturday of June, the Middle Tennessee community of Bell Buckle, population 500, hosts an annual RC MoonPie Festival, celebrating what organizers call "the South's original fast food."

The grand finale is the cutting of the world's largest MoonPie.

From that original chocolate icing, the product line has expanded to include banana, orange, vanilla, lemon, strawberry, and, yes, salted caramel. Sizes now range from mini to single-decker and double-decker.

And the MoonPie now has a theme song, written by Chris Armstrong, a student in one of my Foodways of Appalachia classes and a member of the group Sons of Bluegrass.

"As the legend goes, he didn't say round or anything at the time. He said it just needs to be those flavors, marshmallow and graham, and dipped in chocolate."

— Tory Johnston, vice president of marketing, Chattanooga Bakery

In exchange for writing the song, Chris and the band receive almost unlimited supplies of MoonPies. He introduced my class to the salted caramel flavor in the fall of 2014.

As I talk about foodways around the region, I'm constantly amazed at the number of people who still don't know the ideal way to eat a MoonPie.

It's the microwave method.

As I like to say, a MoonPie is matte finish. When you expose it to microwave heat, the icing becomes high gloss and the marshmallow filling a viscous, luscious goo.

Tory Johnston says that's no secret inside the Chattanooga Bakery.

"Everybody, even in this building, will tell you it's the best way to eat a MoonPie. Even if it's a stale MoonPie, even if it's past its code date, microwaving brings it right back to its youth. It is decadent. A lot of people will put ice cream on it and make their own little sundaes, with a cherry on top."

In our 1,200-watt microwave, punching in 12 seconds for a mini MoonPie will bring it almost to the point of explosion, the optimal temperature.

The MoonPie has spawned its share of imitators, both internationally and domestically, including South Korea's Choco Pie and Over the Moon Pies, created by Zingerman's in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

At around $4 each and made with ingredients like Scharffen Berger cocoa and vanilla from Madagascar, the Zingerman's version offers a stark counterpoint to the working-class profile of the original MoonPie.

But imitation in any form is indeed a high compliment.

Since its introduction 100 years ago, the MoonPie has become an iconic standard bearer of the South.

It captivated consumers from the start, and dietary fads and trends have never diminished that passion. The Chattanooga Bakery now turns out about a million MoonPies every day. SML

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Fred Sauceman's latest book is Buttermilk & Bible Burgers: More Stories from the Kitchens of Appalachia. *He is Senior Writer and Associate Professor of Appalachian Studies at East Tennessee State University.*