

OFF THE BEATEN PATH | FOCUSED | CALENDAR OF EVENTS

a free
PUBLICATION

Door County

MAGAZINE

FALL 2018

ETHNIC FOOD

in Door County?
You bet!

THE VOICE OF SPORTS

Kevin Harlan and
Door County

BELGIAN PIES

*Holding on to tradition
and changing with the times*



Way back, probably in the '90s, I was given an interesting photo assignment for the Door County Advocate. I was tasked with capturing images of a grandmother teaching her granddaughter how to make Belgian pie in Southern Door.

Even back then, the pie lesson was rather a big deal because the tradition of Belgian pie making was beginning to fade.

It's not because tastes have changed, necessarily. Belgian pies are delicious. You'd be hard pressed to find a Southern Door Belgian immigrant descendant who would argue that.

But, as Flour Pot Cooking School owner Gina Guth explained to me, Belgian pies have traditionally been made, en masse. You didn't make just one pie at a time, you made 20 pies. Or 100 pies.

You made that many because you brought them to fundraisers, church picnics and family gatherings. You used the pies for barter—a pie for a jar of sauerkraut, for instance.

It was delicacy, community and currency all baked into one treat.

The recipe, handed down for generations, never took into account that one day, folks wouldn't want to make that many pies in a sitting. Today's cooks aren't all in for the massive undertaking. Simply put, it's overwhelming. Nobody has the time, space, need or inclination.

Guth is working to solve that, by finding ways to pare down the recipes she learned from her family, and making some ingredients easier to cobble together (for instance, she's found a way to create the customary topping without having to buy a large container of dry cottage cheese, which is an important ingredient, but hard to find.)

Her work, and the work of other food educators, is helping preserve traditions brought here from the Motherlands and Fatherlands of the past.

And while we hope those same traditions are being honored back in the old countries, what we have in Southern Door is entirely unique. It's not exactly Belgian, like you might find in Belgium today. It's more a snapshot of a time gone by: a relic of a hard-scrabble immigrant's life, when folks crafted food with what they had on hand, and with a nod to familiar flavors and techniques.

They had one foot in the old world, one in the new.

Completely unique specialties like Belgian pie and chicken booyah—a thick Belgian chicken stew that is endemic to northeastern Wisconsin—are traditions to be celebrated, remembered and passed down.

Those early immigrants undoubtedly changed with the times when they arrived, and we need to, too.

One hundred pies at a shot? Well...maybe not. But take a class, and learn to make a couple here and there. And it will preserve the custom for generations to come.

DOOR COUNTY MAGAZINE

The Flour Pot

Gina Guth has fond childhood memories of being in the kitchen while her mother Jean Guth baked Belgian pies—a family tradition brought to this country by her ancestors. “My great-great-grandma was a first-generation Belgian immigrant,” said Guth.

She recalls pies being spread on every horizontal surface of their home, including atop beds and ironing boards. “My mother would be making about 200 pies for (Belgian harvest festival) Kermiss,” she said, in the traditional flavors of rice, raisin, apple or prune. “Sometimes she’d have extra crust and say, ‘Run down to the store and get a can of cherry pie filling,’” Guth said. “That’s where the cherry Belgian Pie came from.”

But after her mother passed away in 1981, Guth realized she’d never learned her mother’s pie-making process. “The recipe is one thing,” Guth said, “but there’s all these little tricks and tips and steps.”

“I was in the kitchen, but my mother never sat me down and said, ‘This is how you make the dough. This is how you do it,’” she said. With the help of her former mother-in-law, who has also since passed away, they were able to re-create Guth’s mother’s recipe. “We worked it out together.”

continued on pg 8



Flour Pot cooking school's Gina Guth with samples of Belgian pies at the Maplewood Country Cupboard where she teaches.



Brianne Ravet and daughter Maddy Ravet, 11, of Green Bay learn the history of Belgian pie making from Flour Pot cooking school's Gina Guth.

continued

Guth said she was lucky in that her mother used recognizable measuring standards in her Belgian pie recipe. Other curators of their mothers' secret family recipes were less fortunate. "Their recipes would call for a nickel's worth of yeast and a pinch of this or that."

Several years later, Guth was asked to take part in a United Way fundraiser and made 60 Belgian pies. "Because of the pub-

licity from that, St. Norbert College contacted me and asked me to do a demonstration. That was in 2012."

Since then, Guth has taught two classes each year for the De Pere college. But it wasn't until she stepped away from her full-time job and found commercial kitchen space at Maplewood Country Cupboard on Highway 42 that The Flour Pot came to fruition.

“My kids were encouraging me, ‘You’ve got a niche in making Belgian pies.’” She gives classes most Saturdays from May through October to groups of six students.

“I had no idea whether people would take the class,” Guth said. “But it all fell into place.” She’s also added a weekly dessert-making class where students can try their hands at kneecaps, cookies, cinnamon rolls, cheesecakes and more. “I love to bake and I love people,” Guth said. “For me, this is a perfect fit.”

The pie-making classes are also a perfect fit with the strong Belgian population of Southern Door, as well as tourists from other parts of Wisconsin and beyond.

Guth hopes today’s kids don’t miss out on learning about their family’s cultural history in the kitchen. “We need to instill in our younger generation a love of baking. Start them young. Let them be a part of it,” Guth said. “Including the clean-up—that’s an important part, too.”