

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Momma spills her secrets

Who can resist the heartwarming aroma of a fresh baked pie? Ask any family to name one of grandma's favorite desserts and pie is sure to stand high on the list.

Like many other New World foods, pie as we know it today is an all American invention. Pastries from the Old World were adapted by our Colonial ancestors to meet the sparse food supplies. Fillings for the pies — shiny tart apples, mellow, golden pumpkins and tart rhubarb — were gathered from the surrounding countryside. Today's pie, with vast improvements in flour, shortening and other ingredients, has evolved into a culinary delight.

Many-a-time I have watched from behind the dust-laden knick-knack shelf of momma's kitchen as she baked. To this day, I still don't think she owns a set of measuring cups or spoons; instead, she uses one of the most expensive utensils around — her arthritic fingers and a rolling pin that doubled as a "kid chaser" way back in the 1950's.

With the kids shuffled off to school, I recently spent a crisp fall afternoon with momma in her kitchen. Just her, me and my notepad, watching and helping her make pies for an upcoming family baby shower. If the pages seem smeared, it's just the flour and shortening leeching its way out of my fingertips. Here's a primer on momma's secret suggestions for a no-fail pie:

To quote her exactly:

• "A pie is only as good as its crust. Use a light hand with your pastry. Too much handling toughens the pastry." So much for the Cuisinart, eh?

• For a sparkling, extra flaky top crust on fruit pies, brush ever so lightly with milk or cream, then sprinkle with just a tad of cinnamon sugar before baking.

• Never overcook fillings with a cornstarch base. Overcooking thins out the base.

• For better bottom crusts, brush the bottom with a teaspoon of beaten egg and then chill while preparing the filling. This will help seal the pastry and should prevent a soggy crust.

• After cutting the shortening into the flour, sprinkle water ever so gently into the crust and use a tossing motion to moisten the crust. Continue tossing until dough cleans the bottom of the bowl. Never pack and squeeze.

• Whenever possible, make the crust ahead of schedule so that the crust can have a chance to chill, solidifying the shortening or butter before rolling out.

Rose Levy Beranbaum, author of the "Cake Bible" might have her cakes down pat, but I'd put one of momma's tart cherry pies up against her ganache any day. Momma never classified herself as a gourmet cook or baker, but it would be nothing to watch her spend an entire day preparing crusts and arranging lattices so perfect a close up shot could easily be entered into the Museum of Modern Art.

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WINNER DINNER



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Joyce Weigel is the first to win our recognition for her winner dinner. Here, in her Farmington kitchen, she presents a quick meal of Cordon Bleu chicken breasts, mushroom sauce, soft

bread sticks, chocolate covered cherry cake, crushed cranberry sauce and a glass of cranapple juice.

Panel favors a family favorite

AFTER RECEIVING many wonderful recipes, the time finally came to select the first Winner Dinner.

It was not an easy decision because there were so many delicious dinners to choose from. However, Joyce Weigel's Mock Chicken Cordon Bleu got the nod after passing through the picky palates of a most discriminating panel of judges — my children and their assorted friends.

Weigel, mother of three grown children, operates her own professional typing and secretarial service out of her home in Farmington. The chicken recipe she submitted has been a favorite of her children since they were little.

Weigel likes to serve the chicken with extra stuffing on the side and top it all with a brown mushroom sauce that is easy to make. A small serving of cranberry sauce and a tossed salad filled with lots of crunchy vegetables complete the meal.

ALTHOUGH WEIGEL and her family are not big dessert eaters, she offered a recipe for Chocolate Cherry Cake Bars that are a delicious family favorite and also very easy to make.

I think I was just as excited and happy as Weigel when I called to let her know that her menu had been selected to be the first Winner Dinner. When I spoke to her a second time, she told me how thrilled her friends



family-tested winner dinner

Betsy Brethen

and family were for her. Weigel took the whole day off the day the Observer & Eccentric photographer came to take her picture for this column.

Anyone who called to speak to Weigel received the following message on her answering machine: "I'm sorry, I can't come to the phone today. My chicken and I are preparing for our photo session."

I hope this week's Winner Dinner will provide you with a fresh idea for your family and inspire you to send in your family's favorite dinner menu. Until next week, take care, and happy cooking!

Submit your recipes, to be considered for publication in this column

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Confetti's new chef takes a fresh approach

Every little bit of Confetti's contributes to a pleasant night out — the long, narrow restaurant with its award-winning design, the stunning large glass block windows, the attentive service, the fresh bread offered as soon as you arrive and, most of all, the varied menu of pastas and fish dishes.

One of the earlier trendy restaurants out West Bloomfield way, Confetti's looks like a sliver of a place from its front on Orchard Lake Road just north of Maple.

But walk inside and the restaurant stretches out before you like a two-tiered hallway. Though it seats 146, it feels smaller because of its design.

LARGE GLASS block windows on three sides of the restaurant let light

filter in but screen out undesirable views. The restaurant's theme is carried out with colorful confetti strewn over white table cloths and pressed beneath glass overlays. Strips of blue and pink neon add to its contemporary feeling.

Designer Aleksis Lahti created a stunning restaurant from a brown, tunnel-like Maple House several years ago, and owner Bruce Cameron brought it to life with quality meals and excellent service.

Pastas and fish are the stars here. Until recently Cameron followed a "zero-based menuing" approach, creating a new menu each day based on the freshest, in-season foods available.

Fresh and in season are still the goals, but new chef Brian Gallagher



intends to put a few mainstays back onto the menu each day. Like lobster alfredo, one of his favorites, and roasted pork loin served with peach chutney — a popular item, but one that you won't find just anywhere.

WHEN we visited, the chef was serving up a delicious "peared" shrimp that had been marinated in garlic, oil, ginger, pepper and Worcestershire sauce, and was then grilled with corn and red peppers. The shrimp tasted delicious — and slightly tangy. The wood spears, however, were a nuisance.

From a selection of six pastas, we tried the pesto pasta with clams and lobster in a white wine cream sauce — another excellently flavored entrée whose only faults were in a bit

too much pasta and a slightly undercooked white sauce. Other choices were equally tempting, including a chevre (roasted red peppers) fettuccine and a grilled sweetbreads fettuccine.

IF YOU'RE looking for something different from the pasta or red potato side dishes, try the cous cous, a Mediterranean pasta served cold and with a chutney.

Gallagher said many patrons come back and ask for it to be heated, but some like the cold, grainy dish. While we weren't thrilled with it either (it reminded us of cold oatmeal), it was something different and worth a try.

The Cuban black bean soup served the night we visited was excellent —

prepared with just the right mixture of spices.

Our dinner salad was fresh and crispy, though nothing extraordinary. The mustard vinaigrette dressing was good, but — as is often the case — was poured on with a heavy hand. If you prefer a light dose of dressing, ask for it on the side.

AS THE new chef settles in, you can look forward to some new dishes and a delicate treatment of old favorites. He's planning to add mashed sweet potatoes and grilled polenta as "side" dishes and will be stuffing ravioli in various ways. The fish will be only what is in season, no tired white fish entrees.

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