

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Momma's meat pie challenge

I think Momma has finally met her match. If you remember last year at this time, I wrote a column on Momma's great meat pies, also called Tortieres (pronounced tort-e-airs).

Then Tom MacKinnon of MacKinnon's restaurant fame challenged me with accolades about his mother-in-law's famed meat pie creation, the battle lines were drawn and it was imminent a meat pie bake-off was in the works.

For those of you who have never tasted the typically French-Canadian concoction of pork shoulder, potatoes and sage all wrapped in a flaky crust, this writer heartily (burp) suggests you clip this story and accompanying recipe (on a page inside this section) — undoubtedly the best recipe for a pleasant dinner — that will surely please nationalities from any corner of the earth.

Seems Jeanne Beauchemin-Ouellette, born and reared in Montreal, Quebec and now hailing from Farmington Hills has been turning out meat pies every holiday season for the past 40 years or so. Her recipe was handed down verbally from her mom (French-Canadian for grandma) and has since passed through the hands of her five daughters. They all keep the long-standing family tradition of preparing meat pies for their families now.

ACCORDING TO Ouellette, the recipe has never been written down and preserved for all of mankind but instead, and similar to my Momma, the recipe is learned through the making.

With a pinch of this and a handful of that, making sure the onion is the diameter of a good-sized fist and of the utmost importance is the source of where the meat heralds from, this holiday season will find Ouellette starting now to bake more than 25 or so meat pies for the holidays.

Just like my Momma, Ouellette places her order for an extra-lean pork shoulder weeks in advance. At the market, she requests the butcher hand trim as much of the fat as humanly possible. After a second inspection to be sure the butcher has followed orders, it is ground.

Unlike my Momma, who chooses to trim and grind her meat by hand on the old meat grinder clamped to the basement table, Ouellette places her trust and confidence with her butcher.

Since the meat and potatoes are simmered in a large Dutch oven on the top of the stove for hours on end and the fat from the pork shoulder can be basted off during the simmering, the judges in this case call for an equal decision between Ouellette and Momma.

BOTH MOMS choose an all-purpose potato and, foregoing the use of Cuisinarts and Little Oscars demand the onion be chopped by hand so it's not too fine or noticeable in the pie. So much for technology, eh?

The recipes from both moms use fresh ground sage, salt and pepper but this is where the similarity stops. Ouellette uses a dried herb called Sariette (of which she is looking for a source to replenish a dwindling supply).

Momma still makes her crust by hand with lard and flour while Ouellette chooses to opt for more technological advances and has decided the ready-made pie crusts now on the market shelves offer a redeeming alternative.

Again, the difference grows with Ouellette adding some fresh breadcrumbs to her creation while Momma opts to omit the bread, making for a somewhat looser and less dense pie.

Both pies are undistinguishable in looks with the only difference being Ouellette's pie is somewhat more dense and firm in bite.

The Ouellettes and the Janes gang again have been blessed with this wonderful treat to enjoy Christmas Day.

Liqueurs for holiday cooking

Flavor special dishes

By Geri Rinachler
special writer

ONE OF MY earliest memories of holiday entertaining is of the traditional Italian desserts my mother served to family and friends throughout the season.

Panettone, a sweet yeast bread; crostata di ricotta, a cheese pie filled with mixed fruits; and cenci, fried bow-knot pastries, were served from Dec. 25 until the feast of the Epiphany, Jan. 6. When Mom served the coffee, Dad brought out a bottle of anise-flavored liqueur, which he reserved only for special occasions. Anise is a clear anise-flavored liqueur or cordial which has been popular in France and Italy since the 17th century.

According to the master of wine and liqueurs, the late Alexis Lichine, "A cordial is a beverage compounded from spirits with fruits or aromatic substances added by a variety of methods; maceration, steeping or, simply by mixing. They are always sweetened and the word is synonymous with liqueur." ("Alexis Lichine's Encyclopedia of Wines and Spirits," Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

If you were to stroll through any fancy wine and liquor shop, you would be dazzled by the vast array of domestic and imported liqueurs. Nearly every fruit imaginable has been made into a liqueur or fruit brandy from at least a dozen or so European nations and the United States. A number of these liqueurs or brandies have become standard after-dinner drinks as well as staple, recipe ingredients for gourmet cooks and chefs.

LIQUEURS SUCH AS creme de cassis (black currant), framboise (raspberry) and kirsch (cherry) have put the finishing touches on many classic French desserts and continue to be popular in trendy California entrees, salads and desserts alike.

Actually, there are so many fruit, herb and coffee-flavored liqueurs it is impossible to name them all. No matter what type of liqueur you choose, they are all made with different bases, varying amounts of alcohol and sugar so that only a few of them can be substituted in a recipe.

The holiday season is a great time to give them as a gift or test one in a luxurious, dinner recipe. Eager to learn more about these brilliant jewels in a bottle? Read on.

On a recent visit to Birmingham's Bottle and Basket Wine Shop, I asked wine connoisseur Lester Corsini for an inside look at some of his and his clientele's favorites. "All the fine cooks keep a bottle of framboise



JIM JAGOFF/ELDT/staff photographer

Cherry Cornish Hens Escoffier is a dish that includes kirsch, a cherry liqueur, in its recipe. For an individual serving, half a Cornish hen tops sauce on dinner plate. Liqueurs are an important ingredient in other entrees, as well as salads and desserts.

Buffet joins bakery, barn, ballroom

By Arlene Funke
special writer

It's 10 a.m. and workers are making fruit salad, stirring up batches of muffins and sorting silverware and drinking glasses.

The place is Gourmet Buffet of Livonia, a newly opened restaurant that doubles as a catering facility. The owner is Rob Cortis, a 27-year-old Farmington Hills resident whose energy and ambition have netted him several successful food and entertainment interests.

"If you have determination and aren't afraid to work and get your hands in and help out, you will achieve your goals," said Cortis, a 1980 graduate of Livonia Stevenson High School, who holds a degree from the culinary arts program at Schoolcraft College.

The Gourmet Buffet of Livonia, which opened Oct. 1, occupies a former Duff's all-you-can-eat restaurant on Plymouth Road at Middlebelt Road. Cortis already has implemented plans to use the giant kitchen as a central commissary and training center for his other enterprises, which include:

- The New Grande Ballroom, a non-alcoholic nightclub for all ages, in Westland.
- Elite Sweets, a Livonia bakery, which specializes in sumptuous torte

wedding cakes.

• The Barnstormer, a 1914-vintage cavernous barn in Brighton which recently was refurbished into a banquet hall and nightclub.

Cortis has held many jobs, including pizza-maker, clerk, supermarket stockboy, baker. It was while he was working as a disc jockey, spinning records at parties and clubs, that he met Jim McEwen of Redford Township, who became his business partner and confidant. McEwen owns a bar-restaurant in Livonia.

Cortis said he wouldn't have been able to juggle his various roles without the help of such people as McEwen or Dan Miller of Westland, his partner in Elite Sweets. All of Cortis' present endeavors — the New Grande Ballroom, Elite Sweets, Barnstormer and Gourmet Buffet — have been started within the last five years.

"My forte is setting up an efficient operation," Cortis said. "The biggest challenge is to make all the businesses properly managed and controlled, to eliminate any room for complaints and to maximize my free time."

According to Cortis, the addition of Gourmet Buffet greatly enhances his flexibility.



JIM JAGOFF/ELDT/staff photographer

Rob Cortis (right) and his business partner, Jim McEwen, show off a specialty of the Gourmet Buffet, Cortis' new restaurant and catering facility in Livonia.

Gourmet recipes

GOURMET BUFFET CRAB SALAD
1/2 pound cooked snow crab, diced
1/2 pound Alaska whitefish, cooked and chopped
1 cup chopped scallions
1 cup chopped celery
2 cups mayonnaise
1 teaspoon fresh minced garlic
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
dash salt and pepper, optional
8 ounces pasta, cooked and cooled, optional

Mix ingredients together. For best flavor, refrigerate overnight.

OLD-FASHIONED RICE PUDDING
4 1/2 cups milk
1/2 cup uncooked rice
1/2 cup sugar
2 teaspoons vanilla
1 teaspoon nutmeg
1/4 teaspoon lemon peel
1/2 cup raisins, optional

Combine all ingredients in ungreased 4-quart baking dish. Place baking dish in pan filled with one inch of water. Bake at 300 degrees until rice is soft, around 1 1/2 hours. Stir frequently while baking. Serve chilled.

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