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Online Shopper

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Pies With Down-Home Magic, Yours for the Clicking

I SUBSCRIBE to the pie theory of entertaining.

You can't have too many. Or, put another way, a dedicated party giver knows better than to overlook any kind of pie — apple, cherry, pecan, pumpkin, coconut custard, banana, please stop me before I run for my pastry blender — when guests are imminent.

This time of year, guests are always imminent. And I have never met one who failed to turn all gushy and thankful at the prospect of being offered a slice.

The only tiny problem with my pie theory is having pies on hand when you need them.

I like to make a pie crust as much as the next person who was not raised in the South, which is to say that unlike my friend Stephanie, whose childhood in Mississippi taught her infallible pie-crust skills, I have to read the recipe's directions eight times before sifting the flour. And by the time I reach the pressing-the-dough-into-a-ball stage, I am so frazzled that I have to lie down while the oven preheats.

This explains why, for many years, I asked Stephanie to bring pies to my parties (I am thinking in particular of her berry pies and of her pecan pies, depending on the season).

But now that I live far from her in Northern California, I need a different strategy. And that's why, with the holiday season looming, I am embarking on a new pie initiative that revolves around a particularly delicious version called a Derby-Pie, which, remarkably for such a good pie, you can keep in the freezer until you need it.

It used to be hard to get your hands on a Derby-Pie. Before the Internet, the only way to taste the secret recipe was to travel to Kentucky, where it was invented at a little restaurant called the Melrose Inn in a town called Prospect in the 1950s.

A trip was worth it. I had my first slice in the 1980s, when I lived in Louisville. It was hard to describe exactly what was so delicious about the recipe that George Kern, the Melrose Inn's manager, created with the help of his parents, Walter and Leandra Kern. A general description would be that it was chocolate and walnut and gooey and tasted as if Leandra Kern had baked it in her own kitchen and set it out to cool on her back porch, which she in fact used to do.

Did I mention the delicate crust?

The pie was so good that after the Kern family left the restaurant business, they traveled to Washington in the 1960s to discuss the recipe with an examiner in the Patent and Trademark Office.

Nowadays, the name is trademarked and the family's bakery turns out 120,000 pies a year. And Derby-Pies are sold online.

At sites such as Atasteofkentucky.com, Shop.honeybakedcatalog.com and Meachamhams.com, prices for a prebaked frozen nine-inch pie vary from \$21.85 to \$38.95, which includes shipping to addresses in the continental 48 states. The pies can also be shipped to Alaska and Hawaii at breathtaking expense; surcharges upward of \$30 are described on sellers' sites (but if I lived in Alaska or Hawaii, I would serve cake).

No matter which site processes the order, all the pies originate from the family-owned Kern's Kitchen Inc. in Louisville. There, the recipe is closely guarded. Three or four people work in production, but only the baker is allowed in the kitchen during the mixing.

I phoned Kern's Kitchen one day last week to



Leslie Lamble

ask Alan Rupp, Walter and Leandra Kern's grandson, for some tips on how to serve the pie.

"Hang on, you caught me back on the nut table," Mr. Rupp said. "Let me get back into my office, where I can talk to you with less distractions."

Mr. Rupp said he was particularly busy last week, heading into the holiday season. A lot of the

And the Derby-Pie, a
Kentucky original, even
survives a trip to the freezer.

company's savvier customers order now, he said, knowing they can keep a Derby-Pie in the freezer for weeks without harming the flavor.

"It has a high sugar content and is a fully baked item, so you can freeze it without losing the integrity of the pie," Mr. Rupp said.

Neither the ingredients nor the baking process have changed much in 50 years, Mr. Rupp said.

"Nobody has been able to duplicate it," he added, "although a lot of people try."

"I saw a lot of recipes online for chocolate-nut

pies," I said.

"That's not an issue for us, because we know they won't taste like the ones my grandma baked in her kitchen, out in Prospect," Mr. Rupp said. But, he said, over the years the company has filed 10 trademark infringement suits. "The issue is when they attach the trademark and call it Derby-Pie."

Mr. Rupp also sells his pies to local restaurants, hotels and some Kroger supermarkets in Kentucky, Tennessee, southern Indiana and parts of Illinois.

"I recently had a slice at the Brown Hotel in Louisville," I told him.

"Did they do it right for you?" he asked. "Warm it up?"

"Yes," I said. "Is that how I should serve it to my guests over the holidays?"

"Here's what you do on Thanksgiving," he said. "When you pull the turkey out of the oven, turn the oven off."

"O.K.," I said.

"Slice the pie when it's cold, because it cuts cleaner that way, and then put the pie into the oven and let it slow warm."

"For how long?" I asked.

"When you're done with dinner and ready for dessert," he said, "it's ready for you."

If you can wait that long, I ordered a Derby-Pie from Atasteofkentucky.com, ostensibly to keep in the freezer for guest emergencies. But if they want a slice, they had better get here fast.