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Opening the Door to the Bounty of Northeastern Wisconsin

Pear: The Overshadowed Fruit

RETURN OF THE HOP | MAD DOG'S LAST BITE

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Belgian pies were made in large quantities for the Kermis. These guarded recipes were passed down through the generations. Contributed photo

KERMISS: A Reminder of Home for Early Settlers

Celebrating the harvest with Belgian Pie

----- Story by Pamela Parks -----

"When the Belgian immigrants came to this country, they brought with them several customs...perhaps the most popular one was the Belgian 'Kermis.' After the harvesting had been completed, it was customary for the people in Belgium to attend Mass to give thanks to the Lord for a bountiful harvest. This was followed by feasting and dancing (usually lasting three days)...By 1858 some of the Belgian immigrants had been in the United States for five or six years. Many were lonesome and homesick for their native land...Amia Champaign, also a Belgian immigrant, had the answer...'Why don't we have a Kermis?'" —An excerpt from "The History of the Belgian Settlements" by Math S. Tlachac.

AND, SO IT BEGAN. The first Kermis in the Belgian Settlement was held in Rosiere. A Kermis rotation was soon established starting with the last Sunday in August in Lincoln and moving to Brussels and Namur, Rosiere and Champion, Dykesville, San Saviour and Tonet, Duvall and Thiry Daems, Misere and Casco, and Forestville. In the early days, a band would lead the people

out of the church and to the taverns.

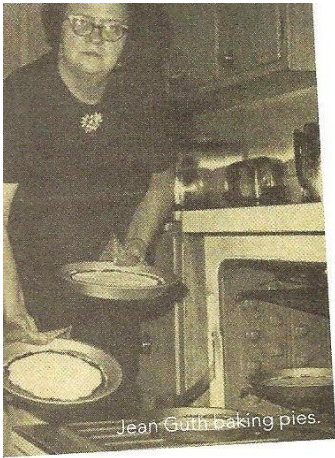
"It was the biggest celebration of the whole year," said Christine Chaudoir, owner of the Belgian Bar in Namur and a board member for the Namur Belgian Heritage Foundation. "Everyone looked forward to the Kermis and would get new clothes. It was the "big festival."

At its height, the Kermis celebration

lasted three days and was filled with feasting, dancing, card games, and a festival-like atmosphere. The Belgian Bar always hired a band and Chaudoir would single-handedly bake up 125 Belgian pies.

"Everybody would have free pie, dance, and just have a good time," Chaudoir said.

Now the Kermis is a more subdued celebration often hosted in local taverns.



Jean Guth baking pies.

However, some churches and the Namur Belgian Heritage Foundation have begun to revive the tradition. Whether big or small, Kermis is always celebrated with Belgian pie.

This year's Kermis celebration is on Sept. 21 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.. Visit www.belgianheritage.org for more information.

Pies by the hundreds

"Then came the baking, which in the early days could only be done in outdoor ovens. As many as three dozen Belgian pies could be baked at one time. The Belgian pie! What would the Kermis be without the famous delicacy, the crust of which was made of dough, spread over with prunes or apples and topped with homemade cottage cheese. So tasty it was that one bite invited another." -- Tlachac.

Tlachac's ode to the Belgian pie is emphatically shared with others. The sweet yeast dough crust topped with traditional filling—ground prunes, apples, or sour cream raisin and topped with a sweet cheese filling (or creamy rice pudding served with whipped cream) --

would be provided by the tavern owners and washed down by a glass of beer. Today, it can be purchased by the slice or pie.

Making Belgian pies is a bit easier with modern conveniences in the kitchen, but it still is a labor of love. The smallest recipe Gina (Guth) Wautier of Brussels prefers to bake pies is in several batches of 20 over two days. The fillings are made the night before and the entire next day is spent baking. It is a family tradition she continues.

"It was not uncommon for my mom Jean Guth to make 200 pies to be given away or sold in my dad's tavern at Kermis time. For days our home was covered with pies set out to cool—on the beds, extra tables, ironing boards and wooden planks," Wautier said.

Belgian pie recipes have long been guarded. Guth caused quite a stir for sharing her pie recipe with news reporters in 1960.

As a child, Wautier helped in the process of making Belgian pies by peeling apples, pitting prunes, grinding cheese, greasing pie tins and washing dishes, but her mother was the only one who handled the dough. Wautier began experimenting with the process as an adult. Through trial and error she adjusted her mother's recipe so that it can make a manageable 10 pies—five of two kinds in a two-hour time frame.

Just as her mom was willing to share her recipe with others, Wautier has done the same by teaching Belgian pie-making classes. She taught her first class at NWTC in

2009. It was wildly popular.

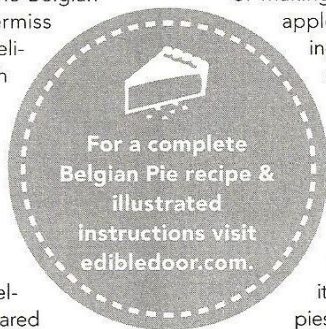
In 2012, St. Norbert College invited Wautier to offer classes through the Language Services Department. With Karen Stillman assisting, they have taught the skill to over 150 people. Students of all ages learn the entire process, sample their handiwork, and take a pie home.

"I think my mom would be proud," said Wautier. ☺



Gina Guth Wautier, left, pictured with Karen Stillman.

Gina Guth Wautier has a self-admitted "passion for pies" and is working to create a video that would be available in Spring, 2015. She will be teaching Belgian pie making classes this fall—time and location were not set at the time of publication. For more information about her Belgian pie recipe or how to sign up for a class, contact Wautier by phone at (920) 495-1062 or email at gina@wautier.com.



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