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Passion for *fashion*

Social-media sensation
Vidya Gopalan

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Praise for pecan pie

The classic Southern staple is this year's IT pie for the holidays.

by **Gayvin Powers** | photographs by **Peter Taylor**

Andersons World's Best Pecan Pie

Move over pumpkin, pecan is surging as this holiday season's new IT flavor. Year-over-year DoorDash sales of pecan-flavored food and drinks are up 28%, and pecan Snickers bars, introduced in 2024, are sticking around. This only goes to show that the rest of the country is catching up with what the South has long known: Pecan is a tried-and-true classic. And at the top of the list is pecan pie.

It's a pie with a humble beginning, dating back to the late 19th century. It has endured since 1886, when *Harper's Bazaar* published a simple description of what's now a Southern classic. Originally a custard-based pie, it evolved with a filling made of sugar-based syrups (corn, molasses or maple) and has become a staple at Thanksgiving dinners.

While pecan pie may not have originated in North Carolina, Charlotte has been perfecting it for years. A pie is only as good as its maker, and three of the most praised pecan pies come from Andersons, The Batch House and The Crunkleton. They prove the confection is more than just a holiday dessert. Pecan pie is sweet nostalgia, a bite of comfort and full of spirit.

ICONIC NOSTALGIA Andersons

With the slogan "The World's BEST Pecan Pie," Andersons has been making its famous pie since 1958. Its origins trace back to the end of World War II in 1946, when three brothers — Jimmie, Pete and Bill — started Andersons Restaurant (formerly Mercury Sandwich Shop). After Pete and Bill left the family-run business, Jimmie sat down with Dewitt Wylie, the chef at Andersons, to create the signature pecan pie recipe that hasn't changed in 58 years.

Jimmie's love of pecan pie was passed to his son Gary Anderson, who started working at the restaurant as a boy, bussing tables and washing dishes.

"My dad and I had such a great relationship," Gary says. "After

college, I just showed up, and we just started working together." After Jimmie passed, Gary took over the business in 1979. Though the restaurant closed in 2006, the pie lives on.

Over the years, local and national celebrities who have delighted in Andersons pecan pie include Mike Love (The Beach Boys), Richard Simmons, Bob and Elizabeth Dole, and Larry Sprinkle, according to Gary. A signed photograph of Bob Hope hangs above Gary's desk, giving thanks for receiving a pie after a performance.

And then there's the David Letterman connection, when Jay Thomas, the late comedian who was a Charlotte DJ in the early 1970s, mentioned Andersons while telling what Letterman calls "the greatest talk-show story of all time." Year after year, Thomas repeated the hilarious true tale involving a traffic incident and the Lone Ranger (Google it for a good laugh) on Letterman's show. As a thank you, Andersons sent pies to Letterman, and in return, the late-night host sent tickets to his show.

Over the years, Gary credits three things with earning them devoted customers. First are the fresh, locally sourced, pecan halves that are roasted to bring out their rich, nutty flavor. The second are the pans in which the pies are baked. "We use an extra deep pan," Gary says, allowing people to experience more of the not-too-sweet filling infused with hints of vanilla. Last, Andersons shipping containers allow pies to arrive in the same condition as when they come out of the oven, Gary says.

Once it arrives, Gary recommends serving it hot or cold.

"Heat it up in the oven and add vanilla ice cream. That way it's no fat, no calories, no cholesterol," he jokes. Eating it cold is an entirely new culinary experience. "When I was in college, my buddies used to tell me, 'You better not come back empty-handed.' So I'd go back and put them in the freezer. If you haven't tried it frozen, you've got to." This brilliant, unorthodox method of eating pecan pie enhances the flavor and caramel-like quality.

1617 Elizabeth Ave., andersonspieco.com



Gary Anderson's favorite drink with pecan pie: Milk
Favorite way to eat: Warm with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, or straight out of the freezer



Cris Rojas' favorite drink with pecan pie: Black coffee
Favorite way to eat: Room temperature with ice cream

A SLICE OF HOME The Batch House

The Batch House in west Charlotte is sugar, spice and everything nice. Walking in, the aroma of cinnamon and the eclectic, grandmillennial decor practically begs guests to sink into one of the plush couches and enjoy a freshly baked slice of pie.

Founder Cris Rojas' love of food is evident. Beloved in her community and known for experimenting with recipes, Cris, aka The Batchmaker, has brought innovative twists to traditional desserts since emigrating from Honduras in 2006 when she was 19. "Food is the way I'm creative, the way that I express myself — the way that I see the world."

As a child in Honduras she "used all of my allowance and birthday money" on food. Her passion increased as she began experimenting in the family's pantry. "I've been baking since I was 8 ... I [tested] everything that we had in our pantry. I saw how creative I could be with food."

During the holidays, Cris would enjoy traditional Honduran desserts like torrijas (a flour pastry dipped in alcohol or a honey mixture), moist fruit cakes, tres leches and rice pudding with alcohol-soaked raisins. In the United States, she infuses what she learned in childhood to create twists on the classics. As a self-proclaimed "chocolate foodie," she describes The Batch House's Chocolate Bourbon Pecan pie as "absolutely insane." It's a fudgy, decadent pie that she brings each year to Thanksgiving dinner — and keeps a separate one for herself, cutting slivers off throughout the day to eat while she prepares the meal.

The inspiration behind her take on the traditional pie comes from her childhood and her love of playing with flavors.

"I love bourbon, and I love chocolate. I wanted to make it my own version." Each pie is handmade, with a signature crinkle along the crust, a testament to the care and detail that go into each pie. The bakery makes about 700 pies at Thanksgiving.

"Food connects us all," Cris continues. Her most heartfelt



Gary Crunkleton's favorite drink with pecan pie: Milk, or bourbon (see pg. 90)
Favorite way to eat: Old school. "I order it with a glass of milk, rather than a la mode."

The Crunkleton's House-Made Pecan Pie served with salted caramel ice cream

memory is of a customer who recently had lost her grandmother. Her grandmother always made pie for the holidays. When the woman ate the Batch House pie, she sobbed. "It made her feel like Grandma was still there," Cris recalls. While a pie can't replace beloved family members, it can evoke comforting memories.

901 Berryhill Road, thebatchmaker.com

SWEET SPIRITS
The Crunkleton

Gary Crunkleton is a collector. Before he was known for pecan pie, he was known for his craft drinks and love of antique spirits. This passion led him and the 1957 Hospitality Group to open The Crunkleton (with locations in Chapel Hill, Charlotte and Raleigh), Rosemont, Puerta and Cheat's Cheesesteaks. It also inspired him to spearhead the 2015 North Carolina General Assembly House Bill 909, known as the "Crunkleton Bill," granting North Carolina establishments the ability to sell "antique spirituous liquor."

Soon after Gary opened the original Crunkleton in Chapel Hill in 2008, he soon discovered that the food was a hit, too. The pecan pie recipe comes from 1957 Executive Chef Greg Balch, whose grandmother created it. Balch's version includes candied pecans and homemade pecan syrup and is topped with salted caramel ice cream. The recipe is a well-guarded secret, as only Crunkleton sous chef Sarah Haqq knows the recipe.

"We warm the pie in a live, wood-fire hearth," notes Sarah Brown, assistant general manager at The Crunkleton in Charlotte. "It'll get just a touch of smokiness on the pie from that fire."

"Being a pie guy," Gary says, "I've had my share of great pies throughout the years. The key lime pie from CQ's Restaurant down in Hilton Head comes to mind. The chess pie from The Angus Barn in Raleigh is a good one. I once had a strawberry and rhubarb pie down at Commander's Palace in New Orleans, decades ago, that I can still taste. In my humble opinion, the pecan pie from The Crunkleton fits right up there with all of them."

1957 E. 7th St., thecrunkleton.com

PERFECT PECAN PIE PAIRINGS

For a modern take on a classic, try pecan pie with a spirit.

"When I do my bourbon tasting, I often talk about the basic flavors as being similar to pecan pie," Gary Crunkleton says. "There's the burnt sugar, a dry nutty flavor like pecans, vanilla notes and the sweetness, which comes from the corn. So, a low-proof bourbon matches well with a nice slice of pecan pie." The low-proof spirit helps create a balance between the pie and the liquor, he says.

"The sweetness from a bite of our pecan pie followed by a small sip of a low-proof Old Grand-Dad or Wild Turkey bourbon pairs fine," Gary says. "If you really want to take this pairing to a higher level, then pairing our pie with a pour of an antique bourbon amplifies the comparable flavors."

- Established in 1882, **Old Grand-Dad** has a high-rye mash that brings out a strong, spicy, cinnamon-enhanced flavor with caramel, vanilla, oak and citrus elements. The aging process and "alligator" barrel char evokes smoky notes and enhances the flavor palette.

- Founded in 1869, **Wild Turkey** brings a spicy, bold, toasted-oak profile, complemented by notes of vanilla, caramel, cinnamon and allspice. Batches have been known to have layers of cherry, orange zest, leather, toffee and pepper.
- In North Carolina, spirits aged more than 20 years that haven't been opened or in production carry the classification of **antique spirituous liquor**. These rare liquors are unique and highly sought-after, with many having been made with lost recipes. Antique bourbons embody deeper, richer, more complex flavor profiles not found in recent releases.



CLASSIC PECAN PIE RECIPES

HARPER BAZAAR'S PECAN PIE

recipe from 1886

"Is not only delicious, but is capable of being made a 'real state pie,' as an enthusiastic admirer said. The pecans must be very carefully hulled, and the meat thoroughly freed from any bark or husk. When ready, throw the nuts into boiling milk, and let them boil while you are preparing a rich custard. Have your pie plates lined with a good pastry, and when the custard is ready, strain the milk from the nuts and add them to the custard. A meringue may be added, if liked, but very careful baking is necessary."

— *Pecan Pie, Harper's Bazaar, February 6, 1886 (p. 95)*

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT'S PECAN PIE

Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady of the United States and wife to Franklin D. Roosevelt, spurred a resurgence of pecan pie when her recipe was published in the Hollis Pantry Secrets Cookbook in 1949. Her version has become one of the most popular.

INGREDIENTS:

3 eggs
1 cup brown sugar
1 tablespoon butter
1 cup corn syrup
1 cup pecans*
1 teaspoon vanilla
a few grains of salt

1. Cream butter and sugar and add syrup, well-beaten eggs, salt and vanilla. When mixed, add the finely chopped pecans and turn into a pie plate lined with pastry.

2. Bake in a modern oven until firm.

*Walnuts may be substituted. **SP**



Chocolate Bourbon Pecan Pie at The Batch House