The Real Shoofly Pie

By Lori Baer

Aaron Springer

MY MANY CHURCH AND LADIES-AUXILIARY cookbooks from Central Pennsylvania dish up some darn good Pennsylvania cooking and are my first stop when looking to conjure flavors from my youth. I find that after getting beyond the persistent "can of creamed mushroom soup" or the "catsup" that seems to be dumped into everything circa 1970, for the most part these cookbooks hide many simple but classic regional recipes first introduced to me by my mother, grandmothers, and aunts at potlucks, holiday feasts and Sunday dinners. So when I was looking for an authentic shoofly pie, I figured my fundraiser cookbooks were sure to deliver.

Surprisingly, I found all the recipes called for unnecessary ingredients like cream of tartar or King Syrup; and every one of them called for eggs. Not the shoofly pie I remembered. It wasn't until I got to *Pennsylvania Dutch Country Cooking* by William Woys Weaver that I found what I was looking for: a humble cake-meets-pie concoction, distinctively flavored with molasses, with nary an egg in sight.

"Shoofly pie has no connection with any holidays," says Weaver, an internationally known food historian, contributing editor for *Gourmet*, and professor of food studies at Drexel University in Philadelphia. "The pie was a poverty food served exclusively for breakfast or in the evening with supper, or as a field break snack with coffee. That's about it. It was never ever eaten as dessert following a meal, even though it is served that way in many Lancaster [Pennsylvania] tourist [spots]."

Weaver explains that eggs were expensive in the 19th century, chickens didn't lay in the winter, and a pie without eggs would have had a longer shelf life. So the pie was basically invented to eliminate the need for eggs, being leavened with baking powder instead. The use of eggs is only a development since the 1920s.

Even more importantly, it's not shoofly pie unless it's made with molasses. The bitter kick of pure molasses, which comes from the boiling of sugar cane juice, can make some wince with every bite, which may explain the use of the more mellow King Syrup that emerges in many recipes. However, molasses essentially gave the pie its name. More likely than the story about molasses pies cooling on the window sill and attracting flies that had to be shooed away, is the theory that connects the pie with Shoofly Molasses, produced in Philadelphia and popular in the late 1800s when the pie first enters the culinary timeline.

"Someone introduced [shoofly pie] under the name Centennial Cake in 1876; where the genealogical line leads prior to that is somewhere in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, perhaps Centennial Rolling Mills, which made flour," says Weaver. "The manner in which the pie was introduced at the Centennial remains murky because no one has a complete record of all the food served there, but it was in fact a Pennsylvania Dutch invention from the start: a crumb cake baked in a pie shell. All the earliest references to it in cookbooks call it Centennial Cake. Shoofly pie as a name comes into the picture much later around the 1880s," he says.

Weaver also explains that shoofly pie isn't indigenous to the Amish or Mennonite communities that predominate in the Central Pennsylvania region as many outsiders have come to believe, but belonged to the larger Pennsylvania Dutch community. It's believed a sense of U.S. pride among the Pennsylvania Dutch—who were descendants of German and Swiss immigrants, not Dutch—growing out of the culture's inclusion in the Centennial celebration drove the popularity of shoofly pie, or Centennial cake. As Weaver explains, the pie became "a symbol of their American-ness."

Two basic versions of shoofly eventually developed, "dry bottom" and "wet" or "gooey bottom" shoofly. The translation of these two types of shoofly pies is literal: one type of shoofly affords a dry cake-like consistency beneath the crumb topping

Shoofly Pie

From *Pennsylvania Dutch Country Cooking*
by William Woys Weaver

Shoofly pie lovers should be grateful to William Woys Weaver's grandmother for obtaining the original Centennial Cake recipe from Mrs. Miles Fry of Ephrata, Pennsylvania. The family had preserved it from the 1870s.

Pastry for 9-inch crust

1 ¼ cups all-purpose flour

½ cup sugar

½ cup unsalted butter

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

½ teaspoon grated nutmeg

¼ teaspoon sea salt

½ teaspoon baking soda

¾ cup warm water

¾ cup unsulfured molasses

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Line a 9-inch pie dish with pastry and set aside. Using a pastry cutter or food processor, work the flour, sugar and butter to a loose crumb, then add cinnamon, nutmeg and salt. In a separate bowl, dissolve the baking soda in the warm water and combine with the molasses. Pour the liquid into the unbaked pie shell, then fill with the crumb mixture. Be certain the crumbs are spread evenly along the sides; this will help prevent overflow during baking.

Bake the pie in the middle of the oven for 15 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 350 degrees and bake 35 to 40 minutes or until the center of the pie is firm and cake-like. Serve hot from the oven or Serve at room temperature. Serves 6-8

and the other bears more of a wet custard hiding under the crumbs. The dry bottom is thought to be the original version because this pie is meant for dipping in a coffee, while the wet bottom variety comes about later—likely the result of a failed baking attempt not fully setting the pie but still pleasing to the baker's palate—and is more popular throughout the Pennsylvania Dutch region today.

Although my preference is for dry bottom shoofly, I guess I'm not a true devotee, since I can't stomach crumbs floating circles in my coffee, but I can appreciate the pie's simplicity that originally appealed to poor farming families.

As I snoop around farmers markets and bakeries and chat with friends and relatives, I find that shoofly pie is one of those foods you either love or you hate. You'll have to try the recipe with a cup of coffee and see for yourself.

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Molasses Primer

I like using mild molasses, which is also referred to as *first molasses*. The first boiling removes only a small amount of sugar and produces the mildest grade. The second boiling yields a darker *second molasses*, one that takes on a less sweet and a more assertive flavor. The by-product of the third boiling, *blackstrap molasses* has the lowest remaining sugar content and delivers the most pungent flavor. Unsulfured molasses is most widely sold and is made from mature sugar cane. In contrast, sulfured molasses is made from young, green sugar cane that has not matured long enough and requires a sulfur dioxide treatment during the sugar extracting process for preservation.