

LAGNIAPPE*

If there were no other reason to live in the South, Southern cooking would be enough.

--Michael Andrew Grissom, *Southern by the Grace of God*

Pecan Tassies

A longtime Southern favorite, the pecan is the official state nut of Alabama. There are over a thousand varieties, many named for Native American Indian tribes: Cheyenne, Mohawk, Sioux, Choctaw, and Shawnee. The word “tassie”—a small cup—has been around for centuries, too. Robert Burns, in 1790, used it in one of his poems: “Go fetch to me a pint o’ wine, And fill it in a silver tassie.” It’s easy to see how the word became used to describe little pastries baked in muffin tins. These pecan treats are bite-size finger food, which makes them ideal for a party tray.

1/2 cup butter (room temperature), plus 1 tablespoon butter, melted

3-ounce package cream cheese (room temperature)

1 cup flour

1 large egg

3/4 cup packed light brown sugar

1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Pinch of fine salt

1/2 cup pecans, finely chopped

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees F. Spray a 24-cup mini-muffin pan with cooking spray, or set out 24 silicone mini baking cups. Beat butter and cream cheese until smooth. Add flour and beat until completely blended. Cover and chill for 1 hour.

Whisk together melted butter, egg, brown sugar, vanilla, and salt until smooth. Set aside. Divide the chilled dough into 24 pieces, and roll into 1-inch balls. Press the balls into the bottoms and partway up the sides of the baking cups. Drop 1 teaspoon pecans into each cup. Spoon about 1 teaspoon of the egg mixture into each cup.

Bake until the filling is set, about 25 minutes. Cool on a wire rack for 10 minutes. Carefully remove from the baking cups to continue cooling.

Holiday Bread Pudding with Rum Sauce

Frugal Depression-era cooks used every scrap of leftovers—including stale bread—while bootleg rum, made from molasses, was always available. With the addition of raisins, chopped candied fruit, and a heady rum sauce, this bread pudding is a wonderful holiday dessert.

* Lagniappe: Southern-talk for “a little something extra”

For the pudding:

7–8 cups torn or cubed stale bread

3/4 cup dark brown sugar

3 cups milk

4 tablespoons butter

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon nutmeg

1 teaspoon vanilla

1/3 cup raisins

1/3 cup candied fruit

1/8 cup rum

4 eggs

For the sauce:

1/2 cup butter

1 cup white sugar

1/3 cup heavy cream

1/8 cup rum

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Grease a 9-inch square baking dish.

For the pudding, place the bread in a large bowl. In a medium saucepan, mix brown sugar, milk, butter, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, raisins, candied fruit, and rum. Stir over low heat just until sugar is dissolved. Pour over bread.

In a small bowl, beat 4 eggs. Add to the bread mixture and stir gently, so that the bread is fully saturated with egg and milk. Let stand for 30 minutes. Scrape bread mixture into baking dish. Bake for 40–50 minutes until the top is browned and the middle is just set.

For the sauce, melt the butter in a medium saucepan over low heat. Add sugar and stir just until dissolved. Mix in the cream and rum. Keep warm (do not boil). Pour the warm sauce over each scoop of bread pudding before serving.

Forgotten Cookies

The intriguing name for these cookies came from the way they are prepared. They were put into the oven at night and “forgotten” until morning—a good use of the leftover heat of the coal or wood kitchen range. Like other meringues (airy, crisp confections of egg whites and sugar), they are dried in a preheated oven rather than baked. (One early recipe calls for drying them in a “hot closet.”) The chocolate chips in this recipe weren’t commercially available until 1940, when Nestle began marketing their recently developed “morsels” or “chips.” We take our kitchen tools for granted, but as you beat the egg whites, remember how pleased Earlylne was with her 1930s Mixmaster, which saved a lot of muscle power!

2 large egg whites
1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar
3/4 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon vanilla
3/4 cup chocolate chips (mini chips are better for these bite-size cookies)
3/4 cup chopped toasted pecans
1/4 cup dried cherries, finely chopped

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line a baking sheet with foil or parchment or use a silicon mat.

With an electric mixer at medium speed, beat the egg whites and cream of tartar until soft peaks form (1 to 2 minutes). Still beating, gradually add the sugar. Beat at high speed until stiff peaks form, about 3 minutes. Using a spatula, scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl and fold in the chocolate chips, pecans, and cherries. Drop 2-inch balls of the meringue mixture onto a large foil-lined baking sheet. (This is easier if you use two teaspoons, one to scoop with, the other to push the meringue onto the sheet.)

Place in preheated oven. After 5 minutes, turn the oven off. Allow the cookies to dry in the oven for at least 8 hours.

Ambrosia

Citrus fruits were a special holiday treat for Depression-era Southerners, and children loved to find oranges and tangerines in their Christmas stockings. The fruits were in season in the winter, but they were costly—if you could afford them, you would serve them to special guests with pride. During the Depression, a dozen oranges cost about the same as five pounds of flour (which would make five loaves of bread) or a half-gallon of milk. You had to have the bread and milk; you didn't need the oranges.

Satsuma oranges, a loose-skinned variety of mandarin oranges, arrived in Florida in 1876 and quickly became a favorite. Christmas was the peak of their season, so the Satsumas were coveted for a fresh fruit dessert called “ambrosia”—the mythical food of the gods. Pineapple (primarily shipped from Cuba) was another prized fruit, added to ambrosia when available.

And there was coconut. Coconuts arrived in Florida accidentally, when the Spanish schooner *Providencia*, bound for Spain with twenty thousand coconuts from Trinidad, ran aground near Palm Beach in 1879. Within a decade, mature coconut palms had grown up to fill the area and the nuts—which traveled well and kept beautifully—were being shipped north.

This ambrosia recipe is complete with helpful suggestions for those who were puzzled about how to get the meat out of their coconut. It is from *Southern Cooking*, by Henrietta Dull, who began selling her homemade food when her husband became ill. Originally published in 1928, Dull's cookbook began as a series of newspaper columns for the *Atlanta Journal*, entitled “Mrs. Dull's Cooking Lessons.” It introduced Southern food to a national audience and adapted traditional recipes to gas and electric appliances. A 1989 reprint edition is available from Cherokee Publishing Company.

6 large oranges
1 large coconut
1/2 cup sugar (more or less to suit the taste)

Remove the brown skin and put the coconut through the food chopper or grate. Remove the orange sections from the skin, being careful to remove all of the skin. Mix orange, coconut, and sugar. Put in a cool place for one hour, and it is ready to serve. 1/2 cup sherry may be added. To get the coconut out easily, remove the milk and place in a hot oven until the shell is quite hot to the hand. With a hammer tap over the nut, then give a hard knock to crack the shell, which will break and come apart from the nut meat.

To the requisite coconut and six oranges, a 1913 recipe adds “one pineapple chopped quite fine, one-half box strawberries, six bananas sliced and the slices quartered, and one lemon sliced fine.” Another (1904) suggests Malaga grapes, dates, and nuts.

A dish fit for the gods, indeed—and perhaps not affordable in Depression-era Darling.

Eggnog

Eggnog was as popular in the South as it was anywhere else, heavily laced with the local rum or brandy. Food historians trace our modern eggnog to early English recipes for posset and syllabub.

Here’s an American recipe from *The Kentucky Housewife*, by Lettice Bryan. Published in 1839, Bryan’s cookbook contained over 1300 recipes, derived from European, American Indian, and African sources and reflects a merging of the three distinct cuisines in Southern cookery.

Break six eggs, separating the whites from the yolks; beat the whites to a stiff froth, put the yolks in a bowl and beat them light. Stir into it slowly half a pint of rum, or three gills [1 1/2 cups] of common brandy; add a quart of rich sweet milk and half a pound of powdered sugar; then stir in the egg froth, and finish by grating nutmeg on the top.