

PIE OH MY!

BY ANGELA KNIPPLE



What is this silence I hear? Where is the outcry of righteous indignation? Where are the protests? Where are the activists holding meetings and organizing sit-ins to protect this national institution, this landmark of taste? Who will cry when the fried pies are gone?

Yes, I am being melodramatic, but when was the last time you made a fried pie? I can't say that I ever have. I remember my grandmother making them and sitting beside the stove just waiting for one to be done, all hot and sticky-sweet, but too good to let cool down. My mother remembers trying to make them and failing miserably (probably just too much filling or too cool of a skillet), but whatever the cause, she gave up. My father remembers his mother's chocolate fried pies, tasting of butter and cocoa, but he never got her recipe.

If there's one shared memory that I think almost all of us in our 30s and 40s have (and I'm not saying where I fall in that range), it's the treat of a fried apple pie from McDonald's. No, they don't source locally or care about the animals they farm or the conditions their farm workers live in, but they used to make a mean fried apple pie. I remember begging for that pie and not being able to wait for it to cool until I bit into that flaky crust and burnt my tongue on that hot-as-lava filling. It hurt so good.

And then, at some point, it changed. It turned into a baked pie because "fried" was a bad word. But it didn't just change. It lost some-

thing. It just wasn't something to beg for anymore. Other fried foods got the same treatment, but none of them seem to be as much in danger of disappearing as fried pies.

So let's embrace our inner child. Give her what she's craving. Let's start with the word. Say it with me, nice and slow. "Fried." Don't be afraid. Say it out loud. Feel how it fits in your mouth. Your lips purse with the "fr" like you're getting ready to give someone a kiss. Then there's that nice, long, drawn-out Southern "i" sound. Just stretch it out until it closes with a comfortable, resounding thud of "ed." "Fried." Isn't that better?

Makes you want one, doesn't it? Me too. Luckily, there is hope for us. There is a champion of the fried pie. It may take a drive, but a little shop sits on a corner in the little town of Union City, Tennessee. It is the outpost of the world-famous Flippen's Fried Pies.

There's a reason they're famous. First of all, there's variety. When I was growing up, peach and apple were the norms, with the occasional cherry thrown in. Flippen's has all of those and more. There are strawberry, coconut, chocolate (more pudding than my father's beloved butter and cocoa), blueberry, lemon and even raisin. And they're all perfect examples of the form.

The fried pies didn't start out as the *raison d'être* for Flippen's. As Jeanne Chambers says, it took a storm to start their fried pie legacy.

MAMA KEE'S CHOCOLATE FRIED PIES

Mama Kee was never one to measure ingredients or write down recipes. She would have told you to make the crust and then just mix equal parts of cocoa and sugar and mash in a lump of butter. This is my version of her chocolate fried pies based on the way she taught my Aunt Charlene to make it.

2 cups all-purpose flour

½ teaspoon salt

½ cup lard or shortening, chilled

¼ cup cold water

1 cup sugar

1 cup unsweetened cocoa powder

8 tablespoons unsalted butter

To prepare the crust, sift the flour and salt together in a medium bowl. Cut in the lard or shortening with a fork or pastry blender or work it in with your fingers until the flour clumps together. Add the cold water 1 tablespoon at a time, working into the dough until it is just moist enough to hold together. Form the dough into a ball, wrap it in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.

For the filling, sift the sugar and cocoa powder together in a medium bowl. Cut the butter into the dry ingredients until the mixture forms small pebbles.

To make the pies, roll out the crust until it is no more than ¼ inch thick. Cut into circles using a coffee can or saucer as a guide. Spoon 2 tablespoons of the chocolate filling into the center of each crust. Dip your fingers in water and moisten the edges of the crust. Fold the crust over the filling so that the edges align. Seal the edges by pressing with your fingers, then crimp with a fork. Heat 1 inch of lard or shortening in a heavy skillet over medium heat until it reaches 350°. Gently place the pies into the hot oil one or two at a time. Cook for one minute, then flip and cook for another minute. Drain the cooked pies on a cooling rack or a paper towel-lined plate. Makes about 12 fried pies.



“They just had fruit that was just too damaged to sell, so Mama Dan Flippen decided to make fried pies instead of letting that fruit go to waste. And before long, people were begging for those pies and the fruit stand was making more money from fried pies than from fruit.”

But times change. Over the years, the fruit stand opened a wildly popular restaurant even though it's far from a main road. But the restaurant gradually became more work than profit. Mama Dan's health began to fail and a broken hip took her out of the kitchen and ended the restaurant's glory days. In its out-of-the-way location, without the restaurant to pull people in, the fruit stand itself saw less and less traffic. But people still wanted those simple fried pies. Now the old fruit stand is only the kitchen where Mama Dan's daughter bakes rolls and biscuits and keeps a skillet going with fried pies in every flavor of the rainbow.

Those pies are sold in the family's corner store in downtown Union City along with jellies, pickles and preserves, the biscuits and rolls, and seasonal fruits and nuts from the Flippen Orchards. And if you can't make the drive, you can still get the pies. Flippen's will ship you frozen fried pies that you can heat back up in the comfort of your own home. Can't wait for a box of pies to get to your hungry little hands? Easy-Way sells Flippen's Fried Pies on those little stands by the registers. You can't get the full variety of flavors there, but they're great



when you need a fix and a lot better than the candy bars occupying that same space at supermarkets.

As great as Flippen's is, there's nothing quite like the smell of fried pies being made right in your own kitchen. It's not an everyday job for most of us, but it's something we should all know how to do. So gird your loins (that means put an apron on so you don't make a mess of yourself) and get your skillet hot. It's time to fry some pies.

It wasn't that long ago that I was afraid of frying. The same people who told us that fried food was bad did a great job of teaching us to avoid the technique as a whole. The thought of hot oil can be daunting; after all, it's going to hurt if it pops you and it is pretty finicky about temperature. But it's worth mastering, and for fried pies, you don't even need that much in your skillet. These aren't deep-fried—that's a whole other dark side to embrace.

How to make a fried pie...The trick to a fried pie is balance. Think *Karate Kid*, but without all that jumping around. Your crust has to be just the right thickness. If it's too thick, it's still going to be doughy inside when your pie is brown on the outside. If it's too thin, it won't be able to hold the filling in. Then you've got to have just the right amount of filling. If you don't have enough, your pie will be too thin and won't taste like anything but crust. If you have too much, your crust won't be able to hold it no matter how perfect it is. Scared yet? Me too.

To make it even scarier, there isn't really a specific crust recipe for fried pies. Just go looking on the Internet for fried pie recipes. Most of them just tell you to use your favorite piecrust recipe. You're supposed to have a favorite? Really? Was I asleep that day? Okay. Just choose a crust recipe. Nothing fancy required, but if you really want to go all

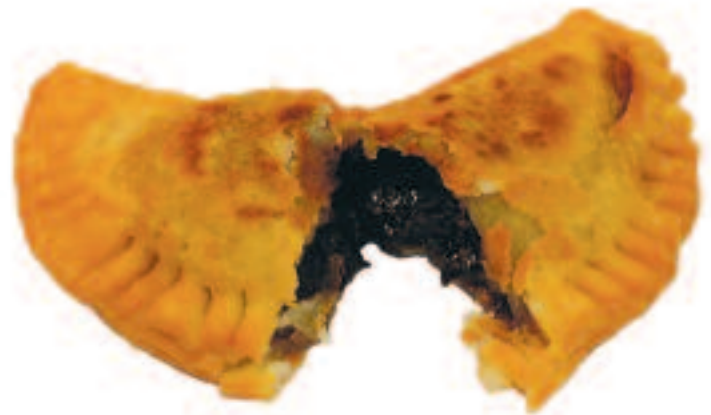
the way into the darkness, choose one with lard. You know you want to. How much worse can it be? After all, we're frying here! (Yes. I am a bad influence.)

So now that you've made some pie crust dough and rolled it out to what you hope is the right thickness, you get to cut it into nice rounds. I guess they don't technically have to be rounds. You could get all artsy and cut them into squares and make triangle pies or use some nifty star shaped cookie cutters and crimp them all the way around, but we're just going to say you're doing rounds. Six inches at least, but no more than eight. Easiest way to get those? Wanna guess? Use what your grandmother probably used: a coffee can. I know it's really high tech, but I think it just might work.

Now it's time for some filling. It's less important what kind you choose than it is to get the right quantity. Two tablespoons should be about right, maybe a little bit more if you went with eight-inch rounds or if your filling isn't juicy. Just spoon it into the center of your round of crust. Ended up with more filling than pie dough? That's not a problem. You have a spoon. You're going to be eating fried pies; eating the extra filling's not going to hurt you now.

We're getting into the homestretch at this point. Just moisten the edges of the rounds, fold your rounds over the filling, and get the edges lined up. Press them tightly with your fingers to seal them and then crimp them with a fork to make them pretty.

This is when things get tricky. You've got all your pretty little uncooked pies all lined up looking absolutely perfect, but this is when we test that you really got it right. It's time to fry. The pros use an electric skillet to keep the temperature at exactly 350 degrees. If you've got one of those, go ahead and use it. Otherwise, you're going



Just choose a crust recipe...if you really want to go all the way into the darkness, choose one with lard.

to have to get it right by trial and error because you really won't have enough fat in your skillet to use a thermometer. Yes, I did say fat. This is when you get to decide what kind you want to fry your pies in. Vegetable oil is fine; so is shortening or even lard. You want to have about a half inch of liquid fat at 350 degrees before a pie ever touches the skillet.

Ready? Here we go. Gently, and I do mean gently, place a pie into the fat with a spatula. You don't want your crust to open now and you don't want to splash hot fat. Let the pie sit for a minute or so, and then gently flip it over. You're looking for a golden crust at this point. If it still looks like raw dough, then your fat isn't hot enough. If it's darker, your fat is too hot. Give the other side a minute or so and transfer your pie to a paper towel-lined plate to drain. You did it! Celebrate by eating pie!

See, it really isn't that hard (That was sarcasm. It really made you appreciate those good folks at Flippen's, didn't it?). So ignore that voice screaming about your waistline and stop adding the cardiologist to your speed dial. They're not an everyday treat, but fried pies are a tradition worth saving and passing on. *eM*

Flippen's Hillbilly Barn

3734 W Shawtown Rd., Troy, TN 38260
731-538-2933
www.flippenhillbillybarn.com

Angela Knipple lives in midtown Memphis with her husband, son, dog and a motley crew of cats, turtles and chickens. Angela and her husband have been instrumental in the Memphis Farm to Chef Movement, the local Slow Food chapter and introducing non-Southern friends to the flavors of the South on their blog: squirrel-squad.blogspot.com.



ANDREW | MICHAEL
Italian Kitchen
A FRESH PERSPECTIVE | ON TRADITIONAL ITALIAN
712 W BROOKHAVEN CIRCLE, MEMPHIS, 38117
Hours 5 PM UNTIL... MONDAY-SATURDAY (901)347.3569
ANDREWMICHAELITALIANKITCHEN.COM

All Natural - No Preservatives
Sparkling River
PEPPER COMPANY
18 varieties...from sweet to certified world's hottest! Fresh, roasted, and sauced.
Memphis Farmer's Market, late July
Sparkling-River.com
1.800.767.8511
PB Olive, Arkansas

CAFE
Society
casual elegance for any occasion
Lunch M-F 11:30-2:00
Dinner 7 days a week from 5:00 pm
Private party rooms for 10-40 people
Gift Certificates • Bar Menu • Patio
212 N Evergreen 901-722-2177