

Mrs. Rowe's Pies

A new cookbook out from California's Ten Speed Press details the culinary legacy of the classic Staunton restaurant, Mrs. Rowe's. On following pages are a few excerpts of Mrs. Rowe's choice pie recipes, plus a few favorite Shenandoah pie eateries from the book's author, MOLLIE COX BRYAN.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIP DAWKINS

Before fancy flavored coffee and biscotti, a cup of coffee and slice of pie were the fare of café and diner habitués. Homemade pie is no longer available at major chain restaurants that have taken over nation's roadways. But Virginia's own Shenandoah Valley boasts a variety of family-owned eateries that still offer homemade pie. Two of them, **The Beverly Restaurant** and **Mrs. Rowe's Restaurant and Bakery**, have been owned by the same families since the 1940s and 1950s.

At the **Beverly**, which is on Beverly Street in Staunton, cream pies with cloudlike, five-inch-high meringue toppings line the shelf of a huge sideboard along the back wall. Some days, they also offer apple or a blueberry, its deep-purple gel dripping over the top of the piecrust, adding a splash of color to the down-home picture-perfect pie arrangement.

Current owner Allyssa Norcroft makes the pies the same way her father, Paul Thomas, taught her. He made them the way his mother, Grace Rowe-Thomas, taught him. She bought the 65-seat restaurant in 1951.

Paul Thomas was so well known for his pie that the other famous Shenandoah Valley pie maker, Mrs. Mildred Rowe, used to try persuade him to work for her. She would good-naturedly offer him a job while they were sitting in his own restaur-

rant. The fact that Thomas and Mrs. Rowe were related by marriage made for a fun, friendly competition.

The pies in both restaurants are remarkable. The Beverly, much smaller in size and scope, is best visited as part of a relaxing day in historic Staunton. Norcroft bakes perhaps 10 pies a day—coconut cream, banana cream, chocolate, a berry or apple and a custard. The Beverly's unique coconut custard pie is a rich custard set in a thick hardy crust and topped with browned coconut.

Mrs. Rowe's Restaurant and Bakery, located just off of Interstate 81, at Exit 225 in Staunton, is a beacon of originality in the midst of the surrounding interstate chain restaurants. Mike DiGrassie, Mrs. Rowe's son, now the owner and general manager, says they make about 50 pies a day. They serve the usual—coconut, custard, lemon, chocolate and fruit pies along with old-fashioned buttermilk, pineapple cream, strawberry rhubarb and pecan.

Their mincemeat pie, served only in the fall of the year, is so extraordinary that it's been written up in *Gourmet* magazine. The most popular pie with the locals, however, is the rich and creamy coconut cream pie, which is the same recipe the restaurant has served since at least 1947, when the family first purchased the then-tiny restaurant, which now has about 250 seats.

Both restaurants are havens for the travel-weary, or chain-restaurant-weary, pie lover looking to fill what used to be a simple yearning for good homemade pie. The Shenandoah Valley, rich with history and the natural beauty of the surrounding mountains, is also a culinary haven for those who enjoy a variety of food, most especially pie.

Here's a sampling of other valley restaurants that offer up homemade pie:

Evers' Country Buffet, in Mount Crawford on Route 11, offers a vast selection of homemade pie. Along with the usual cream and fruit pies, the buffet includes peanut butter and sweet potato pies. On some days, the pie lover will also find raisin pie and green tomato pie. (540) 433-0993.

The Thomas House, Main Street, Dayton, makes its own fruit, custard and pumpkin pies but purchases its homemade cream pies from Evers. 222 Main Street, (540) 879-2181.

The Basic City Luncheonette, 408 N. Commerce St., Waynesboro, offers homemade chocolate, coconut and a lemon meringue that strikes a perfect balance between the sour and sweet. (540) 932-1790.

Kathy's Restaurant, Verona on Route 11, serves homemade peanut butter and sweet potato pie—but only on the weekends. (540) 248-1444.

ORIGINAL COCONUT CREAM PIE

(Pictured on page 19)

Mildred made Goshen resident Clara Cronk's recipe into her own version, and it is still being served today. This is the most popular dessert in the restaurant. "You could eat it every day," says Aaron.

Makes one 9-inch pie

- 3 egg yolks
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup cornstarch
- 1/4 to 1/2 cup water
- 3 cups milk
- 1 cup sweetened flaked coconut
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1/2 recipe Plain Pie Pastry or Vinegar Pie Crust, pre-baked
- 1 recipe Mrs. Rowe's Meringue

Preheat the oven to 325°F.

In a small bowl, stir together the egg yolks, sugar, cornstarch and enough water to make a smooth paste.

Place the milk in the top of a double boiler set over simmering water. When the milk begins to steam, gradually stir in the egg mixture. Cook, stirring occasionally, for about 4 minutes, until very thick. Remove from the heat and stir in 3/4 cup of the coconut, the vanilla and butter.

Pour the filling into the pie crust and top with the meringue. Sprinkle the remaining 1/4 cup coconut over the meringue. Bake for about 30 minutes, until golden brown. Transfer to a wire rack to cool. Serve at room temperature or warm for a special treat.

About the book | MRS. ROWE'S RESTAURANT COOKBOOK

TEN SPEED PRESS, \$24.95.

Writer Mollie Cox Bryan, just moved to the valley, became a fan of Mrs. Rowe's before her death in 2003. While a vegetarian, Bryan appreciated the place for being one of the few restaurants where one could get fresh fried chicken. Early on, she felt that Mildred Craft Rowe was worthy of a biography—a single mother who had built a restaurant dynasty with her own good sense and great culinary skill.

"She was kind of suspicious of me at first," says Bryan, but after she had "hung around long enough," she even began to travel around the valley with Rowe and Mike DiGrassie, Rowe's son. The biography evolved into

a cookbook, with a forward by food historians Jane and Michael Stern, who had written the original *Gourmet* article that put Rowe on the culinary map.

The roll-out begins at 11 a.m., Sept. 27, at the restaurant. The family and Bryan will be signing copies; every purchase gets a free pie. Info at MrsRowes.com or (540) 886-1833.

