

This family makes great apple pies

BY SALLY BAIR

ASPERS - It's no secret that good cooks run in families, and in Adams County there's one family which boasts five of the best pie bakers around. Mrs. William McCleaf, Aspers R1, and her two daughters and two granddaughters are all prize-winning apple pie bakers in a county which has an abundance of delicious apples, and, one would suspect, apple pies.

Virginia McCleaf and her offspring walked away with five prizes at the Apple Blossom Festival held in May and won four prizes at the Apple Harvest Festival held last weekend.

It was Virginia's daughter Shirley Taylor, Biglerville R1, who took first prize in the women's division of the Apple Blossom Festival, followed by her mother in second. Virginia's daughter, Susie, 18, won in the 12-18 age group, and Shirley's daughters Julie, 11, and Aimee, 7, won first and second, respectively, in the 6-11 category.

At the Apple Harvest Festival, Shirley did not win a prize, but Virginia took first, granddaughter Aimee took first in her category and her sister took third. Susie McCleaf, a freshman at Millersville State College, took first in her category.

If all this is confusing, that's understandable. The important thing to know is that these five women know how to make a good apple pie.

Now, for those of you who are quick to want a recipe for prize-winning apple pies, there is one at the end of this article. However, Virginia says, "None of us has a recipe. I go by looks and according to the texture and the feel." As one of 14 children, Virginia remembers her mother baking 10-14 pies at a time, so she just picked it up.

Nevertheless, when the committee asked bakers in this year's contest to supply a recipe so that those who purchased the pies at the auction would know how they were made, a recipe was produced. Shirley says, "We kind of put one together." (The recipe included is actually Shirley's recipe, and if you're a careful reader, you'll note some differences from mother to daughter.)

Virginia stated, "I use Stayman-Winesap apples. It is a tart apple and makes a good flavored pie. I chop the apples, thicken with a little bit of flour and add cinnamon and butter." She concedes that she will use a MacIntosh apple as a second choice. She says, "You need something that will go soft, not mushy."

Shirley added, "I use corn starch instead of flour and I sometimes use lemon." (So much for the exact recipe for those of us who must know exactly how things are done.)

Obviously, it's not just the apples that makes a good pie, but the crust as well. Virginia states, "I always use lard

This is two of the three generation family which boasts some of the best apple pie bakers in Adams County. Mrs. Virginia McCleaf, center, and her two daughters were all winners in the apple pie baking contest at the Apple Blossom Festival. Mrs. Terry Taylor, left, won first place over her mother and her sister Susie won in the 12-18 division. Mrs. Taylor's two daughters were also winners.



because it makes a flakier, tastier crust. And I use milk for the liquid." Why? "My mother always used milk," she replies. "And lard will get a good brown pie."

Shirley says there's a lot to the feel of the dough. "If the pie dough doesn't feel good it won't come out right. Practice makes perfect, so the oftener you bake, the better." Another hint from Shirley, "I use the lard at room temperature. And you have to get right in there with your hands to mix it."

Shirley admitted that she never makes a single pie. Mother and daughter agree that they often make up several pies, freeze them and start them out in a cold oven when they're ready for them. Shirley said, "I make two pies and freeze one."

Both Shirley and Virginia stated that they like to bake their pies in aluminum, but Virginia has an electric stove and Shirley has a gas range. And in the winter, Virginia even makes pies in her wood stove, which she says, "gives a nice brown crust." They also sprinkle a little sugar on top which helps brown the pie.

Explaining that the temperature of the oven and the position of the pie in the oven can affect the final outcome, Shirley said they like to bake theirs in the middle of the oven. She added, "We go by looks. They should be light golden brown."

What do judges look for in a contest? Shirley said, "They check the appearance. The crust should be flaky, both top and bottom. It should be a full crust. They go more for taste than pretty."

And for the final touch, Shirley said, "We make our pies the morning of the contest so they are still warm when the judges taste them."

Lest anyone get the wrong idea, all those pies won were not made at the same time, nor in the same house. Julie baked hers at her grandmothers'. And each family has a preference for the decorative venting they make on the top crust. Shirley's resembles a leaf, Virginia's is often just lines and holes and the girls sometimes make happy faces.

Furthermore, Shirley points out, "There were no names on the pies and at the Apple Blossom Festival we were told the judges were stricter than ever."

When the whole family decided to enter in the Spring, Shirley said, "We thought one or two would win." But they were delighted when they all got a prize. Totally there were 49 pies in the three divisions. Julie had entered in two previous contests and won. Julie and Aimee's six-year-old brother Kiley didn't bake a pie, but he upheld the family tradition of winning by the greased chicken contest.

Now, if you're really following all of this, you will realize that daughter Shirley got first prize and her



There's nothing that tastes as good as a fresh apple pie, warm from the oven. This pie was baked by Shirley Taylor, first prize winner at the Apple Blossom Festival's pie contest. It looks delicious, and when it is cut, it tastes just like it looks.

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mother got second prize at apple blossom time. Shirley reflects, "I don't know how I did that. I was surprised. I thought her pies would be better than mine." Diplomatically, she adds, "It must have been close."

For the McCleafs and the Taylors, entering the contest was a lot of fun. Shirley said, "I like Saturday afternoon best, when the judging is being done. They call and tell you how you did."

Julie thought it was fun, too, but said, with a touch of chagrin, "When I went to school, everybody in the whole school knew about it." That's not so bad, but one year when she won, her teacher suggested to the boys that when they were looking for a wife, Julie's baking abilities should be considered.

This family not only bakes terrific pies, but they also promote Adams County apples. Virginia says, "Maybe I'm partial, but other apples don't have the taste Adams County apples do. Maybe it's the type of soil." Shirley agreed, "A lot of people come long distances for apples here."

Shirley adds, "You can find apples almost the year round because it's easier to keep them in storage. My father-in-law Rodney Taylor is a fruit farmer. The crop is not bad this year, but hail marked a lot of them."

As explanation for her cooking talent, Virginia says simply, "I grew up on a dairy farm and I like to cook and bake. I don't follow a recipe too often. I picked it up from Grandma. We had six children and I think a larger amount of anything tastes better. We always have a lot of leftovers."

Shirley says nonchalantly, "I learned from Mom." Susie, Shirley's sister, adds, "I learned off my mother." Aimee chaps in, "I learned from my Mom."

Virginia adds, "I have two boys who love to eat apple pie. They would eat it for breakfast. We eat a lot of pies."

What's the best way of eating apple pie? Virginia says firmly, "I like it warm with milk. I can make a meal of it." Daughters Shirley and Susie agree that warm apple pie is best. As for the idea of eating cheese with apple pie, Virginia says, "I don't care for the combination."

For Julie, the veteran in the contest, the idea of eating apple pie is not at all appealing. She just doesn't like it. What she does like though, "is stealing grandma's dough before it's baked. I keep sneaking it." She also likes "scrap pie," made from dough scraps, sugar and cinnamon.

All the family members agree that the apple pie contest and the festivals are a way of promoting apples. They also agree that an apple pie is more popular than any other, proclaiming it's America's number one pie.

After being given the opportunity to sample one of these prize-winning pies, I can only agree. A recipe for the pie as Shirley bakes it follows, along with Virginia's recipe for apple cake, another family favorite.

APPLE PIE

- 4 cups sliced Stayman Winesap apples
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

Mix the above ingredients together and place in unbaked 9" pie crust. Dot with butter and cover with top crust. Brush with oil and sprinkle with sugar. Bake at 375 degrees for 30-35 minutes or until golden brown.

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These children of Mr. and Mrs. Terry Taylor, Biglerville R1, were all winners at the Apple Blossom Festival. Kiley, left, won in the greased chicken contest. Julie, center, took first prize in apple pie baking contest, and Aimee took second. At the Apple Harvest Festival Aimee took first and Julie took second.