



Kern's Kitchen President Alan Rupp shows the finished product.

And the pie...

A winning recipe

in the celebration of Derby week. For some, it's a ritual.

Even at Louisville's famous Camberley Brown Hotel, where some of the best gourmet food in the state is created, Derby-Pie still is one of the most requested items on the menu.

"During Derby time we serve a ton of them because people want to take in that whole ambiance and experience of going to the Derby and you can't do that without having a slice of Derby-Pie," said Ruth Bennett, head pastry chef. "But we also sell a whole lot of them throughout the year, too, because we get a lot of tourists who come in here who've heard of it and want to try it. And it would be a slap in the face to try to

pass off an I Can't Believe It's Not Derby-Pie black-bottomed pecan pie glazed with a simple syrup instead of the real thing. It just wouldn't pass. Even though everywhere you go around here, you'll find all of these restaurants using obscure Kentucky words to identify their own versions—Bluegrass pie, Commonwealth pie, etc., they're just not the same. There's nothing better than the trademarked pie."

Almost as famous as the horse race it's named for, the decadent chocolate nut pies are made by hand at Kern's Kitchen—just the way Walter and Leandra Kern made them nearly 50 years ago.

Well, almost.

"Grandma and Grandpappy were running the Melrose Inn in Prospect when they were experimenting with some recipes and created the pie as their signature item for the restaurant," said Alan Rupp, president of Kern's Kitchen. "They literally pulled the name out of a hat.

"The Melrose was the kind of place where if you were to walk back into the kitchen it was hard to tell who was in charge. It was a bunch of ladies doing some really good home cooking: fried chicken and country ham—the kind of cooking Grandma does."

When the Kerns quit running the restaurant in the early 1960s, they continued making the pies out of their home and sold them to the Melrose Inn and a few select upscale restaurants in Louisville like Hasenours and the Old Embassy Supper Club.

At the encouragement of son George and two business acquaintances, the couple got federal registration in 1968 and later state registration, trademarking the name to protect it from would-be imitators.

There have been plenty of those, but none can match the original Derby-Pie.

"You're liable to find a recipe entitled Derby-Pie, but it's not a recipe for Derby-Pie," Rupp said. "The bigger we get, the more people try to make a similar chocolate nut pie. But there's only one place that Derby-Pie is made and that's Kern's Kitchen."

The biggest reason why no one has been able to duplicate the famed pie is because no one has been able to figure out the recipe.

Sure there are Nestle's semi-sweet chocolate chips and California walnuts in it, but the rest is a family secret that only a handful of Kerns possess.

"People have approached us for the recipe, but it's not for sale," Rupp



Where to get it

Here are some of the locations where Derby-Pie is available.

- All Kentucky State Resort Parks
- A Taste of Kentucky, 1-800-444-0552
- Winn Dixie (6 Louisville locations)
- Kroger Deli Bakeries in Louisville and Lexington
- Bristol Bar & Grille (3 Louisville locations)
- Meijer, Inc. (3 locations in the Louisville area)
- Kingfish Restaurant (all locations)
- The Eclipse Room at Churchill Downs
- HoneyBaked Ham Co. (selected locations in Louisville and Lexington)
- Rebecca-Ruth Candies and Saylor's Restaurant in Frankfort
- Dagwoods in Bardstown
- Briar Patch Restaurant in Owensboro

said. "Jerry's (Vuker, Kern's production manager) the first one outside of the family to be privy to the recipe. I'm the only one allowed in the kitchen when the filling is being made. It's a heavily guarded secret, like the 11 herbs and spices in Col. Sanders' chicken."

Rupp has fond memories of watching his grandparents make the pies in their small kitchen at home.

"Grandma baked about three at a time out of her kitchen, and then she'd take them out on the back porch and place them on a cooling rack," Rupp said. "Later, when I started helping them, they then went from baking three at a time in one oven to baking six at a time in two ovens.

"Back then, we'd go in halfway through the bake and spin them

around so we'd get an even bake because the electric oven didn't bake them well."

Rupp also remembers receiving the pies in care packages while he was a student at Western Kentucky University.

"My grandparents would send me the pies when I was away at school and my roommates and I would heat them up in an electric skillet on the floor in our dorm," Rupp said. "We would've gotten in trouble if we had been caught cooking in our rooms, but those pies were worth taking the risk. They were the next best thing to being home."

Rupp returned to Louisville in 1973 to live with his grandparents and help them with the business.

"I was coming up on weekends to run deliveries and help them. Grandpappy had emphysema and grandma was legally blind, so neither one of them had good health. So I just moved in with them and ran the business from there.

"Grandpappy's job was to sift through all of the nuts since Grandma couldn't see. And Grandma did all of the folding of the boxes. She'd sit out there on the porch at night after dinner and fold boxes until she got them all done.

"The last Derby we worked in the house, I remember we were turning out about 800 pies a week and we only had enough room to store about 300. So as you can imagine, there was a lot of shuffling going on. Of course, now we have two walk-in freezers—and if Grandma saw those she would be intimidated by the size."

The company now bakes 160 pies at a time in two rotating ovens and the product is shipped in a four-color box with the slogan, "Enjoy a slice of Kentucky history." Other than that, not much else has changed.

"Everything's still done by scratch here," Rupp said. "There's no preservatives in there—just fresh ingredients.

"One of the things that attracts people to it is that it's got a lot of different textures and flavors to it: the crunchiness of the nuts, the flakiness of the crust, the richness of the chocolate, and it all kind of goes together."

Rupp recommends serving the pie warm, topped with whipped cream—the way Grandma served it. But it's also very good straight from the refrigerator.

—DEBORAH RASCON