



Don Grant, of Grant's Bakery, prepares pies



Trimming the extra dough at Grant's Bakery
Kathy Snow/Journal photographer

"I can freeze part of it and then heat it up later, and it's still as good as the day I bought it."

— Marie R. Valcourt

Salmon pie: a tasty tradition

By J. Barry Mothes
Journal reporter

LEWISTON — Not even the worst flood in Maine's history last week could disrupt a tradition carried out every Wednesday morning in the basement kitchen of Grant's Bakery.

For at Grant's, Wednesday is the day they make salmon pies — a traditional pie crust filled with a tasty mixture of salmon, potatoes, onions, and seasonings that has been a staple of the Lewiston-Albion Franco-American diet for as long as anyone can remember.

The small bakery on Calais Street makes any where from 100 to 125 a day, and it is one of a number of Twin City bakeries that make the traditional pie.

"The deeper the red (of the salmon meat) the stronger the flavor," said Ron Grant, whose father started the family-run bakery in 1906 that Ron and brother

Don now co-own and operate.

"We started making salmon pies shortly after we started here," said Betty Grant, who started the business with her husband in the

1950s and still works at the shop. "Because of the large French Catholic population there was a lot of demand for it so we just started making them."

And they haven't stopped since. Once in full swing, the salmon-pie making at Grant's is pure assembly line. The salmon filling is mixed and cooled on Tuesdays. On Wednesday mornings, Ron prepares the dough for the top (flaker) and bottom

(thicker) crusts. Ron then feeds fist-sized balls of dough through a flattening machine while his mother Betty and another employee shape the flattened dough into tin plates and trim the edges off.

Once the plates are filled with "bottom" crusts, the salmon filling is brought out and spooned in. Meanwhile, Ron has prepared the "top" crust dough

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Betty Grant weighs pies

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and that is then placed over the filling and bottom crust and the trimming is finished off. The pie tops then get a quick brush of egg wash and are stored away until Friday morning when they are baked.

While still part of a long ethnic and religious tradition, salmon pie has also evolved into a modern-day meal-on-the-go, fully adaptable for a quick zap in the microwave and no longer eaten only on Fridays for religious reasons.

The pies are generally sold in three sizes; a large 10- or 12-inch pie favored by restaurants and large families, the most common medium-sized 8- or 9-inch pie, and a small, 4- to 6-inch "individual" variety.

Irene Deditch of Lewiston stopped to talk about salmon pie last Friday afternoon outside a local bakery, a warm 10-inch pie in hand. "I buy them every week. It's an easy Friday dinner and a good one." Deditch suggested a tossed salad or cole slaw to go along with the pie.

Like many people, Marie R. Valcourt of Lewiston often makes her own salmon pie but also likes to buy them from a bakery every once in a while. "I can freeze part of it and then heat

it up later," she said, adding "and it's still as good as the day I bought it." Valcourt also prefers cole slaw or a salad with her pie. "Beets are very good too," she said.

Emile Lacasse has been making salmon pie for almost 40 years. In his small inconspicuous bakery tucked on the corner of Chestnut and Oxford streets in the shadow of Lewiston's mill district, Lacasse and his staff bake them daily. They crank out approximately 2,000 pies a week that are bought at the bakery and also sold to supermarkets from Saco to Rumford.

Lacasse started making the pies in 1945 for the luncheonette he ran at the same location for about eight years. For the thousands of nearby mill workers in those days with a half-hour for lunch, the salmon pies were the perfect item.

"Maybe 60 percent of the meals we served were salmon pies," said Lacasse. "It took over all others because we could serve it so quick. We'd bake them, keep them hot on a steam table, and cut them up and serve it with a white sauce. At that time it used to be a Friday thing."

These days, salmon pie is con-

sidered an any-day-of-the-week item, although Friday remains the most popular day to buy and eat them. The heaviest season for salmon pies according to local bakers is during Lent, with sales on Good Friday estimated to be double the norm. Sales drop off a bit during the summer, but pick up again when the weather turns cooler and people's schedules tighten up.

"When they went away from eating fish on Friday I thought it would go down the drain," said Lacasse. "But now they're eating it on other days. The demand is just as strong."

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