

FORK IN THE ROAD



KATHERINE RODEGHIER/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Cindy Trzeciak, of Naples, N.Y., has been selling grape pies from her home since 1978. The Concord is the go-to grape for bakers in this region of the western part of the state.

Where grape pies are king

Bakers in N.Y.'s Finger Lakes wine country produce plethora of sweet pastry

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Chicago Tribune

NAPLES, N.Y. — “Hi there, isn’t it a glorious day?” asks Cindy Trzeciak, with her characteristic wide smile and friendly banter as she opens the top half of her Dutch door.

Her warm kitchen glows behind her, and the aroma of freshly baked pastry fills the nostrils as she sets her signature dessert before her customer.

Grape pies, made from her momma’s recipe, have been passing through the front door of Trzeciak’s home into the hands of happy buyers for close to 40 years.

In this village of barely 1,000 in the Finger Lakes region of western New York, grape pie remains quite literally a cottage industry. Home bakers turn out the desserts by the thousands, earning it the moniker “Grape Pie Capital of the World.”

Sales peak in the fall, especially when the Naples Grape Festival draws 100,000 visitors on the last weekend of September. Vendors

erect pop-up stores and set up roadside stands, sometimes with a coffee can collecting cash on the honor system.

Finger Lakes continues to grow as a wine region, with 120 wineries and counting, but its Concord grapes are better for pie. Harvested in September and October, they’re made into a filling that can be frozen for baking in any season.

Monica Schenk does just that. Monica’s Pies on New York Route 21, north of Naples, is the only grape pie bakery in town that’s open year-round.

In 1983, when ConCORDS were out of favor at local wineries, Schenk baked her family’s crop in pies in her mother’s kitchen and sold them from a farm stand right outside the door. People loved them, and business took off.

When her mom decided to sell her home, Schenk and her husband bought a four-story barn, turning it into a pie kitchen and shop, with an apartment for mom. Soon after, the Food Network called, and she appeared on its

“Food Finds” show in 2002. Articles in The New York Times and Better Homes and Gardens followed.

Schenk makes two dozen kinds of pies, including a quiche and a chicken pot pie, listed on a blackboard under a sign that reads “Pie fixes everything.” Grape pie remains a best-seller — 10,000 pies a year — and comes either with a crumb crust or Schenk’s signature floating crust, a circle of pastry poised like a water lily atop a gooey purple pond.

“Our grape pies are different because we bake the crust separate from the filling and put the pie together after the crust and filling are cooked,” says Schenk. “This was my mother’s idea; because the pies are so juicy, it’s hard to get much filling in the pie without it leaking all over the oven.”

A relative newcomer to the grape-pie scene, Jeni Makepeace comes from a family rooted in grapes. Her dad was general manager of a local winery, and her stepmom made grape pie at home.

“In 2001, I baked and sold my first grape pies from my aunt’s front lawn at the Naples Grape Festival,” she says. She won the festival’s World’s Greatest Grape Pie Contest that year and twice more in following years.

Makepeace sells 3,000 to 5,000 pies in the fall from tents on Main Street and at local stores. Joseph’s Wayside Market in Naples carries her pies from June through Thanksgiving.

“My pies are more tart,” she says. Makepeace brushes the tops with cream and sprinkles them with sugar. Her crumb-top pies, made with butter, are slightly sweeter.

“Most of us have a very different pie,” says Trzeciak, continuing to chat from inside her Dutch door. There’s no fierce rivalry among the bakers, though.

“We all get along great,” she says, adding that they might borrow flour or sugar from one another when running low.

Though she’s been selling from her home across the street from the high school since 1978, she’s

If you go

Cindy’s Pies: 5 Academy St., Naples, N.Y., 585-374-6122

Monica’s Pies: 7599 State Route 21, Naples, N.Y., 585-374-2139, www.monicaspies.com

Arbor Hill Grapery & Winery: Ships frozen grape pies across the U.S., 6461 Route 64, Naples, N.Y., 800-554-7553, www.thegrape-ry.com

Naples Grape Festival: Sept. 24-25, www.naplesgrape-fest.org

Visitor information: www.visit-fingerlakes.com

not been tempted to market her pies in a store.

“I want people to come and feel at home,” she says, like they’re visiting a “fat, little grandmother with an apron.”

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer.