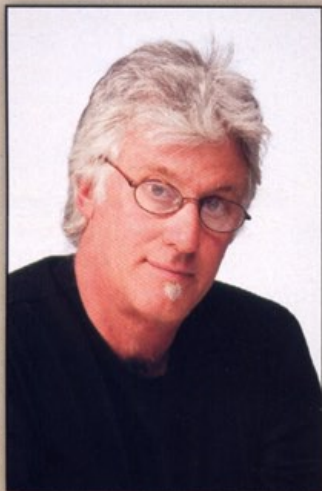


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Raspberry-rhubarb-peach. Nectarine-raspberry. When you mix a stone fruit with a berry, especially fine things happen. These would battle with the apple pies for supremacy in the family, but no matter how tasty the experiment, one thing was sure: There would always be apple. Pure, simple, American, apple pie.

And always the fruit held inside a crust that no one else seemed capable of equaling: leafy and layered, shatteringly fresh but of solid, structural integrity to hold in what must be held in. A good crust must be both a stern and controlling corset as well as a tender striation of fat and flour.

Nowadays, after the Dark Ages of food manufacturers and heart surgeons telling us that butter and lard are kitchen dinosaurs that simply must be replaced by Crisco and margarine, the use of butter is back. But lard? Nobody uses lard.

Of course Agnes did, and so would her daughter, Mary, my mother. There is no substitute for lard in a pie crust, and all the better if you could get it cold and unadulterated from my grandfather Jim, proprietor of Thompson’s Market, the little river-town store that had been in the family since 1866 and was still going strong over 100 years later when I was a kid.

When the pies came out, they went over by the window, the one that faced away from the river and up toward the Methodist church on the corner. No shadow of a cross fell over them, but they were still blessed

as they were cooled by the St. Croix air that flowed off the upper farmlands and down into that glacier-melt-carved valley.

Maybe they were served with ice cream. Maybe not. A slice of sharp Wisconsin cheddar was something my mother liked, I think, but honestly all I remember is the pie, and I’ve been looking for it ever since.

Not long ago I drove down the hill to our house in San Diego — a home with no Agnes or Mary. A home with a rolling pin that hides in the bottom of a drawer, little used in this age of everyone driving off to work, every day.

The kitchen was a disaster. Flour covered the countertops and a big cutting board. Dishes, bowls, everywhere. On a wire rack near the stove above a granite counter (Agnes would have gazed upon this as if it was a precious gem) sat an apple pie that looked suspiciously just like

the ones the ladies in my family used to make. It smelled like the ones the ladies in my family used to make. And when I took my first bite, it tasted just like the ones the ladies in my family used to make.

“Why wouldn’t it?” my wife said, somewhat indignant. “After all, your mother taught me, didn’t she? Just like Agnes taught her.”

Then I knew (especially since she will teach a daughter-in-law someday) that at least one perfect apple pie in America will always be found somewhere, sometime, between the two shores of this land, our land.

And if you’re lucky, you might even get called Hon. ■

“I’d already watched in fascination as her quick hands nicked the skins off a bowl of Granny Smiths or pippins with a potato peeler that made a little clicking noise, back and forth...”