

heirloom recipes

'The cake that won the war'

One of Lael Neill's earliest memories is watching her mother make an heirloom apple cake, wrapping it in wax paper and sealing it in a paraffin-lined box. Off it went to her father, who was a U.S. infantryman fighting in World War II's Battle of the Bulge.

When the cake arrived in Europe six weeks later, it was in perfect condition. Her father shared it with his tentmates, cutting tiny pieces so they could enjoy it each evening while reminiscing about home. "They stretched that cake out quite a while," Neill, who lives in Cedar Creek, said with a laugh. "He called it 'the cake that won the war.'"

The recipe, which Neill believes is German, has been in the family since around 1750.

"I can always remember it at Thanksgiving and Christmas," said Neill, a published author, retired computer technician and former English teacher.

She emailed a photo of a stained index card from her mother's recipe box, saying, "You can tell it's been very well used."



Neill family photo

A World War II photo shows Lael Neill's father, Cpl. Charles Heath, at right.

Raw Apple Cake



3/4 cup butter	Icing (optional)
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar	4 cups powdered sugar
3 eggs	1 cup softened butter
3/4 cup strong, cold coffee	1 8-ounce package cream cheese at room temperature (Neill uses Philadelphia)
1 1/2 teaspoons baking soda dissolved in coffee	1 teaspoon vanilla flavoring or extract
2 1/4 cups flour	
1 1/2 teaspoons cinnamon	
1 teaspoon cloves	
1 1/2 cups seedless raisins, soaked in warm water and pressed dry	
1 cup chopped nuts (Neill prefers Texas pecans)	
1 1/2 cups chopped apples	

Cream butter and sugar together. Add eggs and coffee (with dissolved baking soda) and whip until smooth. Add dry ingredients and beat until thoroughly mixed. Add fruit and nuts. Mix by hand until they are distributed. Pour into a greased and floured 9x13-inch pan or two 9-inch layer pans. Bake at 350 degrees, 50 to 60 minutes. If desired, use a mixer to combine all of the icing ingredients in a bowl until thick and creamy, and frost the cake.

The most vivid memories of holiday celebrations include shared meals with loved ones: the aromas, the tastes, the fellowship. In honor of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's 80th anniversary — and the electricity that made cooking and baking such a snap — we asked our members to share their favorite family recipes.

Stories by Mary Ann Roser

Grandma Jesserene's Sugar Cookies



1 cup granulated sugar	Icing
1 cup butter, softened	1/2 to 1 cup powdered sugar
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract	Several tablespoons of water (just enough to make the icing smooth and spreadable)
1/2 teaspoon lemon extract	Food coloring (adding a few drops at a time as needed)
1 tablespoon water	
1 teaspoon baking powder	
2 eggs	
4 cups flour	
Variety of cookie cutters	Christmas sprinkles

Blend the butter and sugar until creamy. Add the rest of the ingredients, except for 2 of the cups of flour. Roll out the dough on a pastry baking mat, adding the remaining flour as needed to keep dough from sticking to the rolling pin. (Ana used all 4 cups of flour.) Dough should be about 1/4-inch thick. Press the cookie cutters on the dough and carefully remove the shapes, placing the raw cookies on an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake at 375 degrees for about 12 minutes, or until the cookies are golden brown on the edges. Remove from the oven and place on a cooling rack. Once cooled, stir together first three icing ingredients and ice the cookies. Decorate with sprinkles before the icing dries. Makes about 3 dozen cookies.

Cookies baked with love

For half her life, 16-year-old Ana Matthews of Del Valle has been baking and decorating Christmas cookies, just like her grandmother taught her.

Grandmother Jesserene Matthews, a former home economics teacher who also lives in Del Valle, knows a thing or two about baking, as did one of her sons, the late Daryl Ray Matthews, who was known for his pies. Jesserene got the sugar cookie recipe from a friend in the 1950s and shared it with Ana, along with her old cookie cutters.

"I like anything having to do with something old," Ana said.

Ana bakes the cookies in gratitude. After a spark from the stove ignited when Jesserene was cooking in her spacious kitchen, firefighters from the Travis County fire station in Elroy had to be called. They came, armed with axes that, luckily, weren't needed.

Ever since, Ana has delivered dozens of carefully decorated sugar cookies and Toll House chocolate chip cookies to the fire station in Elroy for Christmas. "It's a way to give back," she said. "Taking them to everybody is my favorite part."



Photos by Ralph Barrera

Ana Matthews, 16, left, makes the Christmas cookies passed down from her grandmother, Jesserene Matthews, who offers guidance along the way in the kitchen of her Del Valle home.

Portuguese Tortillas



12 corn tortillas, cut into 1-inch strips	Olive oil for deep frying in a large pan or Dutch oven (about 3 inches deep) plus 3 tablespoons of olive oil to use later
1/2 cup Mexican shredded cheese (five-cheese blend)	
1 can tomatoes with chilis (King uses Rotel)	8 stalks of celery, cut into 1/4-inch pieces
1 jar salsa con queso (King uses Tostitos)	1 large red onion, chopped into small pieces
2 chicken breasts, cut into bite-sized chunks	A few shakes of Julio's (dry) Seasoning
	Salt and pepper, to taste

Deep fry a few dozen tortilla strips at a time in olive oil or bake them in the oven until crispy. Put in a bowl lined with paper towels to absorb the oil if the strips were fried. Use a few shakes of Julio's seasoning for flavor, and toss the strips gently with your hands. Set aside. In a large frying pan, heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil. Add the onions and half the celery. Add the chicken and cook together with a few shakes of salt and pepper to taste. When the chicken is done, add the tomatoes and jar of salsa con queso to the pan. Cook until it bubbles. Add the Mexican cheese and mix well. When that cheese is melted, turn off the heat. Add the rest of the celery. Serve immediately over the crispy tortilla strips. Eat with your fingers and a fork. Serves 6.

The cheese sauce for Portuguese Tortillas is served over homemade crispy tortilla strips.



A young mother's legacy

Nancy King of Martindale has happy memories of dining with her mother at the now-defunct Tavern in Crystal City in South Texas, where the family once lived. Her mother's favorite dish was Portuguese Tortillas, a cheesy chicken nachos dish that can be a shared appetizer or meal.

The two loved cooking together, and King's mother, Genevieve Blackard, figured out how to make the tortilla dish at home. It's among the many hand-written recipes from her mother that King cherishes.

"She died when I was 12," King said. Scarlet fever had ruined her heart, and she was just 33.

"I was her right-hand person," inside the kitchen and out, King said. They would lie in the backyard together on dark evenings, and Blackard would point out the constellations.

King made the recipe for her husband, who died in February 2018, and still serves it to her children and grandchildren. It makes her feel closer to her mother. "When I make it, I remember the times we lay out in the yard and looked at the stars," she said.



Above, at her home in Martindale, Nancy King deep fries corn tortilla strips as part of the dish. At left, a key ingredient is Julio's Seasoning. (Photos by Ralph Barrera)

Her 'go-to' dessert

Charlene Yezak of Brenham is the kind of person who devours a cookbook, reading it from cover to cover, like a novel. She loves making new dishes, but one recipe that's been in her repertoire for more than 30 years is still going strong.

Yezak found the chocolate cake recipe in The Houston Chronicle when the family lived in Spring, just north of Houston. She baked it to celebrate her daughter Rebekah's fourth birthday. Ever since, Rebekah's Favorite Chocolate Cake has been a family favorite.

"I try never to do the same thing twice, except for this cake," Yezak said.

When Rebekah, 37, lived in Boston for about a decade, Charlene baked the cake in a small bread pan and mailed it for her birthday. Charlene also uses the recipe for cupcakes and freezes them to satisfy her husband's sweet tooth.

Rebekah's son, Thomas, enjoyed his grandma's chocolate cupcakes when he turned 4 in September. Then, Charlene whipped up a cake for her dad's 91st birthday in October. "This is definitely a go-to recipe," she said. "I make it five to ten times a year."

Rebekah and the rest of the family are glad she does.



Rebekah Russell said she was feeling a little homesick on her first birthday away from home, and her favorite dessert was just what she needed.



Photos courtesy of Charlene Yezak

Charlene Yezak's dad, Charlie Heinrich, celebrates his 91st birthday with her go-to recipe for cake. It's been a family favorite for more than 30 years.

Cookbook giveaway!

Would you like a chance to have a copy of "The Best of Typically Texas Cookbook"? Just go to our Facebook page or visit bluebonnet.coop and share your favorite family holiday memory by Dec. 13, 2019.

Rebekah's Favorite Chocolate Cake



1 box devil's food cake mix	Icing (optional)
1 small box chocolate pudding	1/3 cup milk
4 eggs	1/3 cup butter
1/2 cup oil	1 cup powdered sugar
1/2 cup warm water	1 teaspoon vanilla
8 ounces sour cream	1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips
1 1/2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips	
(Optional. Makes cake more chocolaty.)	

For cake: Mix all ingredients in bowl. Spray baking pan with cooking spray. Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees. Pour batter into cupcake pan or Bundt cake pan. Cupcakes will be done in 11-12 minutes. The cake will take at least 30 minutes. Check for doneness.

For icing: Gently cook the butter and milk in a small saucepan while stirring. After it's very warm, turn off the heat and add chocolate chips. Stir until melted and add vanilla. Pour over powdered sugar and stir or beat until smooth.



Nurturing a Wendish tradition

If you have any doubt the Wendish culture still thrives in the Giddings area — 165 years after the Ben Nevis clipper ship docked in Galveston with 500 Wends from what is now eastern Germany — look no further than the noodle dishes served throughout the area.

“I remember my grandmother making noodles,” said Brenda Muniz of Serbin, which is about 7 miles south of Giddings. She was preparing a favorite casserole with her twin, Linda Wilkins of Elgin, earlier this year as their mother, Minnie Mae Schulze, looked on. “My grandmother had a big table, and she would roll out the dough and make little strips. She’d let the noodles dry out overnight,” Muniz said.



Minnie Mae Schulze, who died in September, gets credit for her daughters’ favorite recipe.

The twins’ grandmother would then kill a chicken and simmer the noodles in the broth. The aroma of baked chicken and noodles greeted family members as they arrived.

Today, the sisters make a hearty family favorite with noodles and beef, a recipe they credit to their mother, who lived in Serbin. She died unexpectedly in September 2019.

Wilkins picked up homemade noodles from the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum in Serbin, and the twins used their late grandmother’s 100-year-old wooden spatula to stir the pot.

“We would meet at my mother’s every Sunday after church and, occasionally, we’d make this recipe for lunch,” Wilkins said. It sometimes appears on their Christmas Eve menu. Always, it reminds the sisters of their grandmother. Now, it will always be a memory reminding them of their mother, too.

The family traces their ancestors to those who arrived in Texas. Five generations later, the noodles live on.



Brenda Muniz, left, and twin sister Linda Wilkins make their mother’s family recipe at Wilkins’ house. The sisters include homemade noodles, above right, from the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum in Serbin, though they fondly recall the noodles their grandmother used to make.

Hamburger Corn Bake



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| 1 1/2 pounds ground beef, 80 percent lean | 3 cups noodles |
| 1 cup onion, chopped | 1 tablespoon chicken-style soup base (Optional. The twins use Restaurant’s Pride.) |
| 1 12-ounce can corn, drained | 1 cup bread crumbs (Optional. The twins use Progresso Garlic & Herb) |
| 1 10 1/2-ounce can cream of chicken soup | 2 tablespoons butter, melted |
| 1 10 1/2-ounce can cream of mushroom soup | 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese (or cheddar-Jack blend) |
| 1 cup sour cream | |
| 1/4 cup pimentos, chopped | |
| 3/4 teaspoon salt | |
| 1/4 teaspoon pepper | |

Brown meat and onions in a large skillet until lightly brown and tender. Stir in corn, soups, sour cream, pimentos, salt and pepper. Cook noodles and add soup base for flavoring. Stir the cooked and drained noodles into the skillet to mix with other ingredients. Pour mixture into 2 1/2-quart casserole dish. Combine bread crumbs with melted butter and sprinkle on top of casserole. Bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes or until hot. Remove from oven and sprinkle the cheese on top. Makes 8-10 servings.



Photos by Sarah Beal

Pick a pie

Long ago, before there were supermarkets, most rural families had to hunt, grow or forage for their food.

Donna Wynn of Bastrop County thinks about that by-gone time when she steps outside, picks a bunch of mustang grapes and makes green grape pie.

“This pie is from an era that doesn’t exist anymore,” Wynn said, adding that her mother, grandmother and, quite likely, her great-grandmother, made the same pie. “To me that’s sad. It’s not my world anymore” because fewer people today grow what they eat.

But she happily recalls the values her foremothers passed down: independence and self-sufficiency.

The best time to pick mustang grapes is the second week of May, when the seeds are soft, Wynn said, although some cooks prefer to pick the small mustang grapes in summer. She cleans the grapes and freezes bunches so she can have her favorite pie whenever she wants.

The grapes are highly acidic, and can even taste sour, so Wynn uses a cup of granulated sugar for each cup of grapes to create a sweet pie.

“People are usually a little bit skeptical,” she said. “But after the first bite, they’re usually pretty pleasantly surprised. And it’s wonderful with vanilla ice cream on top.”



Photos by Sarah Beal

Donna Wynn of Bastrop County says the key to the star ingredient in her Green Grape Pie is picking the grapes before the seeds harden.

Green Grape Pie



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| 2 cups wild green mustang grapes * | 1 egg |
| 2 cups granulated sugar | 2 pie crusts (Wynn uses Pillsbury) |
| 2 tablespoons flour | |
| 2 tablespoons butter or margarine | |

Boil grapes in just enough water to cover them until they begin to get soft and start to split open (about 25 minutes). Drain the water and mash the grapes with a fork. Add sugar, flour, butter and a beaten egg. Cook together in pan on medium heat, constantly stirring until thickened (about 2 minutes). Pour into an unbaked pie shell resting in a 9-inch pie pan. Top with another pie crust. Prick holes into the top crust and sprinkle with sugar. Bake at 375 degrees, until the crust is golden brown.

* No mustang grapes? Substitute 3 cups of regular green grapes and reduce sugar to 1 cup.

More recipes online

An old recipe card for mom’s Raw Apple Cake on page 18 is a family heirloom for Lael Neill of Cedar Creek, but those beloved cards can get hard to read. You’ll find some of our members’ favorite family recipes at bluebonnet.coop.

