

# THE VALUE OF PIE

Selling a culinary legacy in the heartland isn't as easy as it seems.

BY GARIN PIRNIA



When it comes to desserts, very few are so iconic to a place that it's included in the name. Key lime pie. New York cheesecake. Recently, Indiana has claimed its own: Hoosier pie, made from a simple recipe featuring sugar and cream. In 2009, state senators gathered at the capitol and adopted a resolution to make the treat—known for decades as “sugar cream pie”—the official state pie.

But how did this dessert that many outside of the state have never even heard of become government business, and then get its own sanctioned culinary trail, the Hoosier Pie Trail? I headed to Winchester (93 miles northeast of Indianapolis), the “pie capital of Indiana” and home to Wick's Pies Inc—the world's largest producer of Hoosier pies and the brand served at



the capitol when the resolution was passed—to find out. I had a notion that the wholesome state of Indiana had succumbed to the same temptation that visitor’s bureaus all over the country have lately: to brand and market anything that might bring in a few extra tourist dollars, with authenticity nothing more than an afterthought.

At Mrs. Wick’s Pies, the restaurant adjacent to the Wick’s Pies factory, any doubt about the importance of the sugar cream pie to Indiana’s culinary history is quickly dismissed when I learn that the recipe for their company’s claim to fame dates back to the 19th century. Moreover, sugar cream pies are allegedly as old as the state itself: Even though it is often mistakenly attributed to the Amish, the state’s Quaker settlers from North Carolina first made the so-called “desperation pie” when fresh fruits and other ingredients were scarce as far back as 1816. So the pie is legit, and a partnership between the Indiana Foodways Alliance and Ball State University brought the proposal to the government’s attention.

But one restaurant does not a culinary trail make, so the next day I drive 53 miles west to the Cabbage Rose Eatery in Pendleton, along with IFA’s president, Maureen Lambert. There, sipping on strawberry iced teas in the converted old two-story house, she tells me that the reason for the trail isn’t just to bring money into the state; it’s to bring folks to places they might not normally go. “People are surprised,” she says. “Sometimes they’re just small diners that look like holes-in-the-wall, but the food is fantastic.” IFA, a membership organization with a logo depicting a Hoosier pie, was officially founded in 2007 to develop and promote culinary culture after a study revealed “68 authentic rural culinary tourism sites in eight Northeastern Indiana counties alone.” It subsequently

**SO SWEET** (from left) The Wick’s Pies factory; Triple XXX Family Restaurant (which, while on the Hoosier Pie Trail, offers 14 other kinds of pie); Cabbage Rose Eatery

created a series of culinary trails to attract attention to otherwise-untraveled areas.

A look at IFA’s site reveals not only trails highlighting Indiana-only foods like the Hoosier pie, but things like tenderloin, pizza and candy, as well as trails devoted to tea rooms and counties rather than specific items. Even the Hoosier Pie Trail isn’t solely focused on Hoosier pies; it also includes places that feature homemade fruit or cream pies. Why so many trails? Doesn’t this lack of discrimination cheapen things a bit?

To Lambert, the ends justify the means. “Dining is one of the top three favorite tourist activities, and our goal is to get people off the beaten path of fast food and to eat local cuisine that some may not have in their state or part of the world,” she says.

One place on the Hoosier Pie Trail that people are certainly beating a path to is the family-owned Triple XXX Family Restaurant in West Lafayette. Indiana’s first drive-in (est. 1929) has received attention from many media outlets, including the Food Network—which featured its peanut-butter burgers, among other favorites—and the people there know the difference that culinary tourism can make. “It’s just been an absolute godsend, in this economy, that people are taking the time to get here,” says Greg Ehresman, who owns the restaurant with his wife, Carrie.

Peanut-butter burgers aside, Ehresman says the pies (he offers 14 varieties) are gaining in popularity. “Cherry pie seems to be one of the all-time favorite fruit pies, without a doubt,” he says. “Then I would have to say it’s a toss up between the chocolate cream and the coconut cream. The peanut butter cream takes off periodically.”

While he doesn’t mention Hoosier pie (it’s not even on the menu), if the folks at IFA get their way, that won’t be the case for long.

**MRS. WICK’S PIES**

100 Cherry St, Winchester (94 miles from Indianapolis); 765-584-7437; wickspies.com

**CABBAGE ROSE EATERY**

118 N Pendleton Ave, Pendleton (44 miles from Indianapolis); 765-778-1944

**TRIPLE XXX FAMILY RESTAURANT**

S.R. 26 & W Salisbury St, West Lafayette (70 miles from Indianapolis); 765-743-5373; triplexxfamilyrestaurant.com

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