

# The Legendary & Landmark PIES of NORTH CAROLINA

**W**hat comes at the end is always remembered: the goodnight kiss, the famous last words, the three-point shot at the buzzer, the homemade pie following a fine meal. What's a plate of flounder in Calabash or oysters on the Outer Banks without a slice of lemon meringue, served on a Styrofoam plate with a plastic fork? Can you imagine a rib eye at the Angus Barn in Raleigh without the grand finale — that famous chocolate chess, drizzled with syrup, dolloped with whipped cream? What of the perfectly fried chicken at Mama Dip's in Chapel Hill, culminating with a slice of sweet potato or pecan? Sure, we love our cakes, cobblers, and banana puddings, but pie provides the sweetest memories. *written by* EMMA LAPERRUQUE



## PEANUT PIE

LUMBERTON

When Helen Odom thinks about Blanchard's, long closed in Lumberton, she thinks about her junior prom. It was the spring of 1953. "We ate upstairs," she remembers. "It was a place that we all enjoyed." Claude and Janie Hall Blanchard had opened the restaurant a few years before, after moving back to North Carolina from Washington, D.C. Like many locals, Odom remembers celebrating milestones at Blanchard's — and its peanut pie. Which started out as pecan pie, a recipe from Janie's friend Lyda Lay Crawford Bullard. To make the dessert more cost-effective, Janie switched to peanuts she got from Dublin, the state's peanut capital. Those were mixed with Ritz cracker crumbs, sugar, and egg whites, then poured into a pie tin and baked. After it cooled, the pie was topped with whipped cream and grated bittersweet chocolate. While some bakers keep their recipes close, Blanchard's gave this one to customers like they were family. Odom still has her card, stained from use and annotated with one handwritten word: Delicious.



LETTERING BY LAUREN HOW; PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT HULSMAN



The coconut custard pie has been around almost as long as Blake's Restaurant. Jimmy Blake and Vivian Cook (below) carry on the tradition.

## COCONUT CUSTARD PIE

BLAKE'S, CANDOR

“My father won World War II for us,” Jimmy Blake says. “He got out in 1946, then opened Blake’s on July 4, 1947. My parents had been married about a month.” Indeed, Colon and his bride, Inez, weren’t ones to sit around. After a short honeymoon, they opened their namesake family restaurant. More than 70 years later, it’s still the go-to spot in Candor for meatloaf and creamed potatoes. And it’s still family-run — now by Colon and Inez’s son Jimmy and



his three brothers. “Consistency is our key to success,” Jimmy says. “And nice, friendly folks.” Folks like Vivian Cook, who follows the restaurant’s classic dessert recipes, with a few creations of her own. “I feel like we have the best desserts we’ve ever had,” Jimmy says. Take the coconut custard pie, which has been on the menu since the ‘50s. Its secret? As Cook describes it, the filling “makes its own pie shell.” Just combine shredded coconut, sugar, milk, eggs, and flour; pour into a pie dish; and bake. Recently, Cook has added a new customer-favorite, coconut cream pie — in a pastry crust, with meringue on top — as well as fried apple hand pies. The best part of her job: “That feeling when someone out front says, ‘Hey, y’all did a real good job.’”

## APPLEJACKS

WAYNE COUNTY, AT FAIR TIME

Last year at the Wayne Regional Agricultural Fair, members of Faith Church folded, fried, and sold more than 8,000 applejacks. If you’re from anywhere but here, you may be wondering, Wait, what’s an applejack? To local folks, it is a crispy, just-fried apple hand pie, well worth waiting in line for — even a 60-person line. “Growing up in eastern North Carolina,” Kevin Denton says, “everybody knows what an applejack is.” And at the fair, there’s only one tent selling them. Denton is the music pastor at Faith Church and the manager of their annual applejack initiative. The tradition was started by another church nearby in the late ‘90s; then, a few years back, that church passed the torch. Denton had never worked a day in food service, so how, exactly, did he become the pacer for a nine-day applejack marathon? “I have no idea!” he laughs. But he had worked at Faith Church for 14 years and eaten applejacks even longer. The first year, Faith Church stuck to the original recipe, which used biscuit dough as the crust. The next year, they commissioned the local Pizza Inn to produce thousands of eight-inch dough rounds. Denton’s crew, which includes almost 200 members from their church community, rehydrated dried apples and tossed them with cinnamon sugar. Then, at the fair, they assembled the hand pies, fried them to order, and sprinkled them with sugar. All the proceeds go toward Faith Church’s annual community service project, Faith Gives. As Denton puts it, “It’s a win-win.”



An applejack only requires one hand to eat. With ice cream, you’ll need both.



## GRAPE HULL PIE

DUPLIN WINERY, ROSE HILL

In 1975 — its inaugural year — Duplin Winery produced 20 cases of wine. Fast-forward to now, and that number leaps to 500,000. Duplin is North Carolina’s oldest winery, and largest by volume. Between Duplin’s own vineyards and its 50-plus family farmers, the winery processed more than 14,000 tons of muscadines during the grapes’ most recent, fleeting September season, as summer reluctantly made way for fall. Some of those grapes, however, never became wine. They became pie. In 2001, Duplin opened its restaurant, The Bistro. Think fried green tomatoes and crab cake sandwiches, plus Mama Ann’s grape hull pie. Co-owner Jonathan Fussell — part of the third generation to lead the business — says this dessert was such a fixture of his upbringing that he can’t remember a time in his life without it: “It’s been made in this area for a long, long, long time.” Duplin’s recipe comes from Jonathan’s cousin, the late Ann Fussell. While the pie is a regional classic, it’s also difficult to track down — not because folks don’t love it when they try it, but because it’s so labor-intensive to make. Duplin’s recipe features a homemade pastry crust and shiny meringue topping. The filling is the catch: They hand-press the muscadines to separate the thick skin and juicy pulp, then remove the seeds, then — “’course, I can’t give you all the details!” Jonathan laughs. “They’re our family secret.”

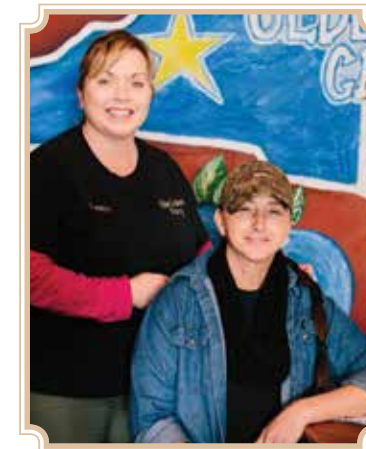
PHOTOGRAPH BY JOEY SEAWELL; LAUREN V. ALLEN OF THE WORLD IN A POCKET

PHOTOGRAPH BY MILLIE HOLLOMAN PHOTOGRAPHY; ILLUSTRATION BY KYLE T. WEBSTER

## BLUEBERRY PIE

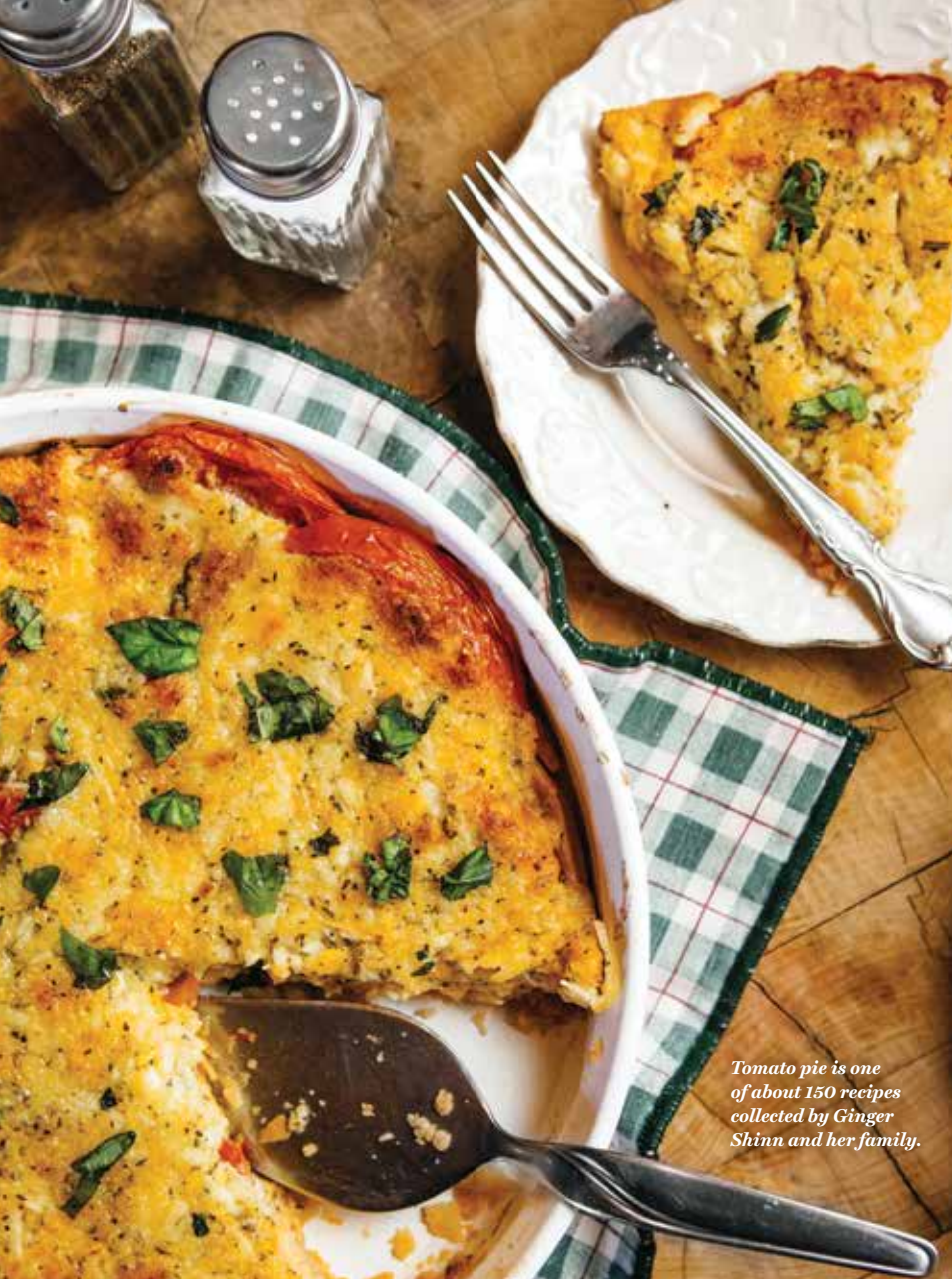
OLDE CAROLINA EATERY, BURGAW

Dees Drugstore was 100 years old when it closed in 2016. A classic pharmacy-meets-soda-fountain, Dees was the place in Burgaw for a BLT and an ice cream soda. But it was more than that: It was a community center. Which is why, as the town mourned its loss, Leann Carroll opened a new spot to honor the drugstore’s memory — Olde Carolina Eatery. Carroll snagged Dees’s tables. And menu favorites, like egg salad sandwiches and hot dogs. And even the woman who, for 14 years, ran its lunch counter — Frances Burns. “I’ve been cooking my whole life,” Burns says. “My mom taught me everything I know.” Like how to make blueberry pie from scratch. “That’s the first thing that flies off the shelf,” Carroll says. Burgaw is tucked within Pender County, which hosts the annual North Carolina Blueberry Festival. Burns’s recipe is as classic and cozy as it gets. “The fruit is soft and loose and oozes out at you,” she says. “Don’t come in here looking for fancy!” But do look for flaky pastry crusts and a lot of friendly faces. “Our goal is to make everyone feel comfortable,” Burns says. “When you come in here, you’re coming home.”



Most of the state’s blueberries are grown in southeastern North Carolina, where Leann Carroll (above left) and Frances Burns turn them into a flaky, fresh dessert.





*Tomato pie is one of about 150 recipes collected by Ginger Shinn and her family.*

## TOMATO PIE

SMOKEY SHADOWS LODGE, MAGGIE VALLEY

In 1956, when she was a teenager, Ginger Shinn and her family stayed a spell at the Smokey Shadows Lodge in Maggie Valley. They were on vacation from their home in Miami, and something about that week — that long, stretching porch, that view of the mountains, 3,600 feet up in the world — stuck with Ginger. Almost 30 years later, she and her husband decided to purchase a property in North Carolina. Ginger checked the newspaper every Sunday until, one week, she recognized a listing: “This has to be Smokey Shadows!” she remembers saying. “It was like a dream.” Today, she runs the lodge with her family, including her daughter Tracy, who cooks their “country gourmet” fare — including a locally famous cheesy tomato pie. A family friend shared the recipe, which Tracy tweaked and tailored until she got it just right. These days, she doesn’t even need the recipe. “I don’t measure,” she says. “Just do it all by sight.” She starts with a pastry crust, which she fills to the brim with layers of sliced tomatoes — “They need to be firm!” — and a mixture of mayonnaise, mozzarella and other cheeses, basil, garlic, and lemon pepper. At the Lodge, Tracy bakes at least one for every table at each meal. “There were a couple times we didn’t make it,” Ginger says. “And oh, we heard about it.”



## PECAN PIE

CREEDMOOR

Paula Ellington’s parents, Bobby and Nita Whitfield, opened Bob’s BBQ on July 13, 1970, the day after their 17th wedding anniversary. Nita’s father, Bob Whitt, ran his own barbecue business in the ’50s. So when he and his wife, Ethel, decided to retire, Nita lured them to Creedmoor with the promise of helping her at her new restaurant whenever they pleased. Turned out, they wanted to help out a lot. Ellington’s grandfather tended to the vinegar-sauced pork shoulder, while her grandmother baked pies — a lot of pies. Chocolate chess. Buttermilk custard. Coconut pineapple. And Ellington’s sister’s favorite: classic pecan. “It’s a very traditional recipe,” Ellington says. “Nothing hokey!” The pecans — the family swears by pieces rather than halves — came from Georgia. But beyond that, well, it’s a family secret — “and we don’t give it out,” Ellington adds. She and her sister Carla Mangum led the business for more than 20 years. Last fall, they decided to retire. This, Ellington says, is when she realized just how many people cherished her family’s legacy. “We were the most loved and the most hated women in Creedmoor!” she laughs. “It was humbling. We’ve been very blessed these 47 years. And who would have ever thought we would be here that long?”



*This dessert at Mama Dip's is handmade with mashed sweet potatoes, and fits into a family tradition carried on by Spring Council (below).*



## PUMPKIN PIE

**ABOARD THE USS NORTH CAROLINA**

On Thanksgiving 1943, the thousands of sailors aboard the *USS North Carolina*, then stationed off the Gilbert Islands in the Pacific, were served a feast. There was baked ham and giblet gravy, whipped potatoes and Waldorf salad, French peas and Parker House rolls, pumpkin pie and ice cream. “And, of course, cigars and cigarettes,” says Battleship *North Carolina* curator Mary Ames Booker. “Those were a big treat.” Big, it seems, is key here. After the battleship was decommissioned in 1947, various documents were recovered, including baker Donald Ayers’s pie dough recipe. If you want to re-create it, you’ll just need 200 pounds of flour, 96 pounds of shortening, and 6 pounds of salt. And don’t overmix: “Too much mixing,” Ayers warned, “makes the crust tough.” But beyond the mammoth quantities, the sailors’ recipes are similar to what home cooks make today. The custardy pumpkin filling (as recorded by baker Oscar David Taylor) included evaporated milk, sugar, and eggs, spiced with cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger. All the better enjoyed with a scoop of ice cream — or even a cigar.

## SWEET POTATO PIE

**MAMA DIP’S, CHAPEL HILL**

Mama Dip’s has been a Chapel Hill fixture for more than 40 years — and everyone has their favorite dishes. Fried pork chops. Chicken and dumplings. Macaroni and cheese. Then there’s dessert. Banana pudding. Cream cheese pound cake. Pecan pie. The last is particularly popular — founder Mildred “Mama Dip” Cotton Council even made it on *Good Morning America* in the ’90s — but if you ask the Council family about one of *their* favorite pies, they’ll tell you: sweet potato. “It was something we had all the time — Sunday suppers, church homecomings, Thanksgiving, Christmas,” Mildred’s daughter Spring remembers. The sweet potato pie sells well, she explains, “because we’re one of the few restaurants where you can find it.” Like pumpkin pie, Mama Dip’s sweet potato pie has a custardy filling made with milk, eggs, and melted butter, plus warm spices, like cinnamon and nutmeg. But unlike pumpkin pie, which often relies on canned puree, the sweet potatoes are boiled until tender, then mashed



**“Growing up, we were always in the kitchen with Mama, watching her cook.”**

until smooth. It’s this sort of handmade touch — literally — that sets Mama Dip’s apart. “Growing up, we were always in the kitchen with Mama, watching her cook,” Spring says. “That’s how she taught us, by touch and feel.”



*Van Eure (below) runs the Angus Barn, where the chocolate chess pie recipe was developed by her mother and a waitress in the 1960s.*

## CHOCOLATE CHESS PIE

ANGUS BARN, RALEIGH

When Van Eure's father, Thad, passed away suddenly in 1988, she dropped everything to run the family business, the famed Angus Barn in Raleigh. The place seats almost 1,000 people, who flock there for juicy grilled steaks and chocolate chess pie. Van's mother, Alice, developed the pie recipe in the late '60s with the help of waitress Betty Shuggart, who worked at Angus Barn for more than 50 years. Now, the restaurant makes at least 100 chocolate chess pies per day, and serves them warm with vanilla ice cream or whipped cream. You can also buy one to take home, or ship a pie anywhere in the country. Van herself doesn't eat them, not anymore. She still remembers a six-week stint helping out in the kitchen. Thad noticed that something was off with the pies — they were missing their signature crackly, crusty top. Van had to figure out why. "Every day, I took one to his office and we'd taste it," she remembers. Again, again, again! One of the tricks, it turned out, was how long you left the pie in the oven to cool. "Finally," she says, "we got it perfect."



## VINEGAR PIE

DILLSBORO

"The Jarrett House was the first North Carolina restaurant I ever ate in," Karen Barker remembers. Like the Jarrett House itself, she and her husband, Ben, are culinary legends around here — for their iconic, award-winning restaurant, The Magnolia Grill, which lived in Durham from 1986 to 2012. Years before that, when Ben was a student at Western Carolina University, he worked at the Jarrett House as a server, Karen says, and ate a slice of vinegar pie "every shift he worked." The cozy inn was a fixture amid the mountains in Dillsboro for more than a century — it opened in 1884 and just recently closed — and the vinegar pie was arguably its most famous offering. This old-school, Southern dessert is a classic "desperation" or "make-do" or "pantry" pie. In other words, a recipe that relies on kitchen staples versus seasonal, perishable ingredients. Instead of using apples, say, use apple cider vinegar. And instead of using buttermilk, use a lot of melted butter. The result is as humble as it is addictive.

### Jarrett House Vinegar Pie

- 1 stick margarine,  
melted and cooled
- 1½ cups sugar
- 1 tablespoon flour
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons  
apple cider vinegar
- 3 eggs
- 1 (9-inch) pie shell, unbaked

Combine the first six ingredients and pour into the unbaked pie shell. Bake at 300° for 45 minutes.



*This Down East creation  
has been enjoyed for a  
long time. How long?  
Nobody's exactly sure.*

## LEMON MILK PIE

### HARKERS ISLAND

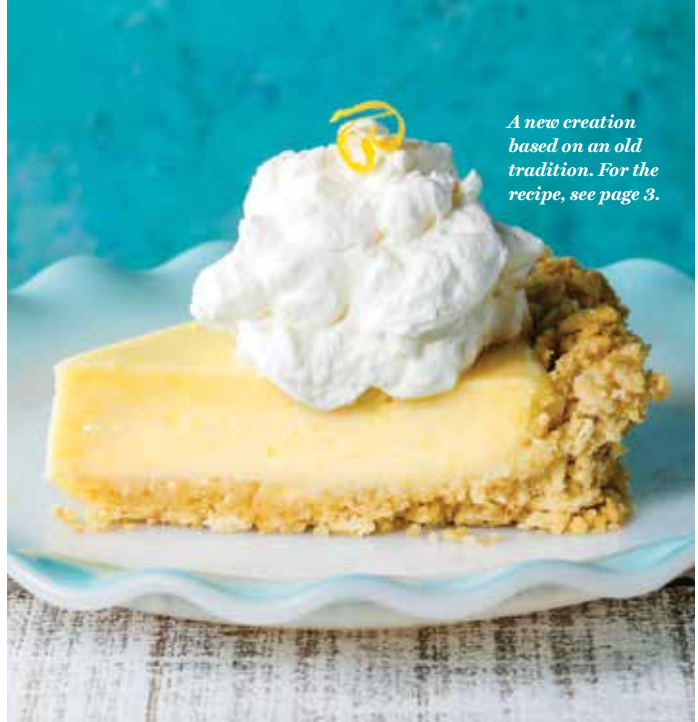
Harkers Island locals call it “lemon milk pie.” Half an hour away, in Morehead City, they know it as “Down East lemon pie.” Others simply say “lemon meringue pie.” But any way you slice it, same pie. What everyone can agree on is why this recipe is so prevalent along the coast: a belief that you shouldn’t have dessert after eating seafood, unless it’s lemony. No one quite knows how or when this idea took hold. “I started waiting tables when I was 13, and I couldn’t believe that people ate dessert after seafood,” Karen Amspacher remembers. “That was a shock.” These days, Amspacher makes lemon milk pies at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center in Harkers Island for various events and fund-raisers. Just like ladies from her church did, she lines a pie tin with Ritz crackers — some crushed, others whole — then pours in a lemony custard made with sweetened condensed milk. Top that with billowy meringue and toss it in the oven until tanned and bronzed, like tourists sunbathing on the beach. In Morehead, meanwhile, Southern Salt Seafood Company is carrying on the legacy of the iconic Captain Bill’s restaurant. There, Albert Cowan styles the pie to “look like the beach.” Crushed crackers resemble the sand, and swirls of whipped topping look like the waves as they curl, then crash onto the shore.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BAXTER MILLER

# ATLANTIC BEACH PIE

CROOK'S CORNER, CHAPEL HILL

“It was almost by accident,” Bill Smith says. “And now I can never take it off the menu.” In 2011, Smith helped host a coastal North Carolina-themed dinner for the Southern Foodways Alliance symposium. For dessert, he wanted to re-create the lemon pie of his childhood, when his family went to the beach every weekend the weather was good. “I did some research, got some church cookbooks, poked around,” he says. “I called restaurants — like Captain Bill’s and Sanitary and The Beacon — to see if they still made lemon pie. And they all did.” For the Foodways guests, Smith made some tweaks. Instead of meringue, he opted for whipped cream, which doesn’t sweat or shrink and is easier to execute for hundreds of people. And instead of the more common Ritz Crackers, he chose saltines — because, well, that’s what was in his kitchen at the time. The pie was a hit. He added it to the Crook’s Corner menu in Chapel Hill and called it “Atlantic Beach Pie.” One day, cookbook author Katie Workman swung by for dinner and tried it — “and then it went viral,” Smith remembers. NPR’s *All Things Considered* featured it as “A North Carolina Pie That Elicits an ‘Oh My God’ Response.” *Southern Living* called it “The Best Dish of Summer.” The Atlanta Food & Wine Festival commissioned Smith to make 700 servings. Of course, not all feedback was positive: “The whipped cream upset some people, because I’m ‘wasting egg whites,’” Smith says. “And there’s a big fight over which crackers to use.” To boot, Smith tops the whipped cream with flaky salt. “Not the way it’s done, traditionally,” he says. Or, it’s a whole new tradition. **Os**



*A new creation based on an old tradition. For the recipe, see page 3.*

*Emma Laperruque is a food writer and recipe developer at Food52 in New York City.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM ROBINSON