

# Picking Pecans

By Cindy Hudson

Pecans have always been my favorite nut to eat and cook with. When I was growing up pecan season meant pralines cooking on the stove, pecan pies in the oven and Mama making her special pecan icing cake. There was always a tray with fresh pecans on the counter in the kitchen ready to crack, peel and pop in my mouth to tide me over after school until supper was served.

We had ten pecan trees in our far back yard, and they produced enough for us to fill up a few sacks to sell for extra Christmas money as well as plenty for us to peel for the freezer, where we hoarded bags all year so we wouldn't run out before pecans started to ripen again in the fall.

On crisp, clear autumn Saturdays, I would head to the back with Mama and my sister, Sandra. Each of us carried an empty gallon-sized ice cream tub and a burlap sack. We staked out separate territories under different trees and started to pick. Mama listened as Sandra and I talked about what was going on at school while we all filled up bucket after bucket, until eventually we moved out of earshot from each other and picked in silence. At noon the sugar house whistle blew to signal lunch for its shift workers, and we took a break to settle in and eat our own sandwiches.

By mid-afternoon we had picked so many pecans we could still see their shapes nestled among blades of grass when we closed our eyes, and it was time to head back to the house. We packed everything up and dragged the now-heavy burlap sacks behind us all the way.

Over the next few months we'd crack pecans at the kitchen table as we watched television during the long winter nights. We'd also eat our fill of delicious candies, pies and cakes for Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's and any other gathering that gave us an excuse to cook dessert. Mama didn't own a candy thermometer, and I remember stirring praline mixtures endlessly over the hot stove, impatiently dropping a little into a glass of cold water every few seconds to see if it had reached a soft ball stage yet. But the thought of tasting warm, gooey pralines kept me stirring diligently until the consistency was finally right.

While I don't have pecan trees in my backyard in Portland, where I live now, I have something even better: a mama who still picks, cracks and peels them for me, from some of the same trees we picked under when I was growing up. She then sends me a few pounds in a care package in the mail each fall. I'm always excited when the box arrives on my doorstep, and I can't wait to pop a few fresh pecans in my mouth right away. Then I get to work making pralines, pies and cakes.

Here are some of my favorite recipes using pecans. I couldn't include the pecan cake icing, because my mama still regards it as a family secret, so I've added Christmas tassies, a relatively new discovery I've only been making about a dozen years. I like these miniature pecan pies because they're easy to serve and so good when you pop them into your mouth. If you don't have a mama who can pick and shell for you, try ordering from a Louisiana pecan company. Here is my favorite. [Rosalie Sugarmill, Inc.](#)

## Pralines

- 1 cup white sugar
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- 1/2 cup evaporated milk
- 2 tbsp. butter
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1-1/2 cups pecans

In a large, heavy saucepan, combine the sugars and milk and cook over high heat until mixture reaches 230 degrees on a candy thermometer or a soft ball stage. Be sure to stir frequently and scrape the bottom and sides of the pan while stirring. Add butter, vanilla and pecans and then beat vigorously with a spoon until mixture starts to thicken. Immediately drop by tablespoonful onto waxed paper, aluminum foil or a lightly greased cookie sheet. Makes about 18 pralines.

\*Note: you can substitute buttermilk for evaporated milk for a slightly different taste.

## Pecan Pie

- 2/3 cup sugar
- 2/3 cup light Karo syrup
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/2 cube butter, melted
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 cup pecan pieces or halves
- 1 nine inch unbaked pie shell

Mix all ingredients together. Pour into unbaked pie shell and bake for 10 minutes at 425. Lower the temperature to 375 and bake for another 25 minutes.

## **Christmas Tassies**

- 1-1/2 sticks butter, at room temperature
- 4 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 large egg
- 3/4 cup firmly packed light brown sugar
- 3/4 cup chopped and toasted pecan pieces
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt
- Sifted confectioner's sugar

Preheat the oven to 350. In a bowl, cream one stick of the butter with the cream cheese. Stir in the flour and form into a ball. Divide the dough into 24 pieces and press each piece into mini-muffin tins to form shells. In a small bowl, beat the egg lightly with the brown sugar, and stir in the pecans, the remaining 1/2 stick of butter, vanilla and salt. Divide the pecan mixture among the shells, filling them about two-thirds full, and bake for 25 minutes or until the filling is puffed slightly and the pastry is golden. Let the tassies cool on racks and garnish with confectioner's sugar. Makes 2 dozen.