

GREAT NEW ENGLAND COOKS

Clara Chalmers Bedford, New Hampshire

Fortwo years running, her apple pie has been selected the best in New England. While that recognition is nice, it will not change Clara... or her apple pie. by Edie Clark

ONE NIGHT AFTER SUPPER, A couple of years ago, George Chalmers was reading the paper, and toward the back, he spotted a little news item. "Best Apple Pie in New England Sought," the headline read, and underneath it said how an inn down in Massachusetts was going to hold a contest. He folded the paper back and took it in to his wife Clara who was busy in the kitchen. "Look, Clara," he said, showing her the paper. "Why don't you try?" She read it and pushed the paper back at him. "Oh, George, there's nothing special in it," she said. "It's just another apple pie."

He kept after her and she sent the recipe out. Now she has a scrapbook filled with clippings about her pie and two silver trays propped up on the sideboard in the dining room, trophies for her pie. For two years in a row the Salem Cross Inn in West Brookfield, Massachusetts, awarded Clara Chalmers top honors for her recipe. It came to her, sort of, from her mother, who was a pastry cook at an inn some 60 years ago. "She never taught me. She didn't have time, but I must have been watching, because when it came time, I knew how to do it," Clara said one day last spring as she scooped the core from a Baldwin with a left twist of her paring knife. Eighty years

old and a great-grandmother several times over, Clara has baked thousands of pies in her married lifetime. "I used to do three to four pies a week, but now that the kids are gone, I only bake one a week."

She was making this one for our lunch. George was in the living room reading the paper as she went through the familiar ritual of peeling and slicing the apples, zip, zip, zip, and measuring the dry ingredients for the crust. She says there's nothing to it, that the recipe is simple. Perhaps it is to her, but there are a couple of twists.

"I think this is my secret," she said, measuring some of the flour mixture into a small bowl, adding cold water measured from a jug in the refrigerator, and whisking it with a granny fork. What emerged was a kind of a sponge, like a sourdough starter. "At the contest they wanted to know why do I do this and why do I do that. I don't know why. It's just the way I've always done it." She set the little bowl aside and proceeded to press the Crisco into the rest of the flour mixture with her hands.

Around her as she worked were the tools she has used for every pie she's ever made. They came at the time of their wedding. "In 1934 you didn't get many wedding presents," she explained, as she began to roll the satiny dough out with the wooden pin. "With the money that we got, I went down and got stuff for the kitchen." That includes the two agate-ware pie plates, the granny fork, the rolling pin, a bone-handled knife she uses to trim the crust, and

Clara holds her steak and kidney pie, hot from the oven, while George is about to sample approximately his 7560th apple pie.

extensive gardening is probably immoral.

"Real Vermonters suspect that Ethan Allen didn't demand the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga in 1775 'in the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress.' But what the hell."

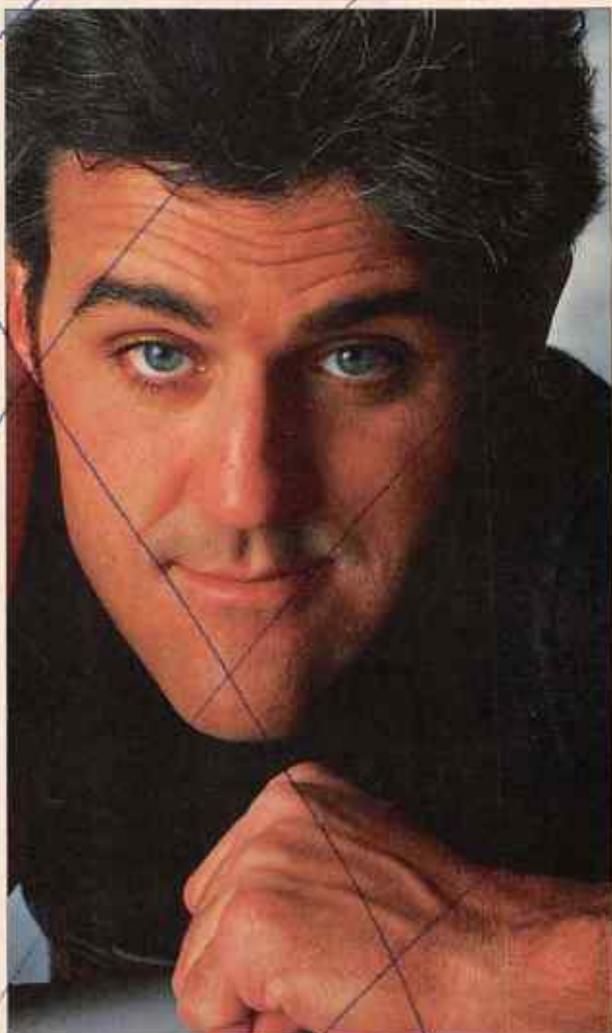
Jay Leno

"Funniest person in America," says David Letterman.

DAVID LETTERMAN CALLS him "the funniest person in America." "King of the stand-up comedians" trumpets *People* magazine. The 37-year-old Andover, Massachusetts-raised comedian earns over \$600,000 a year and sees America — and New England — through a decidedly singular lens.

"I always like driving up and down Route 1 in Saugus; you can always tell which restaurant is doing well because they have a bigger picture of the food they offer on the roof. I mean I've been all over the country, and I've never seen anything like it. Can you imagine going to France and seeing a picture of Duck à l'Orange on some roof? 'Hey Hon, let's eat there.' . . ."

"My mother is great. She's always telling me, 'Jay, save your money.' I bought my folks a VCR for Christmas; all my mother could say was, 'How's this affect you paying your mortgage?' She worries because of the business I'm in, you know — I don't get a



Somehow, growing up in Andover trained Jay Leno to see life as a little funnier than most, making him one of today's top comics.

salary. So I told her, 'Look, Sylvester Stallone got 12 million for working only ten weeks.' 'Sure,' she says, 'but what's he gonna do the rest of

the year?' And there's this phenomenon about parents in New England — nowhere else do I hear the phrase, 'something to fall back on.' They keep telling me, 'Jay, don't forget about your degree from Emerson — you can always fall back on teaching if this comedy thing doesn't work out.' " □ □

two pint-sized tins of nutmeg and cinnamon. The spices were used up long ago, but she continues to refill the tins.

She set the crust into the pan and followed that with half the apples. She uses Baldwins when she can get them, Cortlands when she can't. "If I use Macs, it turns into applesauce," she said. "But it doesn't matter what apple I use, I *always* taste them before I add the sugar." She might use as much as a cup of sugar, but these apples seemed pretty sweet to her so she cut it down to half a cup. She added the sugar mixture to the apples, mixed them with her hands, and then gently pressed the apples down into the pan. Over this, she added the remaining apples and pressed down firmly once again.

Before adding the top crust, she wet the edges of the bottom crust with cold water, explaining that it welds the crusts together so the juices won't run out into the oven. She folded and tucked it all around and then crimped the edges with her fork. With quick, expert jabs, she poked numerous holes in the top, along with one good-sized cut in the center, so she can see when the apples are done. Then, gently, with both hands, she pressed the pie down once more. "They always say I've got the flattest pie! At the contest, oh, you should have seen how *high* some of those pies were! You should have seen the fancy pies coming out of that oven. Some put whiskey in, and some put maple syrup. One woman put whipped cream all around the edge. It was so beautiful and mine so flat. I said, 'Oh! my little old-fashioned pie!' I couldn't believe it when they said I'd won."

From the refrigerator, she brought out her other secret: the heavy cream. "At the inn where my mother worked, they wouldn't give her the cream for the pie so she brought in her own. She said she wouldn't make a pie without cream." She passed her hand across the top crust and poured the cream at the same time, making sure there was cream over the entire top. "My daughter tried to use milk once," she said. "It didn't work." She stood back, just a little proud, and then popped it into the oven.



Clara's grandmother Clara (top) and her mother (above), a pastry cook at an inn, bequeathed Clara their know-how.

Clara has had a lot of mail as a result of the contests, which has pleased her. She keeps the letters tied together in a bundle. "One girl had been married 16 years and never could make a pie. She tried my recipe and wrote: 'In the last three weeks, I've made six beauties.'" She also heard from four men, one of them a recent widower who said that her recipe enabled him to nearly duplicate his wife's pie, and another, a proud cook who sent her his snapshot, a man wearing an apron and a beaming grin, holding his pie made from her recipe. The only sour note in it all has been the recipe that was printed in *Family*





Clara trims an apple pie before pressing it down and pouring cream over the top.

Circle. "They had their kitchens test it, and they changed my recipe." Dramatically. The recipe they printed calls for 3 cups of flour instead of 2 and a cup of shortening instead of $\frac{3}{4}$. "They told me it was because a lot of their readers are beginners, but I couldn't imagine it! I didn't feel like it was my recipe," Clara said, as she settled down at the enamel-top table near the oven.

For a cook known for her apple pie, the rest of her repertoire is surprisingly different. "I'm a Yankee, you know," she said. "I grew up on baked beans and brown bread and red-flannel hash, but George is from Scotland — I like to say that he had to come over here to find me — so a lot of my cooking is Scottish." Like the Scots, many of their foods are hearty and long-lived. She got up and went over to the cupboard and brought back an impressive high loaf, a tar-black cake with pie crust all around. "This is Black Bun," she said. "I made this last Christmas, and it should keep a whole year, if it lasts that long. George likes it with a glass of Scotch after supper." She

cut off a sliver so I could taste — it was a fruited cake, rich with the flavor of currants and raisins and almonds. From the top cupboard she brought down a tin of what she called Empire Biscuits, a round white cookie. Another good keeper, it tasted freshly made. "There are no cookies in Scotland, you know, they're all called biscuits," she said. "I make these in the fall, and we take them to Florida with us in the spring. They will keep forever."

Clara does not use a timer, but about every ten minutes as we talked at the table, she got up, opened the oven, and poked the pie with her granny fork, quick stabs, to let the steam out, the crust growing flakier and darker at each peeking. When she finally took it out, it was golden, the color of good Scotch, the crust not high, but spilling over its pan in tempting abundance. "You may not believe it, but I press it again now," she said, and ever so carefully she pressed the top with the back of her fork. "You have to get all the air out of it."

Around the table at lunch, George spoke of Clara's cooking and of their long life together — 53 years this October — with a proud twinkle in his eyes. Clara grew timid in the face of all the praise. She said she

loves to cook and cooks all the time for George and their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but she doesn't eat much of what she cooks. "I just like to make people happy," she explained.

Clara cut the pie in generous wedges, and George poured himself another cup of Red Rose from the pot. The crust was delightfully flaky and the apples juicy and tightly layered, a delicious masonry. He started in. We figured it might be his 7,556th pie. "Never better," he said.

RECIPES

FROM CLARA CHALMERS' KITCHEN

CLARA'S APPLE PIE

Double Crust for 9-inch Pie Plate:

- 2 cups King Arthur flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ¼ cup cold water (more may be needed, depending on the weather)
- ½ cup Crisco

Apple Pie Filling:

- 6-8 Baldwin or other good cooking apples (depending on size)
- ½ to 1 cup sugar (depending on tartness of apples)
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons heavy cream

To make crust, sift flour, baking powder, and salt together. Remove ½ cup of this mixture and put in small bowl; add ¼ cup water. Combine remaining ¾ of dry mixture with Crisco, rubbing together with hands until mixed. Combine both flour mixtures into a ball. Divide dough in half on floured board. Roll out bottom crust.

Peel and thinly slice apples. Line pie plate with crust, add half of apples, and press down to help remove air pockets. Sprinkle on mixed sugar and spices. Add rest of apples and press down again. Roll out other half of crust, wet edge of bottom crust, and put on top crust. Fold top edge under bottom, and seal well with a fork. Press to remove any remaining air. Prick top crust to allow steam to escape. Brush top with heavy cream. Bake at 400° for one

hour or until apples are done.

MOTHER CHALMERS' BLACK BUN

What's special about this, other than the fact that it keeps indefinitely, unrefrigerated, is the tin, which should have high sides: Clara's is 3" high and 8¼" x 6½".

- 3 pounds currants
- 2 pounds seeded raisins
- ½ pound mixed peel, cut up
- ½ pound almonds
- ½ pound (1 cup) white sugar
- ½ pound (2 cups) flour
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon cream of tartar
- 3 teaspoons allspice
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ginger
- ½ teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 teacup of milk (about ¾ cup)
- 1 egg

Mix all ingredients together and set aside.

"Paste" (crust):

- ¾ pound (3 cups) flour
- ¼ pound butter
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- a little salt

Mix with about ½ cup of cold water and roll out. Line pan with waxed paper and ¾ of the paste. Fill it with the fruit mixture, cover with the rest of the paste. Bake in a moderate oven (300°) for 4 to 5 hours.

EMPIRE BISCUITS

- 1 pound (4 cups) flour
- ½ pound (1 cup) sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ pound butter
- 1 egg
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon almond extract

Sift and mix together all the dry ingredients. Rub butter into the mixture. Add the beaten egg, lemon juice, and almond extract to make a stiff paste. Roll between two sheets of waxed paper and cut with a cookie cutter. Bake in a 375° oven 10 to 15 minutes. (THIS RECIPE CONTINUED ON PAGE 154)

OCCGS REFERENCE ONLY