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Good gourd almighty

For this pumpkin pie maker, nothing beats a cushaw

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Frances Chauvin was born into a family of pie makers, but she married into the cushaw tradition.

The striped, crooked neck pumpkin seems to be declining in popularity these days. Chauvin is the most visible local champion of the gourd. She sells her cushaw pies at the Tuesday Crescent City Farmers Market and at the Saturday Red Stick Farmers Market in Baton Rouge.

Growing up, she doesn't ever recall seeing a cushaw.

"I lived over near Lake Charles. But when I went around to Eunice and that area, I did see some cushaw," said Chauvin, who grew up in Welsh. "My grandfather was a truck farmer and he didn't raise them. I don't think they even raised many pumpkins there.

"My husband's mother was from Napoleonville. She would cook cushaw like a sweet potato dish during the holidays."

Gary Nabhan, the director of the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University, has made a career of studying and promulgating traditional varieties of American food plants. The cushaw's pedigree goes back a long way.

"It's a squash that came pre-historically, north from the tropics into what is the United States today," he said. "It remains in the Mississippi Delta, west Texas and throughout Arizona and New Mexico.

"The terms 'squash' and 'pumpkin' are used interchangeably," he said. "There are different varieties in each of the species of those things. Some people call it squash, some people call it pumpkin. I never make too much of those names."

The cushaw prospered generations ago because it was fairly resistant to squash vine borer, a pest that often kills other types of squashes and pumpkins in the hotter regions of the country. Perhaps owing to pesticides, other pumpkins, such as those carved for jack-o-lanterns, are now much more popular.

"Like a lot of old heirloom plants, it was really a multi-purpose thing," Nabhan said. "People in Mexico and the Southwest used the seeds for molé and for roasting. Sometimes they even fed the

meat of the squash to hogs.

"They also use the flowers, because the flowers are a pretty good size," Nabhan said. "We pick those flowers every morning, put a piece of cheese in them, batter them and fry them as squash blossoms."

Nabhan says that the decline in the popularity of the cushaw may also be related to refrigeration.

"It's a long-storing squash. You can keep it for four months after harvesting," he said. "Without refrigeration, it was nothing to keep a squash around that long. Now, people can keep other kinds of squashes in their refrigerator.

"I've grown it for 20 years, because it gets so big and can be steamed, baked, boiled, grilled, used in soups and used in pies. I just think it's one of the great all-around pumpkins of the United States."

The visual differences between cushaws and other pumpkins is obvious. In addition to its elongated shape, the cushaw's trademark stripes of white, green, yellow or orange set it apart. The flavor differences are more subtle. Nabhan said he thinks cushaw is a bit more meaty in texture.

Chauvin said she has come to prefer the cushaw, but she doesn't think it has a radically different flavor from its round cousins. Her cushaw specialty is the pie. Coming from a family of fine cooks and bakers, she apprenticed early.

"My grandmother taught me when I was about 9 years old," she recalled. "I'd make pies for special occasions and holidays."

She learned to make pumpkin pie from her great aunt, Dora Watkins, who in turn had learned the recipe from a woman who was working for her.

"I don't remember her name. That was back in 1902, I wasn't born," Chauvin said. "They told me that's where they had gotten that fresh pumpkin recipe, which we would also use for the cushaw."

Long before she got into the pie business, Chauvin and her husband John were in the radio business. In 1958, they bought WFPR-AM, "Florida Parishes Radio," and in 1972, they added WHMD-FM -- both country music outlets. About the time that they sold the stations in 1995, Chauvin's son, Tim, and his wife, Lori, were helping to establish the Hammond farmers market. The couple sold fresh cut flowers. They asked Chauvin if she would sell baked goods to augment the small number of vendors at the then-fledgling enterprise.

"I thought about my pies because my mama's and my grandmother's pies were always a big hit," she said. "We used to go to a funeral, and if they had put pies out afterward, you could tell what pies they made. Their crusts were always the best, crisp crusts."

Some pumpkin pie bakers insist on using canned pumpkin because there's less water in the product. Chauvin says that water comes from boiling the pumpkins, not from the pumpkins themselves.

"You don't boil them," she said. "If you boil them, they'll be full of water. You bake them. But now we use the microwave because it's a lot quicker."

Chauvin's husband grew cushaws for her until he died in 2004. Now she buys them from growers at the Red Stick market.

She is a mother of seven and a grandmother of 17. Long before she started baking professionally, she had a kitchen capable of turning out dozens of pies.

"We had a lot of kids and we always had a lot of parties and all," she said. "So we bought a Vulcan stove and oven, like the restaurants have. When I started making pies, I didn't have to buy

anything."

In addition to her signature cushaw pie, Chauvin also makes pumpkin, pecan, apple, blueberry and peach pies.

"Thanksgiving is the busiest week of the year," she said. "We do 30 to 35 big pies and about 120 of the small ones."

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Frances Chauvin uses the same recipe for pumpkin pie, if you can't find a cushaw for the following recipe. She also uses it for sweet potato pie, adding two more tablespoons of butter, 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg and 1/4 teaspoon vanilla. She also uses 1/2 cup brown sugar instead of white sugar.

The filling for the pie is enough to make one 10-inch deep-dish pie. However, the recipe for the crust makes three pie crusts. Chauvin usually bakes several pies at once.

If you don't want to eat the pies that day, "It's good to go ahead and make the pies, bake them, freeze them and have ready to stick in oven, frozen, for 30 minutes" before serving.

Her pie crust tips: The less you handle and roll the dough, the crisper it will be. Chauvin cuts in half the shortening, then the other half. And she doesn't stir the mixture. Instead, "Pick at it with a fork."

Chauvin rolls dough on a floured pastry cloth, with a cloth stocking over her rolling pin.

Frances Chauvin's cushaw pie

Makes 1 10-inch pie

1 cushaw, seeds removed, cut into 2 to 4 pieces

3/4 cup sugar

Pinch of salt

1 tablespoon McCormick pumpkin pie spice

1 tablespoon melted butter

1/4 teaspoon cinnamon

3 eggs

1 1/2 cups heavy whipping cream

1 unbaked deep dish 10-inch pie crust (recipe below)

Bake the cushaw pieces at 350 degrees for 1 1/2 hours, or until fork tender. Or, bake pieces in microwave for 20 to 30 minutes, until fork tender. Let cool slightly and peel.

Mash pulp in food processor to consistency of mashed potatoes. Measure into a mixing bowl 1 heaping cup of the cushaw meat. (Reserve rest of cushaw for another use. Chauvin freezes it by the heaping cup.)

Add sugar, salt, pumpkin pie spice, butter and cinnamon. Stir thoroughly. With an electric mixer, beat in the eggs. Add the cream, and beat mixture until smooth.

Place in a 350-degree preheated oven and bake for 60 to 90 minutes, until mixture is set and toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

Pie crust

Makes three 9- or 10-inch pie crusts

2 1/2 level cups all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon salt

1 cup Butter-flavor Crisco shortening

3/4 cup ice water

Sift flour and salt into a mixing bowl. With a pastry cutter, cut half of shortening into the mixture. Then, cut in the rest of the shortening, until it has a few marble-sized chunks. Add the ice water all at once. Do not stir: Instead, pick at the mixture with a fork until it forms a big glob. With your hands, gather into a big ball. Measure out 3/4 cup of the dough.

Dust with flour a pastry cloth and a stocking cover for a rolling pin. Pat the dough lightly into a 5-inch circle about 1/2 inch thick. Roll from center out, first one way, then the other way. By that time it should be almost full size. The less you roll it, the better.

Repeat with the rest of the dough to make two more pie crusts. (Any extra can be used to make shoe soles: cut, roll, rub with butter, sprinkle with cinnamon sugar.)

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The 1981 cookbook "Feliciano Favourites" by the Women's Service League of St. Francisville notes that cushaws grow well in the Feliciano soil, and "was a favorite cold weather dish in the old plantation homes. It was often served with game or pork. We received many similar cushaw recipes."

The recipes were for a casserole of sweetened cushaw, thickened with a little flour. One had a topping of butter or margarine combined with cinnamon and sugar; others were sprinkled with cinnamon or nutmeg.

Amelia "Ba Ba" Davis'

baked cushaw

Makes 10 servings

1 small cushaw

1/4 cup flour

Enough milk to make a paste with flour

2 cups sugar

1 stick margarine, melted

1 egg, beaten

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 teaspoon nutmeg

Cinnamon (optional)

Cube the cushaw; boil until tender. Drain, seed and peel. Mash the pulp. Make a paste of flour and milk. Add it with rest of the ingredients (except cinnamon) to the pulp, and mix well. Place in a buttered baking dish. Sprinkle with cinnamon if desired. Bake in a 350-degree oven about 30 minutes, or until lightly browned on top.

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Serve "pepitas" as a snack, or add to salad or soup for more crunch.

Roasted cushaw

or pumpkin seeds

Scoop seeds into a colander and rinse off pulp. Drain well. Measure seeds by the cup into a mixing bowl. For each cup of seeds, add 1 tablespoon oil and 1/2 teaspoon salt . Mix to coat. If desired, add chili powder, garlic powder, Creole seasoning or other seasoning

Spread in a single layer on a baking sheet and bake at 350 degrees for 30 to 40 minutes, stirring, until light browned.

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