

November/December 2015

Issue 4 | \$5.95

edible HOUSTON

LIVE LOCAL ★ LIVE WELL



**TRADITION &
HERITAGE ISSUE**

PECANS | HERITAGE POULTRY | TAMALES | A SEASON FOR GIVING

ediblehouston.com

Member of Edible Communities

PRECIOUS, PLENTIFUL PECANS

In our hearts as well as on our palates, no nut can compare with the official state nut of Texas, the lordly pecan

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY SUSAN EBERT

The sun has barely breached the horizon when I round the bend and first see the massive tree, its ancient, gnarled branches illuminated by shafts of sunlight. I've come to Washington-on-the-Brazos State Park specifically to see this celebrated specimen, the La Bahía Pecan, to whet my excitement for Texas' impending pecan harvest season, which runs from October through January.

The tree takes its name from the La Bahía Road, an east-west trail through southwestern Louisiana and southeastern Texas that was

known as early as 1690. La Bahía Road crossed the Brazos River near where this tree sprouted in the early 1820s, at the spot where Andrew Robinson operated a ferry service and ranked among the first settlers of what would become Stephen F. Austin's colony at Washington-on-the-Brazos. Remarkably, La Bahía's nearest genetic relative is 900 miles away in Jaumave, Mexico ... oh, the stories this tree could tell! The interpretive sign near the tree posits that perhaps a pecan fell from a saddlebag or wagon of Mexican travelers passing through, but I'll pose a different theory for your consideration in a bit.



Then as now, groves of pecans stretch to the horizon along the Brazos River both to the north and south of me, as they do along many of our state's rivers. Since a pecan tree requires about 200 gallons of water per day throughout most of the year, they thrive in riparian zones, and have since prehistoric times. Native Americans would plant even more seedlings along their riverine migration routes to ensure a future food source, which along with prickly pear tunas and buffalo meat comprised most of their diet from autumn into winter.

Then as now, groves of pecans stretch to the horizon along the Brazos River both to the north and south of me, as they do along many of our state's rivers. Since a pecan tree requires about 200 gallons of water per day throughout most of the year, they thrive in riparian zones, and have since prehistoric times. Native Americans would plant even more seedlings along their riverine migration routes to ensure a future food source, which along with prickly pear tunas and buffalo meat comprised most of their diet from autumn into winter.

By the time the settlers came through, the pecan trees were so plentiful that pioneers felled the heavily laden specimens outright, or would stand on a low branch, cut off all the other branches to strip the nuts, and leave countless trees to die. By the dawn of the 20th century, the pecan faced extirpation in its native Texas soil.

Fortunately for the pecan—and for us—its savior-to-be was already toiling away. Edmond E. Risien, an Englishman who arrived in the Hill Country in 1870, had become fascinated with pecans and devoted his life to upbreeding them. He identified a top-producing tree in San Saba that would become known as the San Saba Mother Pecan, eventually buying the land solely to own that tree. From that tree would come revered varieties such as No. 60, Jersey, Liberty Bond, San Saba Improved, Texas Prolific and the internationally renowned Western Schley. Efforts of growers and conservationists have restored Texas' native pecans to plenitude, and in 2001, the Texas Legislature bestowed it with its designation as the official nut of Texas.

My theory on the La Bahía Pecan? In 1821, Mexico won its War of Independence and wrested "New Spain," as Texas was called, from the Spanish empire. As I ponder La Bahía's origin, I imagine a friendly Franciscan friar roaming the Brazos River valley, unaligned and alone on a savage frontier, offering these sweet delicacies as a universal peace offering to all he meets, thus forging the pecan's reputation for hospitality.

I sure would have, if I were he. Whether showcased in a pecan pie, tucked into sweet rolls redolent with cinnamon, glistening over ice cream in a buttery caramel sauce, twinkling atop a sweet potato casserole or incorporated into a savory pecan-cornbread dressing, pecans are the nut nonpareil when it comes to the holidays. Plus, nothing says "Welcome, guests," better than an omnipresent bowl of sugared and spiced pecans, continuously replenished throughout the season.

Thinking about all of the delightful ways to use pecans as I stroll among the hundreds of nut-laden trees in the state park has me hankering to pick up a few pounds for my favorite pecan recipes. But they won't come from here: Foraging of any kind is prohibited in Texas state parks, as it is in national parks and refuges, and that goes for even picking up nuts off the ground.

"We want the nuts to stay in the parks," says Kevin Good, assistant director for Texas state parks, "as a food source for wildlife and to grow more pecans."

Having known that, I jump in the Jeep for the short drive from Washington-on-the-Brazos to Caldwell to Royalty Pecan Farms, a 500-acre sustainable pecan orchard, where the excitement about the imminent harvest is already building.





clockwise: neighbor's kids love pecans; growing in clusters; La Bahia pecan tree

PECANS

Pecans rank highest among nuts in antioxidants, and may delay aging and decrease the risk of Alzheimer's disease, cancer and heart attack risk. Store pecans in an airtight container, in the refrigerator for up to six months or in the freezer for up to two years. The darker the nut, the older it is: Some supermarket pecans may be three to five years old, and dark brown in color. Fresh orchard pecans will be honeyed gold in color.

About Royalty Farms: Royalty Farms kicks off its 2015 harvest with a free wine tasting on October 3, and orchard tours every Saturday in October. The annual Pecan Harvest Festival and Pie-Baking Contest takes place on November 14. Visit royaltypescans.com or call 800-694-8362. To locate other Texas pecan growers, visit the Texas Pecan Growers Association at tpga.org or call 979-846-3285.

Zach Stein, a Royalty Farms employee who's also a biology student at Texas A&M, pulls up on a tractor hauling a long bench-seated wagon, and I join the crowd piling in for the modestly priced (\$3) orchard tour. Stein's a Katy native, he tells me, who served in the Navy after high school. He's obviously passionate about pecans. He's not the first here to become mesmerized by these majestic trees.

"Owner Mike Adams fell in love with pecans and bought this land in 1985," Stein tells me. "He still comes out here almost every day."

Five hundred acres may sound small by Texas standards, but Royalty Farms now has 16,000 producing trees from which they harvested 600,000 pounds of pecans in 2014. "We have seven of the 48 pecan varieties grown in Texas," says Stein. "We grow Desirable, GraCrop, Kiowa, Cheyenne, Choctaw, Wichita and Pawnee—varieties selected for their flavor, production and suitability to our soil and climate."

Following the tour, the wagon disgorges us into the orchard shop, where shelves brim with pies, tarts, breads, pralines, coffee and other pecan confections including their own pecan-orchard honey. Royalty Farms employs a full-time chef on premises, and even hosts orchard weddings and other formal events.

Oh, and the pecans? They're everywhere: in barrels, boxes and bags; in the shell, cracked or in halves or pieces. As I choose my treasures, I can barely wait to prepare the treats these plump, amber-hued jewels will grace.

Susan L. Ebert contributes to *Texas Sporting Journal* and *Sporting Classics* magazines, and writes about wild game and fish cookery for the *Houston Chronicle*. Her book *Field to Table: Hunting, Fishing, Foraging & Gardening* will be published by Rizzoli New York in March 2016.





Sweet Sorghum Bourbon-Pecan Pie

Serves 8–10

For the dough:

- ¼ cup leaf lard, finely diced
- ¼ cup unsalted butter, finely diced
- 1½ cups organic all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon sea salt

For the filling:

- 5 eggs
- 1 cup organic cane sugar
- 2 tablespoons good Kentucky bourbon (Wild Turkey and Four Roses are non-GMO)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup sorghum cane syrup
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- ½ cup pecans, coarsely chopped
- 1 cup whole pecans, for decorating the top

Make the dough: Place the lard and butter in a bowl and chill in the freezer for at least 30 minutes.

Measure the flour and salt into the bowl of a food processor fitted with a metal blade. Add the chilled lard and butter using a spatula or spoon.

Do not touch the fat, as you want to keep it as cold as possible. Pulse six or more times, until the dough forms pea-sized lumps.

Transfer the mixture to a bowl, make a well in the center and add ice water 1 tablespoon at a time, stirring with a Danish dough whisk or a fork, until the dough just comes together. With lightly floured hands, quickly press the dough into a disk, wrap with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.

Just before making the pie filling, roll the dough out on a lightly floured pastry cloth to a 12-inch circle and transfer to a 9-inch glass pie dish, leaving a 1-inch overhang. Decoratively crimp the edges of the dough. Preheat oven to 350° F.

Make the filling: In a stand mixer, beat the eggs on low speed, slowly sprinkling in the sugar 1 tablespoon at a time to fully incorporate. With the mixer still on low, add the bourbon and salt, then drizzle in the sorghum and melted butter.

Remove the bowl from the stand and stir in the chopped pecans. Pour into the piecrust and arrange whole pecans on top.

Bake for 30 minutes, then cover the outer edge of the piecrust with a crust protector or foil to keep it from burning. Bake for another 15 minutes, or until the center barely jiggles when the pie is shaken gently. (The pie will set up more as it cools.)

Sassy Spiced Pecans

Super-fresh pecans and spices in this simple recipe take a perennial Southern favorite from the ordinary to the sublime. Have these treats out on the counter in a pretty bowl when guests arrive, or package them in decorated half-pint jars for a pretty—and much appreciated—hostess gift.

Yields 3 cups

INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups pecan halves
- 1 cup coarse organic cane sugar
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 1 teaspoon chipotle chile powder
- 1 teaspoon ground Saigon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon Mexican vanilla

For the topping:

- 2 tablespoons coarse organic cane sugar
- 1/8 teaspoon coarsely sea salt
- 1/8 teaspoon chipotle chile powder
- 1/8 teaspoon ground Saigon cinnamon

Preheat oven to 325° F.

Spread the pecans in a single layer on a baking sheet, and bake for 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, combine the sugar, salt, chile powder and cinnamon in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat and add 1/4 cup water. Bring to a boil without stirring, and boil until the mixture reaches the soft-ball stage (a drop of the syrup forms a soft ball when dropped in cold water, usually at 235° F). Remove from the heat, stir in the vanilla and let cool for 2 to 3 minutes.

In a separate bowl, stir together all the topping ingredients.

As soon as the pecans come out of the oven, pour them into the saucepan with the sugar-cinnamon mixture and stir continuously until the sugar mixture begins to lighten in color and thickens slightly. Pour the pecans back onto the baking sheet, spreading them evenly, and sprinkle with the topping. Using your fingers or a rubber spatula, separate the pecans, tossing gently to coat them completely with the topping. Let cool to room temperature, and store in an airtight container in a cool, dry place for up to 6 months.



RICE UNIVERSITY FARMERS MARKET

5600 GREENBRIAR DR., ENTRANCE 13B
TUESDAYS FROM 3:30 P.M. - 6:30 P.M.



RICEFARMERSMARKET



RICEFARMERSMKT