

Chapter 1

Sweet Pecan Pie

If God had intended us to follow recipes, He
wouldn't have given us grandmothers.
—Linda Henley

Way back when I was a young man in my early twenties, I was strolling through a casino in Las Vegas—not a fancy, high roller type of casino but the type that those of us on budget might visit. The blackjack table closest to the walkway by the elevators was packed with an eclectic combination of folks, all seeking the thrill of beating the house and then sharing their exploits and good fortune with their friends or anyone else who would lend an ear.

I am not sure, but I think the minimum bet was \$5 a hand, so this really was not the place where the professionals hung out, which was quite evident by the way this group played—no wonder the casinos make so much money. As I watched in amusement for just a moment, an entourage of loud folks who'd had a few too many walked by, and in a bit of spontaneity, one of the guys muscled his way onto the one empty seat at the table, pulled out a wad of cash, and decided to play. He never did ask for chips, just put a hundred-dollar bill (or a few of

them) on the table and in a loud voice bantered with the dealer about getting the “right” cards.

Here, he was clearly the high roller, a position he seemed to relish, and in a distinct southern accent would yell, “Sweet pecan pie!” in a long, drawn out way—think “Sweeeeet pee-con piiiie!” every time he won a hand, followed by high fives and cheers from his new groupies at the table as well as his friends who loved playing vicariously through him.

There were more than a few “Sweet pecan pies” thrown around in the fifteen minutes or so he lasted; and the image of him, a bit tipsy and sweaty from all the excitement, using this obscure phrase to celebrate was quite the show. It’s a picture or video in my head, to be precise, that has stuck with me for many years, so much so that I am still known to this day for yelling my own version of “Sweet pecan pie”—thankfully, not at a blackjack table (I am not a big gambler, never have been) but rather when I am about to take a few turns through the powder, head down the mountain on a bike, or embark on some other type of adrenaline-filled activity.

Despite its strange and somewhat unhealthy origin, the phrase “Sweet pecan pie” said out loud has become a signature saying when me and my family are about to do something fun, much to the embarrassment of my kids.

Unfortunately for the gentleman who helped serve as a catalyst for this now time-tested Dusebout family tradition, each of his “Sweet pecan pie” moments was offset by several “busts” or dealer wins, and his day after all that excitement ended rather quickly, the same way it does for most people who visit Las Vegas to try their luck:

With a lot less money than when he got there.

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Most of the family-friendly movie *Cheaper by the Dozen 2* takes place at a fictional lake in upstate Wisconsin and revolves around two large families and the childish competition between the two patriarchs, who

end up alienating their wives and kids in the process of one-upping each other. It is a silly, feel-good movie that does make several valid points about family and parenting, namely that there are no perfect parents and that us parents need to let our kids pursue their dreams, not ours.

Early in the movie, knowing that some of his children were now young adults and time together was becoming more and more sparse, one of the dads, Tom Baker, played perfectly by Steve Martin, persuades all twelve of his kids (that’s right twelve kids) for one last trip to the lake as part of a Baker family tradition. Watching him beg, bribe, and guilt all of his kids to show up is both a reminder of how far many of us parents will go to keep our families together and a nod to the importance of creating and celebrating traditions.

These family traditions take on many shapes and sizes: a special vacation spot like the Baker’s lake house, a board game that is played over and over, a certain meal that is served or a movie that is watched during the holidays, or even some ridiculous saying that gets repeated enough that it becomes folklore and is passed down through generations.

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Pecan pie’s beginnings can certainly be debated the way most things can be. Some say it was founded in New Orleans by the French. Others say a recipe was first published in 1898 in a church charity cookbook in St. Louis. Zac Brown Band’s hit song “Chicken Fried” alludes to pecan pie being part of Georgian culture.

But regardless of its founding, there is little question as to where it has its roots. Travel through rural Texas and it would be hard to find a diner or restaurant where they didn’t serve the world’s “best” pecan pie. Pecan pie is so much a part of the Lone Star State that in 2013 they named pecan pie the state’s official pie and have now adopted the pecan tree as its official state tree as well.

As one might imagine, growing up in a small town in southern Texas, my wife's grandmother, Myrtle, learned to make her family's version of pecan pie at a young age and then brought the recipe with her when she and her husband went west to build a life in Los Angeles.

The beauty of this tradition, like most traditions, is in the excitement and expectation that comes with it. Each year, right around Halloween, everyone in the family would begin to ask when Myrtle's famous pecan pie was coming:

"Do we get it for both Thanksgiving and Christmas?"

"How many will she make?"

And then in time, as she got older, everyone began with the inevitable questions about how exactly she made it so darn good. In her case, one could watch and participate, but Myrtle was old-school and held on to her position that no two pecan pies were the same and that measuring the ingredients took the fun out of it: "Just put in a little of this, a splash of that, and it all works out." This casual style, lacking any formality at all, frustrated the literal folks in our family to no end. But when we really get down to it, Myrtle's way of making each pie original, changing it up and making it a little bit different each time, and encouraging others to do the same is actually a pretty good metaphor for life in general.

If we are honest with ourselves, we are all looking for the perfect slice of the pie, a life full of joy, purpose, and adventure. But how do we get there? Can we just do the same thing over and over again? Can we just follow someone else's formula or copy someone else's recipe?

Here's the thing. We are all different. We look different, think different, and have different gifts, attributes, and deficiencies. Shoot, we ourselves are different at different times in our life. So, by all means, let us learn from others to better understand the ingredients that make life taste so good. But let us also get after it in our own way, in a way that is uniquely us, and let's make it an adventure full of movement, full of something new.

In pecan pie terms, let's all find our own recipe and go for it.