

THE Life OF Pie

For generations of students and alumni, there's nothing quite like a slice of UW-Madison's fudge-bottom pie.

But who introduced the dessert on campus is a riddle wrapped in a graham-cracker crust.

BY MICHAEL PENN MA'97

Around the time of UW-Madison's 150th birthday, I helped edit a booklet that commemorated 150 great achievements of the university, a happy little celebration of the things that make Wisconsin unique. We included a brief passage about Carson Gulley, the gifted and ebullient head chef in UW's residence halls for twenty-seven years and the only person of color for whom a campus building is named. The item was sixty-five words, barely a paragraph long. But in the end, only three mattered: *fudge-bottom pie*.

We wrote that among Gulley's contributions to campus was a "lip-smacking fudge-bottom pie," an innocuous-seeming link between cook and cookery that we'd seen made in many places, including Gulley's own spiral-bound recipe book. We might have provoked less controversy if we had said Gulley invented Bucky Badger.

The publication had been out only a few days when we received a missive from Ted Crabb '54, director of the Wisconsin Union from 1968 to 2001, who said that we'd printed a mistake. Gulley "had nothing to do with fudge-bottom pie," Crabb wrote. "Fudge-bottom pie is a Union dessert item." He was polite about it, yet insistent that we "set the record straight" about a valued piece of the Union's heritage.

What we learned is that when the subject is fudge-bottom pie — the decadent custard-over-chocolate creation that

has been served on campus since Harry Truman was president — everyone wants a piece. The dessert may not have the edificial permanence of Bascom Hall or Camp Randall Stadium, but it represents ground no less hallowed. Generations of alumni cherish it, and so, too, do the two campus organizations that lay claim to it.

Both the Union and the Division of University Housing serve their own version of the pie — and their own version of its origins. One story says that the pie was invented at Memorial Union, where it's been served every day since at least the 1950s. A competing theory gives credit to Gulley, whose name graces the pie served by Housing's kitchens, as well as the cafeteria building where students eat it.

Past attempts to reconcile these histories have tended to lead to frustrated ends — and a lot of heated debate over a chilled pie. But seeking truth, reconciliation, and a reason to charge pie to the *On Wisconsin* expense account, I decided to dig deeper into

the layers of this campus legend. The idea was to get to the bottom of fudge-bottom pie, no matter how many calorie-laden forkfuls it took.

When it comes to UW-Madison traditions, fudge-bottom pie is older than Bucky Badger, the Fifth Quarter, or the Terrace sunburst chair, and it has fueled more all-nighters than any mochaccino or latte on the block. Recipes vary, but the basic technique is deceptively simple: pour a layer of dark chocolate onto a graham-cracker crust, and then pour vanilla-flavored custard onto that. Top with whipped cream and shaved chocolate, and you've got yourself a slice of campus history.

Skillwise or tastewise, it's not quite *crème brûlée*. But it would be hard to imagine another dish so indelibly intermeshed with the fabric of campus life. At the Memorial Union's Lakefront on Langdon cafeteria, fudge-bottom pie is the only dessert that earns a regular shelf spot; the others all wait out a three-week rotation. It also appears frequently in the Rathskeller and on the menus of catered dinners, and all that demand keeps Union bakers busy. For the year between the May 2004 and 2005 commencement ceremonies, they cranked out 1,776 pies — nearly five a day — using 172 pounds of chocolate, 521 pounds of granulated sugar, 341 pounds of confectioner's sugar, 333 quarts of heavy cream, and 444 pounds of butter and margarine.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JULIA SONMI HEGGLUND

In residence-hall cafeterias, the pie appears less often, typically about once a month. But that's only because they don't serve alumni, who are more maniacal about their pie than students. Go where the old-timers eat — comfort-food spots such as Dotty Dumpling's Dowry or the Stamm House — and some version of it

is on the menu. Crash just about any catered event on campus, and you'll discover that fudge-bottom pie is more ubiquitous than rubber chicken. For last year's football banquet, for instance, the athletic department ordered 140.

Food managers have come to learn that if alumni are present, fudge-bottom

pie had better be, as well. "We receive irate calls from alumni when they are back in the building and can't get a piece of fudge-bottom pie," says Julie Vincent '74, MS'79, the Union's assistant director of food and retail services. In 1998, the Union failed to serve the pie during a meeting of its own trustees, and they're still hearing about it. Barbara Manley '52, a trustee from Greenwich, Connecticut, complained to a local newspaper reporter that she looked forward to a few special things when returning to campus, "and fudge-bottom pie is one of them."

Vincent, who is not herself a rabid fan of the pie, sometimes wonders why it gained such mythical status. "We do some other extraordinary desserts, and I think, why don't any of them get that kind of attention?" she says. "We have an espresso chocolate torte that is amazing." But the foodie in her understands that the devotion to fudge-bottom pie is about more than just a pleasing combination of ingredients.

"It's the nostalgia," she says. "The foods we love often represent the traditions we grew up with or the things we grew accustomed to at a particular point in our lives. For a lot of alumni, fudge-bottom pie is one of those traditions."

There is disagreement, however, about whose traditions the pie represents. Both the Union and Housing have been making the dessert for decades, and each claims to be first on the fudge-bottom scene. It's a mostly good-natured contest of two campus institutions — the UW's living room and its bedroom — that often compete on the same turf. But pie seems a particular point of pride for both.

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Paul Evans. “We don’t compare hot dogs or burgers or brats. It’s just the pies we talk about.”

For Housing, the story of fudge-bottom pie is tied to the legacy of Carson Gulley, one of its most distinguished former employees. (See Flashback, page 66.) As head chef of the Van Hise refectory, now known as Carson Gulley Commons, Gulley built a legend every bit as rich as the pie linked to his name.

Born in Arkansas in 1897, Gulley taught himself cooking while working a series of kitchen jobs throughout the South and Midwest before landing at UW-Madison in 1927. He was quickly promoted to head chef, a role he held until 1954. In the kitchen, Gulley was a master of detail, dabbling and fussing over a string of innovative creations, including one of the first methods for preparing boneless turkey breasts. George Washington Carver, who once hired Gulley to lead a dietetics course at Tuskegee Institute, described him as “an artist ... dealing with the finest of all arts.” He was also a friend and confidant to several generations of students, who revered him for his warmth and wisdom. As an African-American civil-service worker on a largely white campus, he achieved an iconic status usually attained by only the most luminary of professors.

Many say that Gulley’s masterpiece was his fudge-bottom pie, a dessert that he apparently — more on that in a moment — served to students in the Van Hise dining hall. His recipe, published in his 1956 cookbook, *Seasoning Secrets*, is widely cited as the progenitor of the various iterations served in Madison today, including the one Housing proudly calls “Carson Gulley’s Fudge-Bottom Pie.” The name honors the man as much as the creation, says Evans. But he adds, “I always

liked the idea that this was his pie.”

The problem is that the pie Housing serves today isn’t much like the one yielded by Gulley’s recipe. Gulley used a chocolate-flavored custard to form the pie’s bottom layer, but current versions call for a denser base of pure dark chocolate. “It’s a different kind of pie,” says Rheta McCutchin ’56, who worked as Housing’s food service director for thirty-six years before retiring in 1994. She says that Gulley’s creation is closer to a traditional black-bottom pie, a Southern dessert that is often made with layers of chocolate- and rum-flavored custard.

Housing’s current version bears more resemblance to the pie served by the Union. And there’s good reason for the similarity, says McCutchin: she stole the Union’s recipe.

Although McCutchin inherited Gulley’s recipe book when she took over the residence hall kitchens in 1958, she says the Union’s version of fudge-bottom pie was growing popular among students, and many wanted something like it served in the campus dining halls. But the Union’s recipe was then — as it is today — a well-guarded secret.

“The mystery was the chocolate,” says McCutchin. She couldn’t quite match the Union’s dusky bottom layer until the early 1960s, when an employee familiar with the Union’s method taught her how they did it. Housing has essentially followed that formula ever since, and its pie remains similar to — although not the same as — the one served at Memorial Union.

That fact would seem to affirm a Union heritage for at least the modern version of fudge-bottom pie. But the pie story down on Langdon Street is only somewhat less fudgy.

Ted Crabb says that the pie was the work of two Union chefs, Lewis Marston ’32 and Maurice Coombs, who introduced it at the Union in the 1940s. He cites conversations with Paul Cleary ’55, who began a job in the Union dish room as a high school student in 1944 and spent twenty-five years on the Union’s food management staff. According to Cleary, who died in 2004, Marston already had the recipe when he joined the Union as food production manager in 1940. With his head chef Coombs, he perfected the pie and put it on the Union menu sometime around 1945.

Marston left that same year, eventually landing in Washington, D.C., as

head chef for the U.S. Senate cafeteria. Coombs, who helped make the Union bakery one of the city's best, succeeded Marston as food production manager. "They were very well-known for making all kinds of pies," says Rose Edwards '41, who joined the Union food staff in 1947. She confirms that fudge-bottom pie was already in the mix by the time she arrived. Coombs is also responsible for establishing fudge-bottom pie off campus, putting it on the menu of the Simon House, a Madison restaurant he helped open in 1952.

It isn't known, however, whether Gulley's chocolate-flavored-custard version predates the Union pie, or if he had any influence on its creation. As a native Arkansan, Gulley may have been acquainted with the Southern tradition of black-bottom pie, but history reveals little about when he began making it in Madison. He featured a black-bottom pie recipe on the Cooking School of the Air radio program in December 1952, and his cookbook, published four years later, includes black-bottom and fudge-bottom pie recipes, both of which use the twin-custard method. A few alumni have told me that they recall eating Gulley's pie as early as the 1930s, but their recollections are hazy.

"It's pretty difficult, after all these years, to try to remember when you first had a pie," says Newell Smith '41, who directed Housing from 1955 to 1983 and believes he may have had the pie as a student in the 1930s. "As I recall, nobody paid too much attention to it, other than to say it was a good pie."

Traditions don't begin as traditions, and so it should not surprise that the first campus fudge-bottom pie was not met with fanfare and a team of archivists. It seems to be one of the



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givens of life at UW-Madison, just part of the way things are around here. People don't ask why Bascom Hill has a statue of Abe Lincoln, a Kentuckian by birth with no obvious connection to Wisconsin. It is just there, and it always has been there, at least for our lifetimes.

We know that fudge-bottom pie has not always been the dessert of choice on campus. In the Union's first quarter-century, people swore by its chocolate nougat cake, which is listed in a 1953 brochure as the Union's most popular dessert. Crabb says fudge-bottom pie was "coming on strong" during his student days in the early 1950s, and now nobody remembers nougat cake.

No one is sure what precipitated the fudge-bottom boom. Catherine Tripalin Murray, a Madison native and author of

four cookbooks, believes it had something to do with the pie's exotic appeal in an era of apple and banana cream. "This was a recipe so different from any pie we grew up eating that we were in awe of what it looked like and how it tasted," she says.

Yet it may be that fudge-bottom pie was never as popular in reality as it is in the memories of a certain generation of alumni. Sentimentality is a significant part of food: ask anyone who has gone out of their way to find an old favorite burger joint or to have Babcock Hall ice cream shipped to their homes. "Whatever you remember about campus — whether it's Observatory Hill, the Terrace, Bascom Hall, or fudge-bottom pie — those things take on greater significance in your mind after you leave," says Crabb.

To alumni, a slice of fudge-bottom pie carries more than a rich combination of flavors. It tastes like the old days, hearkening memories of the happy indulgences of college, of people and places fondly stored in the scrapbooks of our minds. Its tradition is as much about where you ate the pie and with whom you ate it as it is the pie itself.

The pie's contested history, too, is part of its intrigue. As Paul Evans says, "Maybe it's better not to know. If nobody can really claim it, we can continue this banter about who was first and whose pie is better." We're left with a legacy that is like the pie itself: it is light and airy on top, but beneath lies a murkier layer thick with myth and folklore. And everyone knows the bottom is the most delicious part. 🍰

Senior editor Michael Penn and the *On Wisconsin* staff participated in a side-by-side taste test of the UW's two fudge-bottom pies. To see the results and to share your own memories of the pie, visit uwalumni.com/onwisconsin.