

Pennsylvania Pie Fight: State Cracks Down on Baked Goods

Inspector Nabs Homemade Desserts At St. Cecilia Church's Lenten Fish Fry

By KRIS MAHER

ROCHESTER, Pa. -- On the first Friday of Lent, an elderly female parishioner of St. Cecilia Catholic Church began unwrapping pies at the church. That's when the trouble started. A state inspector, there for an annual checkup on the church's kitchen, spied the desserts. After it was determined that the pies were home-baked, the inspector decreed they couldn't be sold.

"Everyone was devastated," says Josie Reed, a 69-year-old former teacher known for her pumpkin and berry pies.

Sold for \$1 a slice, homemade pies have always been part of the Lenten fish-fry dinners at St. Cecilia's, located in this tiny city near Pittsburgh. Similar dinners are held in church basements and other venues across the country this time of year.

The problem is the pies are illegal in Pennsylvania. Under the state's food-safety code, facilities that provide food at four or more events in a year require at least a temporary eating and drinking license, and food has to be prepared in a state-inspected kitchen. Many churches have six fish fries a year, on Fridays during Lent. St. Cecilia's has always complied with having its kitchen licensed, so food made there is fine to serve. But homemade goods don't make the cut.

The disappearance of Mary Pratte's coconut-cream pie, Louise Humbert's raisin pie and Marge Murtha's "farm apple" pie from the fish-fry fund-raisers sparked an uproar that spread far beyond the small parish. The local paper dubbed it "piegate," and a nearby bakery donated pies to the church to help fill the gap at the dessert table. There are reports of other churches continuing to sell contraband pastries. Legislation to overturn the baked-goods ban is being discussed.

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture declined to make the inspector available for comment. Bill Chirdon, the department's food-safety director, says it has cited only one church in the past three years for unsanitary conditions. In that case, he says the church held outside picnics every week and let food sit in the sun and didn't respond to changes recommended by food-safety inspectors.

Mr. Chirdon says the pie episode has shed light on an often-overlooked aspect of food safety. "I've gotten a lot of letters from churches that are tattletaling on churches down the street that aren't licensed and don't meet standards for food service."

Fish fries gained popularity from the requirement that Catholics abstain from eating meat on Fridays during Lent, a period of 40 days of prayer and penitence that represents the time that Jesus Christ spent in the desert fasting before beginning his public ministry. The dinners are also a way for parishioners to bond as Easter approaches.

But the meals are a vital fund-raising tool, too. The events provide income to fix leaky roofs and to subsidize tuition at parochial schools, for example. "It's a way of helping to raise funds with a minimum number of volunteers," says Rev. Ronald P. Lengwin, a spokesman for the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh diocese, which includes St. Cecilia's, projects overall revenue to be flat this year, while costs are up. In March, the diocese said it would close four elementary schools at the end of this school year.

Meanwhile, home-baked pies continue to be sold at many other fish fries. At a fry in the school cafeteria of a Catholic church on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, the fish-fry director said they never bake pies at the school. Instead, parishioners bake pies, cookies, cakes and cupcakes and bring them in. Donations like those help keep costs down, he says. As for the regulation requiring goods to be baked on the premises, he said, "We're ignoring it. Don't tell anyone."

The ruckus at St. Cecilia's could lead to changes in Pennsylvania state law. State Sen. Elder Vogel Jr. has drafted legislation aimed at allowing nonprofits, including churches, to serve food prepared at home. That would cover fish fries held during Lent. "Once again, you've got the heavy hand of government coming in," he says. "These ladies bake pies, out of the goodness of their hearts."

Sen. Vogel, who sits on the state legislature's agriculture committee, says state officials seem willing to change the law. "They have more work on their hands than going after little old ladies baking pies."

The inspector's warning to St. Cecilia's carried no fine. But the inspector has raised some hackles by telling the women that the state would allow them to bake pies for sale in their own kitchens, if they paid \$35 to have them inspected as well.

"Well, that's just ridiculous," says Ms. Humbert, 73, one of the parish bakers. She has been bringing raisin pies to the church for more than a decade and says she thought the women's kitchens "are probably a lot cleaner than some restaurants," but might not meet "nitpicky" requirements.

Ms. Pratte, 88, has been attending St. Cecilia's since she was a girl. She missed a step and spent two and a half weeks in the hospital earlier this year. She said it would be "kind of hard" to get to the church to do any baking. "I'd rather just make them at home," she says of her coconut-cream pies. Others say it's difficult to bake good pies in a strange oven.

Thanks to the publicity caused by the crackdown, the St. Cecilia's fish fries attracted more visitors than ever before. The church has cleared about \$3,500 on each fry, according to Father Michael Greb, pastor of the church, who notes that regular donations are down about 10%. The fish fries are the church's biggest fund-raiser of the year.

Fish dinners, either baked or fried, cost \$8.50 and are served with french fries, baked potato or two pierogis. Cole slaw costs 75 cents. The church typically goes through several hundred pounds of haddock and cod per fry and at least 20 pies.

On a recent Friday, the smell of frying fish wafted from a downstairs kitchen and dining hall to the upstairs foyer with its nearly life-size crucifix. Father Greb wore a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap and jacket over his black clerical clothes and sat in the brightly lit hall at a table with parishioners.

Some people had suggested that the women put their homemade pies in boxes to make them appear they had been purchased. But everyone insisted they hadn't.

Diane Rotuna, 62, said she donated two apple pies that she purchased from a local grocery chain, "just to keep it legit."

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