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*Naples:
The Grape Pie
Capital of the World*



The Queen of Grape Pies

Irene Bouchard launched Naples' grape pie industry

By TARA MORGAN

The Naples Record

Helen of Troy's face may have launched a thousand ships, but Irene Bouchard's Concord grape pie launched an industry. Today, nearly 40 years after the Queen of Grape Pies sold her first dessert to The Redwood Restaurant, Naples is known as the grape pie capital of the world, and Bouchard deserves a lot of the credit.

Since 1965, she has been using the modest kitchen in her 150-year-old home on Cohocton Street to bake homemade Concord grape pies. The culinary attention given to each pie, and her commitment to using only the best quality ingredients has made Bouchard's grape pies known nationwide.

Bouchard, 86, began her baking career in the late 1950s. After working in the Widmer Wine Cellars bottling department for a few years, she decided to quit her job at the winery and open a home-based bakery in the fall of 1959. The rest, as the cliché goes, is history. Since that day, Bouchard has baked – and sold – about 300,000 grape pies.

"I started my little bake shop, and baked various desserts for local customers," Bouchard recalled. "I had always loved to bake, so I enjoyed having my own shop very much. Then in about 1960, The Redwood Restaurant was built across the street from my home.

"In 1965, Al Hodges, who owned The Redwood, had always been looking for something new to serve at his restaurant to attract new customers," Bouchard remembered. "And one day he came up with making grape pies. Mr. Hodges then started serving this unusual dessert. Now, the grapes are always harvested in September and October, and Mr. Hodges made these pies and served them to customers for six to eight weeks each fall.

"The demand increased to the point that customers were asking to buy a whole pie to take home. He could hardly keep up with his orders (in the late 1960s). That is when he asked me if I would be interested in baking grape pies to sell to his customers," said Bouchard. "People loved the pies, and there were no other places making grape pies."

Bouchard decided to help Hodges keep up with the grape pie frenzy. She acquired a grape pie recipe from a close friend of her mother's and was ready to bake. Bouchard has since tai-



Irene Bouchard...

She started making grape pies for The Redwood in 1965

lored the recipe to make for a creamier texture, replacing flour, often used as a thickener, with tapioca.

"Well, I didn't realize what an endeavor this would be for me," Bouchard said with a smile. "The first year we prepared about two bushels of grapes and made 50 pies; every year the demand increased, until in the 1980s, I was making thousands of pies each fall."

Preparing the grapes is a multi-step, time-consuming process.

"You have to take each grape and take it off the stem," explained Bouchard, who at her baking peak has used as many as two-and-a-quarter tons of grapes in one season. "Then you pinch each individual grape to get the pulp out. You then separate the pulp from the skins. Then you boil the pulp for about four or five minutes, and after that you put it through a colander and then pour it over the skins. There is no other way to get all the seeds out, because you want to have the whole grape in the pie."

For years, Bouchard, who also makes her own pie crusts, supplied

The Redwood with pies, as well as to customers of her in-home bakery. She also baked all the desserts for the Naples Hotel during the late 1990s, when her daughter and son-in-law, Rick and Linda Mahusen, owned the establishment.

"I baked all kinds of things there," Bouchard said. "I baked pies, cakes, rolls, all types of muffins, and biscuits too."

The longtime baker also enjoyed making pies just for her husband, Donald. They were married for 64 years, prior to Donald's passing in July.

"Don's favorite pies were custard and apple," said Bouchard, a mother of two, a grandmother, and also a great-grandmother.

However, when baking for her grape pie fans, Bouchard's commitment to using Concord grapes is tried and true.

"I tried other kinds of grapes a couple of times," said Bouchard, who said she obtains all her Concord grapes from Jerome's farm, "but they were never nearly as good as the Concord grapes."

Her baking prowess, especially when it comes to grape pies, has landed Bouchard on a great many television programs over the years, as well as on the pages of many publications. She has

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been the focus of articles in regional publications such as the *Democrat & Chronicle*, the *Finger Lakes Times*, *Life in the Finger Lakes*, and, of course, *The Naples Record*, as well as in many national and international gourmet cooking magazines, including *Saveur*. In television and print appearances, Bouchard has been referred to as the Grape Pie Queen, the High Queen of Naples, the Pie Wizard and the Pie Lady.



Irene Bouchard

"I take it all as a compliment," Bouchard said with a smile. "I think it's great. I'm glad that people enjoy my pies so much. It's a wonderful thing to be known for. Pies make people happy. And I have always enjoyed the customers and meeting new people. People come back year after year for my pies. It's an honor."

And the accolades continue. Bouchard will be visited by the Cable Food Network on Friday, where she'll be filmed in the kitchen where all her pies have been made and then baked in one of her two ovens. Her story will be an important element in the show being put together for the Food Network series *Great American Festivals*.

Bouchard has chronicled her life and grape adventures in an aptly titled, as-yet unpublished book, *The Grape Pie Queen*.

"I mainly wrote it because I wanted my family to have a record of it all," said Bouchard, "It's been quite an adventure!"

While Bouchard no longer handles orders in the thousands per season, she still fulfills custom orders and will most definitely have pies available at her home at 9 Cohocton Street during the Naples Grape Festival. Just look for the large grape flag and the bunch of "grape" balloons across from the Redwood. Bouchard charges \$9 per pie. For individual orders, call Bouchard two days in advance of when the pies are needed. She may be reached at (585) 374-2068.

IRENE'S CONCORD GRAPE PIE RECIPE

- For a 9-inch pie (she suggests a metal pie plate)
- 5 1/2 cups Concord grapes
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon tapioca
- butter (for dotting pie at end)
- milk (for brushing over pie crust at end)

Remove and save skins from grapes (pinch grape at end opposite stem so fruit pops out). Put pulp into saucepan without water and bring to a rolling boil. Boil for 5 minutes. While hot, rub through a strainer to remove seeds. Mix strained pulp with skins and let stand for five hours (This colors the pulp and makes it pretty). Mix sugar and tapioca into grapes and pour into pie pastry. Dot with butter; cover with top crust (Irene uses a "floating" top crust—a circle of dough slightly smaller than the top of the pie—because it is easier than crimping top and bottom together and it also makes a pretty purple ring around the edge.) and brush with milk. Bake at 400 degrees for 20 minutes, turn down oven to 350 degrees, and bake for 15 to 20 minutes more or until crust is golden brown.