

Experiencing an Old Favorite—Sugar Cream Pie

A neon sign boasting "Fresh Homemade Pie" acts as a beacon in downtown Huntington, Indiana. Nick's Kitchen is well known for its sale of the first original hand-breaded pork tenderloin sandwich, peddled from a portable food wagon more than one hundred years ago. The sandwich became so popular that the owner, Nick Freienstein, built a restaurant on that very street.

My first encounter with Nick's Kitchen was about 20 years ago, shortly after my family moved from Wisconsin (aka "up north"). I was in pursuit of pie.

I had driven past the diner with its glowing sign many times before curiosity finally got the best of me. The diner was packed, and I was lucky to find a table—even the soda counter was full. The place was buzzing with locals who swapped gossip and the news of the day while businesspeople skimmed the daily paper. The walls were dressed with photographs of local and national history that had taken place in town—some of it even happening in the restaurant! I became so absorbed with my surroundings that I hadn't even glanced at the menu before I heard my waitress asking, "What'll you have, Honey?"

The voice was friendly but startled me just the same. I asked about the pie selection, only to be overwhelmed by offerings of cherry, apple, peach, chocolate, and sugar cream.

"Sugar cream?" I asked, "That's a pie? I've never heard of it!"

"It's an Indiana favorite," she exclaimed. "They're made here fresh each morning, but we go through lots of pie. So, if you're ordering lunch you'll want to order your pie now, too, because the kind you want might be gone." Not wanting to miss my chance, I ordered a slice of sugar cream right away, and warmed up, per suggestion of the waitress. I was not certain about anything I had just ordered.

A few minutes later the pie was placed before me. It had a thick, creamy texture and a light dusting of sugar and cinnamon over the milk-white filling. My fork cut through it like butter, and each bite melted in my mouth. It tasted undoubtedly sweet, but not overly sugary. The flavor was rich and smooth—and uniquely different from any other pie I had ever experienced!

Sugar cream pie has since been named the official state pie of Indiana. The simple recipe originated from the South Union Shakers in 1800s Kentucky. The pie was made from a few staple ingredients, including cream, flour and sugar. Those early pies used brown sugar, which differs from the Hoosier all-white-sugar version. The recipe traveled north from Kentucky to Ohio and finally Indiana. In the 1900s, the Wickersham family began mass producing the pies in Winchester, Indiana, making nearly two dozen sugar cream pies daily. Now, Wick's Pies can make more than ten thousand pies during one eight-hour shift.

Tourists seek out Nick's Kitchen for the classic Hoosier experience—a giant, breaded tenderloin sandwich and a piece of Indiana's sugar cream pie. After 20 years, it tastes like home.