



PECANS

RECIPES & HISTORY OF AN AMERICAN NUT

BARBARA BRYANT & BETSY FENTRESS
RECIPES BY REBECCA LANG

WITH 60 RECIPES FROM SALADS & SAUCES TO SNACKS & SMOOTHIES



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WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM CELEBRATED CHEFS AND FOOD WRITERS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT HOLMES

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PREFACE

I love pecans. Fresh. Roasted. Chopped. Whole. For as long as I can remember, pecans have been a part of our family kitchen. My mother didn't enjoy cooking, but she did it anyway, and our family of seven thrived on her nutritious meals. Everything tasted better with pecans, according to her, so I grew up loving them—not because she told me to but because she was right. My favorite memory of my mother's cooking is her pecan waffles—the perfect marriage of flavor and crispiness. Hers were smothered in *real* maple syrup and mine with homemade jam, a squeeze of lemon, or nothing at all. As the waffles sizzled on the griddle, the whole kitchen smelled heavenly.

Most people have pecan memories, many of them centered on holiday celebrations. A treasured part of our Thanksgiving and Christmas was oven-roasted pecans coated with lots of butter and a generous sprinkling of salt. We called this delicious cocktail snack Funsten pecans, after my precious aunt Georgeanne Funsten. Her family was in the pecan business for many years, and she made sure we had plenty of pecans year-round. Pecans, almonds, and walnuts—all in the shell—were always stuffed into the toe of our Christmas stockings, along with a navel orange. Where were the little chocolate soldiers my friends got? Fresh nuts were a delicacy I did not appreciate then, but I do now.

But nuts are more than a holiday treat or topping. Their historical importance in agriculture, trade, culture, art, and in the lives of indigenous peoples is fascinating reading. Our cookbook *Almonds: Recipes, History, Culture*, told the history of the almond dating back to the time of the Silk Road. In contrast, the pecan is our North American native nut whose longevity would not have been possible without our diverse culture. We have the Native Americans to thank for discovering and planting pecans across the South and Southwest, and we have an African American slave and gardener to thank for his experimentation with pecan rootstock to graft the successful Centennial tree that made the pecan the popular nut it is today. In *Pecans: Recipes & History of a Native American Nut*, we share with you history, recipes, and chefs' stories that attest to the glory of this extraordinary nut. How marvelous that something so small can bring so much pleasure. We hope you enjoy celebrating this culinary and historical treasure with us.

—BARBARA BRYANT



INTRODUCTION

As the only major nut tree indigenous to North America, the pecan holds a special place in our country's cuisine. Rich in nutrients, steeped in history, and a favorite delicacy of presidents and native peoples, pecans are one of the true heritage foods of the United States.

AMERICA'S PECAN: BEGINNINGS

The migration routes and cultivation of the pecan by Native Americans, presidents, botanists and African-American slaves makes for a complicated and compelling reading.

A close relative to the hickory, pecan trees were growing wild in America long before long before the first Europeans came to the Americas. The first pecan trees could be found along the Mississippi River and west into Texas, and as far north as Indiana and Kansas. Pecans flourished and spread throughout the Southeast and Southwest. Named after an Algonquin phrase meaning "taking a stone to crack," the pecan became invaluable to Native Americans.

Migration was the key factor in the spread of pecan trees. Native Americans in southern Mississippi were thought to have been some of the first people to add the pecan into their diet. They used broken limbs or long sticks to shake and knock the nuts onto the ground for gathering, a primitive invention that, though now mechanized, is really not too much different than methods used today. We do know that pecan harvest determined migration routes, and early Native American tribes depended on pecans for about four months of the year.

As they traveled the Mississippi River and its many tributaries, the tribes naturally carried this compact food. They found myriad uses for pecans—as nourishment, medicine, and certainly as barter. Pecan leaves were dried and ground to treat ringworm; tree bark was boiled down in a decoction to treat tuberculosis, as well as to make tea for upset stomachs. Fermented pecan powder became what is the thought to have been to the first nut milk.



HARVESTING AND SHELLING

As the first few pecans hit the ground, it's a bit of a ceremonial beginning to autumn. Dry weather is essential for a successful harvest. If the pecans fall onto wet soil and are allowed to remain there too long, the tannins in the shells can leach into the nut, which adds a bitter flavor.

The nuts are dried quickly since fresh pecans are very sensitive to moisture. During processing the nuts are dried to a point of 8% moisture (and eventually lowered to 5% or below). The fresher the pecan, the more delicate the flavor. A pecan right off the tree has more butter-like flavor than one purchased later in the season. Due to the high fat

content (around 70%), the nuts can go rancid very quickly. After pecans are harvested from the ground, they have to be separated from any "bycatch" like small rocks and sticks that were picked up along with the nuts.

After harvesting, the nuts are sanitized and then sent into the crackers, though some growers actually polish the shells to remove the dark streaks on their outside. Through this process, the nuts are shelled, sorted and graded. The nuts are first cracked to loosen the shells from the meat, then a sheller will knock off the shell from the meat. The pecan meat is then sorted by size before being packaged.



Pecans are harvested from mid-October to the end of November in the Northern Hemisphere. Left, a harvesting shaker rolls through a pecan grove in Albany, Georgia as harvest begins. Above, a Georgia grower holds freshly harvested pecans. Below, a pecan grower in San Saba, Texas moves a huge half-ton bag of premium inshell pecans to be transported to a nearby processing facility for shelling, sorting and grading. Right, clusters of California pecan flowers, called catkins, bloom in spring.



WORLD PECAN PRODUCTION

The United States produces 80 percent of the world's pecans with an annual crop of about 300 million pounds (136,077,000 kg) from more than ten million trees. Mexico ranks second in production with 222 million pounds (100,700,000 kg). Other countries that produce pecans commercially include Australia, Brazil, Israel, Peru, and South Africa.

Georgia, Texas, and New Mexico account for over three-fourths of the pecan production in the US, with twelve other states in the South, Southwest, and West making up the remainder of the production. The annual domestic consumption and foreign exports are as follows:

U.S. Domestic Use	45%
China	28%
Mexico	15%
Canada	5%
Netherlands	3%
United Kingdom	2%
Others	2%





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A NOSE FOR NUTS

In Atlanta, I know the pecans are falling when I feel a certain telltale tug on my dog's leash. The minute my neighborhood's random trees unclench their fists to drop the season's first fruit onto the sidewalk, Shirley comes to a full stop. She wants a snack.

At such moments, I can't help but take pity on my short-legged, sausage-shaped Shih Tzu-Dachshund mix, as she tussles with a half-open pecan. I bend over, retrieve her treasure, sort the buttery nutmeat from the bitter shell, and share it with my pecan-loving girl. Taking a nibble myself, my mind goes dancing back to my South Georgia childhood.

Gathering pecans on the family farm, I could never resist an impromptu breakfast. Most of the nuts I collected made their way into my mother and grandmother's holiday goodies. My job was to press one perfect half into each ball of their snowy white Divinity candy.

Should I ever encounter a stash of that heavenly confection, it will only take a second before a familiar nose moves in for a sniff. Doggone it! I have no say in the matter—half for me, half for Shir.

—WENDELL BROCK, James Beard award-winning food writer



ESPRESSO CHOCOLATE PECAN BARS

MAKES 18 BARS

Pecans have been a part of brownie recipes forever, but these fudgy bars are extravagant, and the addition of espresso and Dutch process cocoa powder intensifies the decadence! Watch the cooking time closely. If a slightly gooey texture is desired, bake as directed. For a firmer texture, bake for a few minutes longer.

Nonstick cooking spray, for the baking pan

1/4 cup (45 g) semisweet chocolate chips

3/4 cup (185 g) unsalted butter

3/4 cup (65 g) Dutch process cocoa powder

1 1/2 cups (300 g) sugar

3 large eggs

1 cup (155 g) all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons ground espresso-roast coffee

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

1/8 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup (58 g) chopped pecans

Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C). Lightly spray a 9-inch (23-cm) square baking pan with cooking spray. Line the bottom and sides of the pan with aluminum foil, allowing 2 to 3 inches (5 to 7.5 cm) to extend over the sides. Lightly spray the foil with cooking spray.

In a saucepan, combine the chocolate chips and butter over medium heat and heat, stirring constantly, for about 4 minutes, until melted. Remove from the heat and let cool for 1 minute. Whisk in the cocoa powder and sugar, mixing until blended. Whisk in the eggs, one at a time, whisking just until blended after each addition. Whisk in the flour, coffee, vanilla, and salt until fully blended. Fold in the pecans. Pour the batter into the prepared pan.

Bake for 36 to 38 minutes, until the edges just pull away from the pan. Let cool completely in the pan on a wire rack (about 30 minutes). Using the foil overhang as handles, lift the brownies from the pan and cut into eighteen 1-by-4-inch (2.5-by-10-cm) bars.

The bars will keep in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 2 days.

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