

GLOUCESTER DAILY CATCH

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L'ANDANA'S THANKSGIVING FARE

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northshore

NOVEMBER 2017

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THE FOOD ISSUE



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Perfect Pot Pie

A South Shore staple brings its turkey pot pies to the North Shore.

BY ALEXANDRA PECCI

Willow Tree's turkey pot pies feature a natural proportion of light and dark turkey meat, homemade gravy, and a homemade crust that's buttery and flaky.

Like a lot of kids, Alex Cekala and his brother, Chris, spent their days after school helping out with the family business. For them, that meant cooking chicken, making chicken pies and chicken salad, washing dishes, and sweeping up the parking lot on a property nestled among weeping willow trees. Unlike a lot of kids, though, Alex and Chris were the third generation of a business that is an icon of New England food: Willow Tree, beloved for its chicken pot pies and chicken salad.

"It's all still made the same way that my grandparents were making it," says Alex Cekala, who's now general manager of Willow Tree. "We hold dear to those practices and recipes...we're making it just like you would at home."

There's no mistaking a Willow Tree pie, with its thin, flaky crust covering a filling of rich, home-made gravy and all-white-meat chicken. And the pies are all made by hand; all 1 million of them. That's how many chicken pot pies Willow Tree prepared in 2016, made with more than 3 million pounds of chicken. It also made more than 2 million pounds of chicken salad last year.

Now the company is expanding its pie-making prowess to include turkey pies, just in time for the holidays. For many years, the company has sold fresh turkeys to customers out of its farm store in Attleboro, making turkey pies from the leftovers.

"We have to use them, just like that old farm mentality," says Alex.

This year, though, Willow Tree is starting to bring in turkeys just for turkey pies as well, offering them in a limited distribution and quantity over the next several months. They'll feature a natural proportion

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—ALEX CEKALA, WILLOW TREE

of light and dark meat, homemade gravy, and a homemade crust that's buttery and flaky. Altogether, the ingredients of turkey pie consist of what so many people love most

about Thanksgiving: gravy, turkey, and bread, all in a single dish.

"The turkey pie is a nice alternative for the whole process of Thanksgiving," says Alex. "I think

Brothers Chris Cekala (left) and Willow Tree general manager Alex Cekala (right), along with Wally Cekala, Willow Tree president.





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in-depth

FACES

more and more, as people want to try more food, a pie is an easy way to have your turkey.”

That Willow Tree’s turkey pies were born from necessity and “that old farm mentality” of using up whatever’s available is especially fitting given the company’s history.

Alex and Chris’s grandparents, Chet and Eileen Ceka-la, purchased Willow Tree Poultry Farm in the 1950s, where they raised chickens and sold eggs and meat.

“My grandmother would fill her car with eggs every day and sell door to door,” Alex says. “Of course being a farm you have to be inventive and use the whole animal, and nothing goes to waste.”

With that in mind, Chet developed his chicken pie recipe in 1954 and sold his creations in the farm store. By the 1970s, word had spread about the pies, and grocery stores came calling. So Chet hit the road.

“He hunkered down and made a couple hundred pies and delivered them to all the stores,” Alex says of his grandfather.

Soon, Chet developed a chicken salad recipe, too, and it wasn’t long before Chet and Eileen’s son, Wally, showed the same moxie as his parents, filling his car with chicken salad and selling it to “every sub shop, pizza shop, [and] grocery store that he could think of.”

Then Willow Tree got a call from Shaw’s, asking whether they could carry the chicken salad.

“As my dad says, the rest is history,” Alex says.

Alex and Chris have also inherited their family’s entrepreneurial—and culinary—spirit.

“My brother and I did the same thing my father and grandfather did,” Alex says, by building on their family’s traditions and legacy with new products, like pies with veggies added, and new flavors of chicken salad, like avocado, Buffalo style, spicy Sriracha, and the perfect-for-the-holidays cranberry walnut.

Willow Tree’s expansion of its turkey pie production this year is only one of the ways the company celebrates Thanksgiving, though. They sell fresh turkeys, ready-to-cook turkeys, and homemade fixings like mashed butternut squash with brown sugar and butter, bread stuffing made with spices and rendered chicken fat, mashed potatoes, and cranberry sauce. They’ve also partnered with the New England Patriots and Goodwill for many years to provide turkeys for Thanksgiving baskets for needy families. That tradition continues this year.


CONTACT

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“Everybody should have a turkey on the table for Thanksgiving,” Alex says. **n/s**