

## **A Toast to Tourtiere**

(Written by Pat Skene for *Canadian Living Magazine* Christmas 2001)

When is a tourtiere more than a meat pie?

When it summons up culture and Christmas, food and family, love and legacy.

It all started – or started again – back in December of 1991. I'd curled up with the Christmas edition of my favorite holiday magazine and suddenly, I found myself thrown back into the wonderful nostalgia of my mother's Christmas traditions. There on page forty-nine was a full-page photograph and recipe for a tempting tourtiere, complete with a step-by-step cooking lesson, created by the magazine's test kitchen.

I took a deep breath and wafted back nearly half a century into my French Canadian childhood and the deliciously spiced memories of a good old-fashioned tourtiere. What could be more delicious than a heart warming, home cooked meat pie on a cold snowy Christmas Eve?

Every year, my mother would set aside a special weekend in December for cooking her Christmas tourtieres. This meat-pie-making ceremony was always an exciting time, since it marked the beginning of our Christmas season. The tantalizing smell of herbs, spices and sizzling pork and onions filled the house and launched us into the festive spirit. We sat around the warmth of our small kitchen cutting, slicing and hatching our holiday plans.

There was always the same talk about the tree, which was a special expedition carried out by my brother and my father. They would tie old wooden snowshoes to their boots and crunch their way through the deep snow in the woods behind our house. Hours later, they would emerge with flashing red cheeks, dragging the perfect Christmas tree, leaving a trail of pine needles behind them.

Then we would take out the colored glass ornaments that my mother had carefully put away every year. With any luck, they had survived the summer, tucked away in the same closet where we loved to play hide and seek and tell ghost stories on a rainy day. And in the middle of each window, we hung a lighted holly wreath that warmed every room with the glow of the holidays.

It may be hard to believe in today's world of retail madness, but Christmas was never about gifts in our home. It was about food mostly, and the ritual meals my mother made to celebrate the spirit of the season with family and friends. It was about finding oranges and homemade fudge in our stockings on Christmas morning. It was about singing Christmas carols while we stood in freshly fallen snow that sparkled like diamonds in the moonlight.

It was about uncles and aunts and cousins dropping in with their toe-tapping fiddles and banjos, for a family sing-song in the kitchen. It was about the fresh smell of an evergreen standing in a pail of water and tied to the wall with string. And it was always about the luscious 'tourtiere' meat pies in the warming oven that welcomed us home from church on Christmas Eve.

When my mother passed away several years ago, the holiday traditions became mine to continue for my family. And, while I have succeeded in making Christmas a celebration of old-fashioned values and eagerly anticipated rituals, as a busy working mother I'd never quite managed to graduate in kitchen duty. My husband had always threatened to turn our kitchen into a library, as we never used it. But eventually, and probably out of necessity, he donned the apron and found that he enjoyed cooking. Thankfully, our kitchen was saved.

But my culinary skills certainly didn't extend to making a successful tourtiere. However, after reading the 'simple-to-follow' cooking lesson in the holiday magazine, I thought I'd give it a try. I was determined to catch the flailing baton of my French heritage and teach my daughter how to cook this wonderful meat pie and continue the family holiday tradition I'd enjoyed so much as a child. And thus it came to pass that my fifteen year old daughter and I ventured forth into the kitchen, armed with the recipe and determined to do my mother proud.

Perhaps I aimed too high. The first mistake I made, was to multiply the recipe to make ten pies! My mother, I remembered, had always made several pies simultaneously, so, I was following in her kitchen slippers...or so I thought. What a muddled mess!

As we chopped, browned and sliced, pans over-flowed with twenty pounds of sizzling ground pork, spitting and exploding like angry firecrackers. My daughter looked at me with a mixture of horror and pity, as she awaited further instructions. "Maybe we should call Dad," she said like a frightened bunny, as her eyes were locked on my every move.

"We can do this," I assured her and I frantically separated the meat into larger pots and skillets, while she took on the daunting task of slicing a mile-high mountain of mushrooms.

When my husband appeared on the scene, his eyes darted anxiously around the kitchen. There we were, surrounded by a tourtiere-induced war zone, wearing snorkel masks to keep our eyes from tearing up, as we furiously peeled and chopped thirty onions.

"The masks were my idea," I called out to him. "We don't have a word processor to chop the onions, so the masks really help."

"I think you mean 'food processor'" he said, "And I should get a court order to stop you from teaching her how to cook." Then he simply kissed my daughter on her snorkel mask and quickly sprinted from the room.

Building slowly, but steadily, our giggling rose to a crescendo of hysterical laughter – and suddenly the time spent in meat-pie hell turned into a cherished moment between mother and daughter. We looked at each other with our lips stretched and distorted by the suction of the rubber masks strapped to our heads, and we howled again until we cried even more into our onions.

That laughter has echoed each successive Christmas, and the memories of making that first tourtiere together will be with us forever.

Making tourtiere goes more smoothly now, although my new Cuisinart 'word processor' has made the snorkel masks optional. As with all of the seasonal celebrations and ritual meals we enjoy, our Christmas customs become more precious as the years pass and we welcome each new family member. And, while I create my own legacy to feed the holiday spirit at this miraculous time of year, I'm thankful for finding one lost memory that revived my mother's very special tradition

Someday, my daughter and granddaughter will be in charge of carrying on with our family's tourtiere-making ceremonies and I hope that laughter will always remain a key ingredient of this wonderful holiday recipe.

***Merry Christmas!***