

# French meat pies –

By STAASI HEROPOULOS

LUDLOW – It's 6 a.m. at St. John the Baptist School and the chatter of French-speaking ladies – and the smell of French meat pie – will begin filling the halls of this 80-year old brick schoolhouse.

"We disrupt the whole school for three weeks. We take over the entire kitchen," said Jeannette Nolan.

Each year since 1978, a dedicated group of parishioners at St. John's spends three weeks each October carrying hundreds of pounds of beef and pork, spices and a secret recipe – all the way to the school's third-floor kitchen. And there, they begin making the first of some 25,000 traditional French meat pies – French tourtières.

The tourtière is French-Canadian fare that first began gracing tables more than a century ago, as a way to ring in the New Year.

"We would go to mémère's and have a glass of wine and a piece of French meat pie. That's how we celebrated New Year's with mémère," said Nolan.

The tradition of baking French meat pies for the church

## a coveted concoction



Jean Bergeron, left, and Jeannette Nolan work to cool and wrap pies at St. John the Baptist Church in Ludlow.

began with three ladies – 26 years ago. They would make 1,000 pies a day and sell them right at the school, fresh from the oven. The band of bakers

has grown over the years to as many as 50 people some days – and they now turn out 2,000 pies a day.

Each year since 1978, the retired ladies – and now a handful of men – work Monday through Thursday, beginning early in the morning, and toiling until 5 each evening, with only short breaks for tea, fruit bread and soup. Last year, the group sold the 4-inch pies for \$2.50 apiece – and raised \$40,000 for the church.

"It takes a lot of dedication. They really go above and beyond the call of duty. It's a great team of people," said the Rev. Homer Gosselin, the pastor of St. John's.

Back in the beginning, the ladies would mix and roll the pie crusts by hand. It was tough, tedious work. But 15 years ago, they reinvested some of their profits and bought a used mixer and dough roller.

"They really bumped up production when they bought those machines," said Gosselin.

Over the years, three generations of parishioners have baked and sold more than 170,000 pies, raising over \$400,000 for the church. There are other fund-raisers at St. John, but this is the biggest.

"None of them can compete with what we bring in," said Nolan.

St. John's French meat pie is as much a New England tradition in these parts as fall foliage and covered bridges.

"People just wait for the fall and our pies. They keep asking 'When are the pies coming?'"

### HOW TO HELP

**What:** French meat pie sale

**Cost:** \$3 each

**Benefits:** St. John the Baptist Church

**Where:** St. John the Baptist School, 207 Hubbard St., Ludlow, third floor

**When:** Monday-Thursday, Oct. 17-Nov. 3, noon-5 p.m.

**For info:** Call the rectory, (413) 583-3467

When are the pies coming?" said Nolan.

When the orders start rolling in, it's tough to keep up with demand. It's pretty common for families to order and reserve 40 or 50 pies at a time. The St. John ladies only do this once a year, so people stock up.

There's no place at St. John's to store the pies, so if you want one, or a dozen, you have to stop by the school between noon and 5 p.m. and take them right home with you. The eighth-graders are there to lend a hand, doing their homework near the kitchen and standing by in case pies need to be delivered to a waiting customer.

The ladies speak with pride when they tell the tale of their annual meat pie tradition. But the story doesn't include exactly what's in those popular and famous pies.

"We don't give out our secret recipe and you'd be surprised how many people want to know," said Nolan.

It may be a closely-held secret, but it is a widely shared tradition – French Canadians in Ludlow baking traditional meat pies for people across New England.

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