
INDIGENOUS INDUSTRY

BY ANNA KING

PIE GUY

Baking away again in Margaritaville.



RED HOOK—Steve’s Authentic Key Lime Pie store stands on the edge of the bay, next to a row of tall, leafy palm trees, an artificial waterfall and a thorny lime shrub. This might be Miami, except for the Statue of Liberty in the distance and the Staten Island ferries gliding back and forth.

On a recent Tuesday morning, Steve Tarpin, the Steve behind those crumbly, just-sweet-enough crusts and their creamy-tart filling, is threading a small, white, plastic fish head onto a fishing rod. Two Jack Russell terriers race out toward the bay. “I’m gonna catch Mango some breakfast,” he says, pointing at the larger dog.

Tarpin, who is 50, takes a final swig from a bottle of Mahou beer, ambles past his delivery truck, a 1953 Ford, and casts his line toward the Verrazano, scanning the water for signs of aquatic life. Meanwhile, his employee, Jason Emery, prepares the latest batch of 600 pies. The scent wafts through the air, along with the sounds of the Mills Brothers’ “Java Jive.”

Tarpin loves fish. Even his last name is ichthyological, shortened from the Armenian Tarpinian. He often wrangles bluefish, sometimes a striped sea bass, from the murky Brooklyn waters, but today they aren’t biting. He finishes his American Spirit cigarette and gives up. Mango will have to make do with dog food.

Born in Miami, Tarpin misses “water that’s warm enough to swim in, good authentic Cuban food, certain smells, and the thunderstorms that

are regular as clockwork on summer afternoon.” He goes back twice a year to fish, but otherwise stays put, rarely even venturing into Manhattan. He gets up at 3:30 each morning, fishes, tinkers with his motorbike, and bakes some of the best pie in Brooklyn.

In Florida he’d been a woodworker when an accident left him unemployed, so he moved to New York on a whim. He began making pies in 1994 “for personal use” in an L-shaped studio apartment on Smith Street he shared with his young daughter Sakura. At a friend’s barbecue he got his first order—for three pies—from a man who owned a third-



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generation Italian restaurant on 14th Street called Frank's, and business grew from there. He opened the bakery in Red Hook seven years ago and now delivers pies to restaurants throughout the city, sometimes in his vintage Ford truck, although "the Key Lime Express is semi-retired." Clients include Peter Luger, the Waterfront Ale House, DUB Pies, and, in Manhattan, Wolfgang's Steakhouse, Cowgirl, and, during the summer months, Pescatore.

The pies come in three sizes: a 4-inch tartlet for \$4, an 8-inch pie for \$15 and a 10-inch for \$25. A glass of limonade is \$2. A few years ago Tarpin added the "Swingle," (essentially a Key lime popsicle: a tartlet dipped in melted chocolate and frozen) named for Walter Tennyson Swingle, the American botanist who categorized the Key lime or *Citrus aurantifolia*. This morning, the kitchen crew is working on a variation, the "Swingle Diablo," with fiery chili peppers blended into the chocolate. The spicy kick is tempered by the cool lime beneath.

Behind the kitchen, motorcycles stand in various states of assembly. Most belong to Tarpin's fishing buddy, Mike Leonard. They go on expeditions with other members of the Red Hook Yacht Club, but the waters around Brooklyn are



not quite the Florida Keys. "Fishing is one thing, catching is another," admits Tarpin. The club members are building a 17-foot fishing boat to take down to Miami. "If successful, we might try our hands at a 39-foot river cruiser which might make a trip up the Hudson, the Erie Canal to the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi to the Gulf, swing along the Armpit—the Florida Panhandle—down to the Keys, then back to New York via the Intercoastal Waterway," he says. "Purely out of the fantasy file."

Tarpin is clearly more fisherman-baker than businessman. Wooden palm tree cutouts frame the windows of his office, and a bleached steer skull tacked onto the wall wears a bikini bottom; its matching top covers a sign that reads, "TO BEACH." In lieu of a cash register, there's a cardboard box of twenties, tens and singles in the kitchen; the desk drawer in Tarpin's office holds wads of twenties, while a box next to his desk, full of fives and singles, is labeled "not-so-petty cash." Payment records are piled haphazardly.

"We have a new mail procedure," he says. "It's called Opening It Up Right Away and Dealing With It." He picks up a pile of mail, leafs through it, and sets it back down. "It's not in operation yet."

On his desk sits a pair of alligator-shaped salt-and-pepper shakers, a tiny head ("the dog ripped it off something"), a piece of driftwood that doubles as a pen holder, and two pictures of his wife, Victoria. They met four years ago when he was delivering pies to the Brooklyn café where she worked. "I passed her face many times, then one day I actually *saw* her."

As for the pies themselves, the recipe is simple: freshly squeezed limes, butter, condensed milk, egg yolks and graham crackers. It's almost the same recipe that Rachel, the protagonist in Nora Ephron's novel, *Heartburn*, used for the pie she baked and threw in the face of





her adulterous husband, but her pie contained bottled lime juice, which Tarpin considers unacceptable. He's one of just a handful of Key lime pie producers in the U.S. who use the juice of fresh Key limes, not concentrate. And he uses only the small, yellow, "true" Key lime, "what the world had pre-botanists," forsaking the more common Persian lime found in supermarkets and squashed into the tops of Corona bottles. The Key lime has a thinner skin and crisper flavor, but is not as hardy as its Persian cousin, plus people expect lime to be green, not yellow.

Tarpin holds up a green mesh bag of Persian limes to demonstrate. Even Persian limes turn yellow as they ripen, he explains, and the bag is the supermarket's way of disguising it. His tarts are a pale yellow, rather than the neon-green, meringue-topped, jellied concoction on offer at average diners. He has no interest in cherry pies, apple pies or any other kind of baking for that matter. He keeps things simple. Five ingredients, one product.

In Florida he tended his own Key lime trees, but today he receives shipments from a small Mexican town near the Pacific Coast, around 100 miles south of Puerto Vallarta. He gets 18 shipments a year, each of 54 boxes, around 375 limes per box. That's 365,000 limes a year. Back in the day, he squeezed them by hand. Now he uses a Zumex juicer, but still squeezes on an immediate-use basis; the pale-yellow liquid goes straight into the mix. Silver refrigerators line a kitchen wall, filled with shelves of pies and tarts. A door leads to a walk-in freezer stacked with logs of butter, cartons of condensed milk and eggs.

Today Tarpin has a new employee, Annie Macmullan, starting at noon, to replace Jason Emery, 29, who has completed his bakery initiation and is moving to Oregon to start up the West Coast operations of Steve's Authentic Key Lime Pies. "We haven't worked out the details," Tarpin admits, "but it will be something like a limited partnership, or franchise." Like the master, Emery intends to run the business from his apartment, at least to begin with. The main start-up cost will be the juicer, around \$5,000.

Speaking of advising epicure entrepreneurs, novice bakers occasionally drop by for guidance. Today Anne Heelen, 28, and Rebecca Kethcum, 27, stop in with aspirations of running a chocolate cupcake business, Caked Cakes, from their apartment. Tarpin offers to get them chocolate at wholesale prices.

"I'm in a good place—I don't want to jinx it, but look where I am," he says when the Caked Cakes bakers had gone, waving his arm at the pies, the bikes and the beers. After 20 years, he still enjoys Key lime pie, but there's no lime in his Corona. "I don't like fruit in my beer," he shrugs. □

SHARING THE KEY LIMELIGHT



Photo: Michael Harlan Turkell

Steve's ain't the only lime pie in town: Pies 'n' Thighs also bakes the key to our heart. Each slice is a dreamy, creamy, cheesecakey cloud, plenty sweet and plenty tart, with that terrific, acidic limey zing. Plucked from fluffy heaven, it's tucked into a buttery, wafer-thin graham cracker crust. Everyone knows Gotham's water is the secret to her bagels—maybe Key lime pies just require a view of the industrial edge of the East River.

— GL

Pies 'n' Thighs, 351 Kent Avenue at South 5th Street, Williamsburg. Slice: \$4. Whole pie: \$24 and a day's notice.