

Chapter 1

The Crown Prince of the Nut Kingdom

Is it PEE-CANS or PA-KAWNS?

It really doesn't matter how you say the name of the nut, pecans have long been enjoyed in copious culinary delights: roasted with butter and salt; candied with sugar and other flavorings; added to soups; tossed in salads; used to crust meats, seafood, and poultry; stirred into cake batters and frostings; and utilized in a plethora of pies, candies, and cookies.

When Keith Courrégé, a pecan connoisseur and culinary aficionado of the highest order, self-published his book *Pecans from Soup to Nuts* in 1984, he proclaimed that the pecan was the "Crown Prince of the Nut Kingdom, God's gift to the South." Indeed, it's the Southern states that are the largest producers and consumers of this delicious, versatile nut, and for this reason, many pecan-based delicacies have become a staple in Southern cuisine.

The history of the pecan began thousands of years before the discovery of America. It is believed that certain North American Indian tribes were the only people who knew about pecan trees. No one from any other part of the world had ever seen this nut. In 1787, Thomas Walton, an Englishman who had a plantation in South Carolina, described the foliage of the pecan but ended with "the fruit I have not seen."

History tells us that George Washington planted pecan trees at Mount Vernon. The trees were a gift from Thomas Jefferson, who is credited with their initial popularity in the South. Washington was fond of the pecans and constantly enjoyed them when they were available from his orchard. In a diary entry dated 1794, he mentioned planting "several poccon, or Illinois nuts."

Some fifty years later at Oak Alley Plantation, owned by Telesphore J. Roman and located along the great River Road in Louisiana, a slave gardener known only by his given name Antoine succeeded in grafting sixteen trees

near the plantation mansion in 1846 or 1847. Later, he successfully grafted 110 trees. This was an epoch in the history of pecan growing since it was the first successful effort of record to graft pecan trees. It was also the first commercial orchard developed to produce nuts for sale.

Thanks to Antoine, the pecan industry developed and now, more than 150 years later, pecan orchards continue to flourish in Louisiana. Drive along Louisiana Highway 1, from Alexandria (where some claim there is an imaginary line that separates north and south Louisiana) to Natchitoches, and you'll see grand majestic pecan orchards lining both sides of the road as far as the eye can see. It was near Natchitoches, on the Cane River, where pecan orchards thrived alongside vast cotton fields, that Dan Regard first got into the pecan business in 1969. Years later, he opened Cane River Pecan Company, on Front Street in downtown Natchitoches, as an outlet to sell his pecans directly from the orchard. The town, which predates the 1718 founding of New Orleans, and the



languorous river are surrounded by historic plantations, Creole architecture, and huge, stately oak trees.

Spring, in Louisiana, is said to have arrived only when the first bright green leaves appear on the stark bare limbs of the pecan trees. In a matter of days, or so it seems, the leaves fill out and the trees bask in their glory. During the spring and summer, the pecan trees provide shade under which there are picnics, barbecues, and all manner of warm-weather gatherings. It is also the time that commercial growers tend to the orchard, checking the trees for disease, trimming dead or damaged limbs, and sprucing up the grounds.

In the fall, when the cold fronts begin pushing their way south, gusty autumn winds send the dry, crackly leaves and the mature nuts flying, and the nut-loaded limbs are soon bare. The locals then scramble, sometimes on their hands and knees, to pick pecans to load into sacks and baskets in hopes of selling them. However, they always keep some for their personal larder to make goodies for the winter holidays.



At commercial farms, pecan growers are busy clearing the orchards. Fallen limbs are removed to allow heavy commercial harvesting equipment to sweep the orchard floor. Until the early 1980s, pecans in the Regard orchards were hand picked, but now mechanized equipment is used.

Harvesting usually begins the second or third week in October and can last, depending on the size of a farm or orchard, up to eight to ten weeks. During harvesting, small sticks, nuts, and even small rocks will be gathered at one time. Of course, inclement weather always seems to creep up on a good harvest. Thunderstorms roar through, sometimes causing wind damage to the trees. Tractors get stuck in the mud. Equipment breaks down.

Once the harvest is completed, the gathered nuts are sorted according to size and packaged for their journey to a commercial sheller. It may take a commercial sheller up to six months to shell his purchased nuts. End users, including grocery chains, candy makers, ice cream producers, bakeries, and food service companies, buy the shelled pecans.

All unsold pecans are kept in cold storage, where they do very well until the following year. Unbeknownst to most consumers, pecans purchased at major supermarkets in the fall and winter months are actually from the previous year's crop, which has been held in cold storage.

It takes ten years for a pecan tree to produce a profitable crop. One tree alone can yield up to four hundred pounds of nuts in a good year. In the United States, pecans are second in popularity only to peanuts (which are not even true nuts). The United States produces about eighty percent of the world's pecans.

The Good Nutritional News about the Pecan

If you're nuts about nuts, there's good news. Pecans are not only tasty, but are also nutritious. They have been found to be an excellent source of protein and contain carbohydrates, which are energy-producing nutrients. Pecans are also a great source of antioxidants and have been shown to prevent LDL (low-density lipoprotein,



also known as the “bad” cholesterol) from building up in arteries, and can help lower total cholesterol levels. Compared to other nuts, pecans have one of the highest levels of phytosterols, a group of plant chemicals that may help protect against cardiovascular disease.

The fat found in pecans is mostly polyunsaturated and contains no cholesterol. Pecans add fiber to your diet and contain nineteen vitamins and minerals, including iron; calcium; vitamins A, B, and C; potassium; and phosphorous. These nuts are flavorful and can add a delightful crunchy texture to a variety of foods. Adding ten large pecan halves to your salads, vegetables, meat dishes, and desserts will add sixty-five nutritious calories to your diet.

Food for thought: One ounce (about nineteen halves) contains 196 calories, 3 grams of protein, and 20 grams of fat. Ninety percent of the fats are unsaturated (about sixty percent monounsaturated and thirty percent polyunsaturated). These nuts are sodium free and fiber rich.

Of course, remember moderation is the key word when consuming all good things.

Storing Pecans

Since pecans are a seasonal crop, you will want to store plenty for year-round use. It's best to harvest pecans as soon as possible after they fall to the ground, as the nuts can deteriorate rapidly if they become wet from rain and high humidity.

To speed up the drying process, arrange the pecans in a single layer in a shallow baking pan or tray and let sit in a warm, dry area for one to two weeks. They should be stored once they are thoroughly dry in airtight containers in a cool, dry, dark place.

Because pecans are rich in oil and will become stale or rancid quickly, they should be stored properly. Shelled or unshelled nuts will keep fresh for about a year stored in airtight containers in the refrigerator or several years in the freezer. Package shelled pecans in moisture/vapor-proof containers, such as plastic cartons, glass freezer



jars, reusable cans, or plastic freezer bags. Pack tightly and exclude as much air as possible. Unbroken kernels stay fresh longer than broken pieces. Nuts can be thawed and refrozen without loss of quality.

Tell Me More!

The recipes in this book may call for different forms of the pecan, so we invite you to acquaint yourself with these terms.

Pecan meal is finely ground pecans. It is primarily used to coat or crust fish, chicken, meats, or vegetables. It can be added to piecrusts, pancake batter, or the batter for frying chicken or fish.

To produce this meal, put pecan halves or pieces in a food processor or electric blender and pulse several times until very fine. **Do not overprocess.** Due to the high oil content, the meal can turn almost into butter if ground too quickly. One cup of pecan halves or pieces yields about one cup of meal. You can make a large batch of the meal and store it in airtight containers in the freezer for later use.

Pecan halves come in various sizes.

Pecan Sizes (halves per pound)

Mammoth = 200-250 halves

Junior mammoth = 251-300 halves

Jumbo = 301-350 halves

Extra large = 351-450 halves

Large = 451-550 halves

Medium = 551-650 halves

Cane River Pecan Company offers only the mammoth size, and the recipes featured in this book use that size pecan. However, any size will do for most applications—just be sure the nuts are fresh and come from a reliable source. Pecan halves are used for decoration or garnish for pies and cakes and for making pralines and other candies.

Chopped pecans are simply halves that are chopped and used in various applications.

Pecan pieces are usually broken pieces of pecans and can be used interchangeably with chopped pecans.

