



Pecans

By Jenny George

Have you ever tasted a fresh pecan? If you live in New Mexico, you may be one of the lucky ones. A truly fresh pecan is light and creamy, golden and richly flavored. Pecan orchards can be found all across the agricultural areas of southern New Mexico. And while most pecan farmers sell straight to brokers, delivering their harvest into the national nut market, some still keep a portion of fresh shelled pecans for us locals. Fred Montez knows something about fresh pecans, and something about the community here in New Mexico. Each year, he brings his pecans up from the Mesilla Valley to the winter farmers' markets in Santa Fe and Los Alamos.

Fred has spent the last thirty years cultivating his orchards to get the kind of yield he gets these days. He planted his first tree in 1979, on his return home from a early career in the military. "When most guys were coming home to rest," Fred explains, "I came home to grow pecans." He settled on his grandfather's old farmland, but unlike his predecessor, who had grown a general mix of cotton, melons and alfalfa, Fred began to specialize in pecans. It can take more than a

decade for a pecan tree to reach a good yield. When he first started, he would pick five or ten gunnysacks of nuts at each harvest. Nowadays, it's four 2000-pound trailers. He cares for seven acres of pecans including five varieties of trees, each with their own "personality." *Western Schley* is a popular variety that stores well; *Wichita* trees produce beautiful golden nuts; *Burkett* pecans are nearly perfectly round; and *Mohawks* are a huge "papershell" variety, meaning the shells are so thin you can crush them easily in your hand.

Fred is lucky; the Mesilla Valley is a great place to grow pecans. The area is intensely sunny and warm, but not too humid. High humidity can bring with it all kinds of bugs, weevils and moths, something growers in Georgia and parts of Texas have to grapple with. When you see him at the market, ask Fred if he ever sprays his orchards with any pesticides. He'll point to a close-up photo of a young, green nut hanging in the foliage. Perched on top is a ladybug. "That's my pesticide!" Fred *never* uses chemicals. It's the good growing conditions in southern New Mexico that have helped



boost the state's rising pecan industry over the years. New Mexico is typically one of the country's three top pecan-producing states. In the last two years, we've claimed the number one title, producing upwards of 50 million pounds of nuts per year.

According to Richard Heerema, extension specialist at New Mexico State University who studies pecans, the success of the industry is due to a combination of factors. The climate is ideal, but there are economic incentives for farmers, too. "Many crops in New Mexico aren't as profitable as they used to be, so growers are switching to pecans. They're just more profitable for farmers," he explains. This may be why pecan acreage in the Mesilla Valley has expanded more than 500 percent since the 1970s.

For Fred Montez, any success is really the result of simple hard work.

Mexican Tea Cookies

A perennial Christmas favorite!

Makes 4 dozen

2 sticks (1 C.) unsalted butter, soft

3 C. confectioners sugar

1 t. vanilla

2¼ C. all-purpose flour

¾ C. very finely chopped pecans

¾ t. salt

Pulse pecans in a food processor until finely chopped, being careful not to turn into paste. Beat together butter and ½ cup confectioners sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer at medium high speed until pale and fluffy, about 4 minutes. Add vanilla, then add flour, pecans and salt and mix at low speed until just combined. Cover and chill, at least 6 hours.

He prunes, irrigates, weeds the orchards, harvests, sorts the shelled pecans (three times!) to check for dark spots and bits of shell, and finally drives the 600-mile round trip to market. He taught himself the trade, experimenting over the years with different harvesting techniques. A while back he discovered a way to get the sweetest possible nut: a sun-drying method. "The first hard frost opens the shell and exposes the nut. Some growers will harvest right then, but I let them dry on the tree for two more weeks and the sun makes them sweet. They lose any trace of bitterness. I think my pecans are sweeter than others," he says.

When you taste the special sweetness of Montez pecans, you're not just snacking—you're tasting history. Pecan trees are the only major nut tree that grows naturally in North America. Fossil evidence even reveals that pecans were collected and stored by the original inhabitants of America. The name "pecan" comes from an Algonquian word meaning "requires a stone to crack." Wild pecan trees still exist in natural groves across the South and into Mexico, where the huge trees can live for hundreds of years. It's no wonder so many quintessential American dishes (think pecan pie, pralines, butter pecan ice cream...) utilize the savory sweetness of these nuts.

This year, you'll find Fred Montez selling his pecans at the Santa Fe Farmers' Market on November 15th and December 20th (just in time for the holidays), and at the Los Alamos Farmers' Market on November 29th. He can sell out by 9 a.m., as loyal customers line up for his wares, sometimes while it's still dark out. Stock up on a delicious and significant local product; nuts you don't use right away can be stored in the freezer for up to a year, which keeps the delicate oils in the nuts from spoiling. And just so you know what you're getting into, Fred warns: "Once you've eaten a fresh pecan, you'll never be able to eat an old pecan again!"

Find Fred Montez of Montez Pecans at (575) 525-2726.

Preheat oven to 375°F.

Cover cookie sheets with lightly buttered parchment. Let dough stand at room temperature until just pliable, about 15 minutes. With buttered hands, roll level teaspoons of dough into ¾-inch balls and arrange about 2 inches apart on cookie sheets.

Sift remaining 2½ cups confectioners sugar into a large shallow bowl.

Cookies must be baked in the middle of the oven to bake evenly – only use the middle rack! Bake in batches in middle of oven until bottoms are pale golden, 8 to 10 minutes. Take cookies from the oven and drop hot cookies into confectioners sugar. Use a slotted spoon to gently roll, coating well, then transfer to a rack to cool completely.

Roll cookies in confectioners sugar again when completely cooled. Store in an airtight container for up to a week.

Sweet and Spicy Pecans

These are delicious on their own as a snack with cocktails, crumbled on baked apples, or in a salad!

Makes 1 ½ Cups

3 T. real maple syrup

1 ½ t. sugar

¾ t. salt

¼ t. freshly ground black pepper

1/8 t. cayenne pepper

1 ½ C. pecan pieces

Preheat oven to 325°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment. Combine maple syrup and next 4 ingredients in large bowl. Stir to blend. Add pecans; stir gently to coat. Transfer to baking sheet and spread into single layer.

Place large piece of foil on work surface. Bake pecans 5 minutes. After 5 minutes give the pecans a stir, then continue baking until pecans are golden and coating bubbles, about 10 more minutes. Immediately transfer to foil. Working quickly, separate nuts with fork. Cool completely and store in airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days.

Pecan Praline Bacon Skewers

Makes 24 Hors d'oeuvre skewers.

You should always double this recipe – even then it won't ever be enough!!

1 pound thick-cut bacon (about 12 slices)

3 T. sugar

1 ½ T. chile powder

¼ C. pecans, chopped fine

24 bamboo skewers

Preheat oven to 425°F.

Soak the bamboo skewers in water for 15 minutes. Slice the bacon strips across in half, and thread each half over a skewer so that it is skewered in 3 places. On a large broiling pan arrange bacon skewers in one layer and cook in middle of oven 10 minutes, or until bacon just begins to turn golden. In a small bowl stir together sugar and chile powder. Remove pan from oven and sprinkle the sugar mixture and pecans over each piece of bacon. Return pan to oven and cook until bacon is crisp and browned, about 5 minutes. Transfer bacon, praline-sides up, to paper towels to drain, and serve.

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