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Cheese CAKE

The Windy City battles
the Big Apple for taste



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By Chuck Green

What could be better for a case of dry mouth than the mere thought of cheesecake? And what's more irresistible than that first scrumptious bite? The second bite.

From chocolate chip to banana cream, Chicago is renowned for some great-tasting cheesecake. It's enough to make one zip past the main course on a menu, the chef would understand – they're human too.

Now, whether the Windy City is actually the second city in terms of cheesecake is debatable. You'd rouse a pretty good argument from cheesecake aficionados in the Big Apple, who'd probably no sooner trade theirs for ours than they would the Yankees for the Cubs.

Nevertheless, when it comes to cheesecake, Chicagoans are doing anything but singing the blues. "We're in a fun and indulgent business and we love the business because you can delight people," said Eli's Cheesecake Company's Jolene Worthington, executive vice president of Operations.

"(Cheesecake) is an indulgence. We know that we're not a middle-of-the-plate commodity. We don't want to be a commodity in the food business. We're premium."

While apple pie might be synonymous with mom, Worthington said cheesecake does more to tickle the taste buds. "I think we're lucky that cheesecake, in some cases, is recognized as being more popular than apple pie; in food service and in everyday life. You can't talk about apple pie. There's no romance in apple pie. But cheesecake has a wonderful history and has legends surrounding it. It has made reputations and resulted in secret formulas that thousands of people have tried to duplicate."

Worthington believes cheesecake and Chicago fit like they're custom-made for one another. "Chicago is the city of big shoulders. We're a masculine kind of city; no nonsense and down to earth. It's only fitting cheesecake would be the dessert of choice.

"Chicago is a great food town," said Howard Gordon, senior vice president, Business Development and Marketing, Chicago Cheesecake Factory.

"It houses our number one restaurant in sales in our entire company, so we know Chicago loves food." However, he's not prepared to crown it the cheesecake capital of the world. Not when there's New York.

"Obviously, the most famous cheesecakes over the last century have been from New York. Chicago has

Photos: an. View of ELI Cheesecake Co.

done its variation of it, but it seems like you always hear about New York-style cheesecake. You don't really hear about many other different styles of cheesecake."

What makes New York and Chicago cheesecake different? Well, if you ask former New Yorker and current Chicago resident Gary Fine, professor of Sociology at Northwestern University and author of "Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work," for one thing, it's a matter of the sweet tooth.

"For New Yorkers, cheesecake is a much more adult dessert because it's more sour. Kids would be much less likely to eat New York-style cheesecake than they would Chicago cheesecake, which is sweet. In New York, cheesecake is less pure dessert-like."

Sweet or sour, cheesecake, like other desserts, is widely considered a "comfort food," said Worthington and Gordon. That's certainly welcome during this unprecedented period in our country's history.

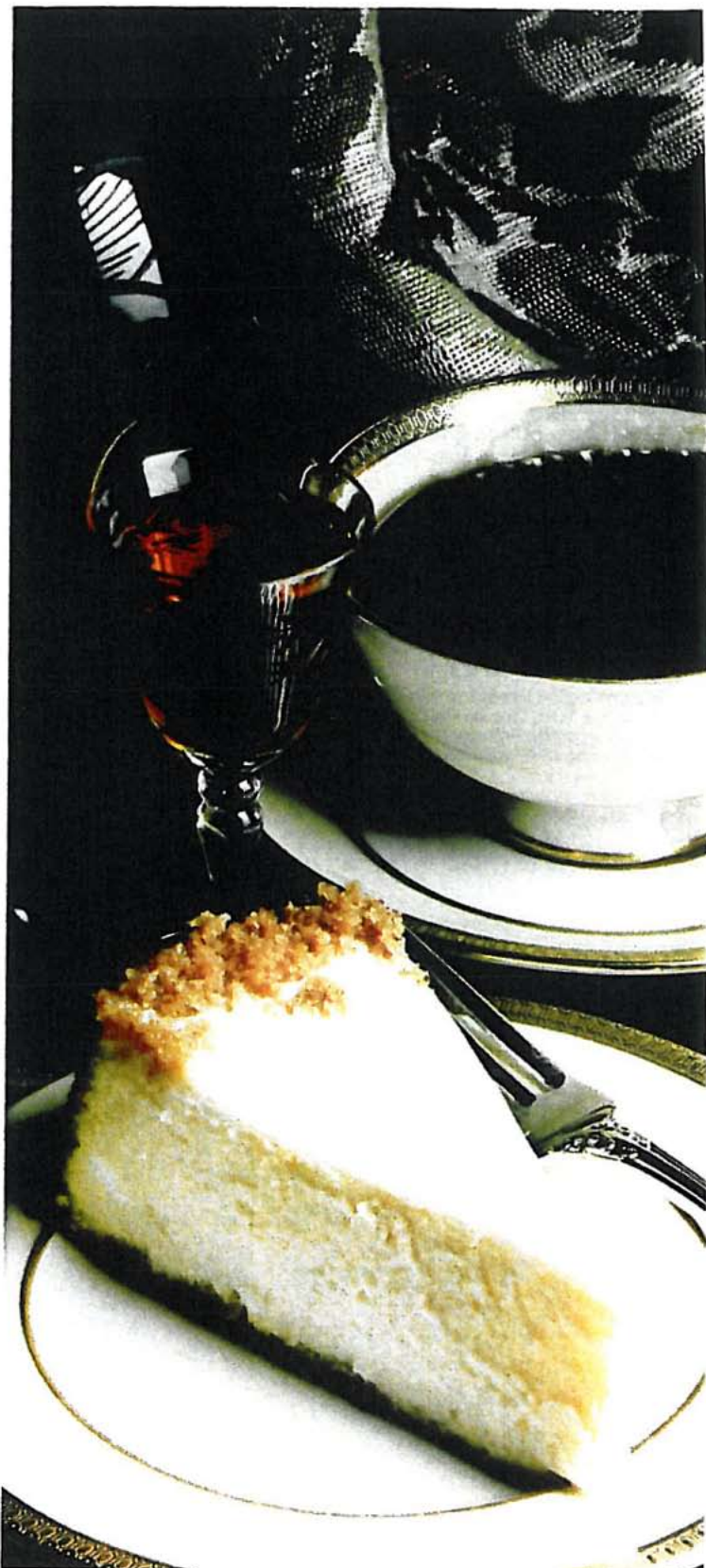
"To me, Chicago is definitely a comfort food town. Between cheesecake, pretzels, ice cream, the Chicago hot dogs, pizza, pasta, you name it, Chicago loves it. In any big town, really, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, you'll always see comfort being top on the list when it comes to what people are eating," said Gordon.

"When you have something that's creamy and tastes delicious, people want it. Just the word cheesecake brings a smile to people's faces."

Dr. Alan Hirsch, director of the Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, couldn't agree more. "In times of high stress, individuals tend to try and re-create the emotions they experienced in the past, periods when they were more calm and felt safe and secure."

In a study among almost 1,000 people from 45 states conducted by the Smell and Taste Institute, 86 percent reported that smells from foods like cheesecake and breads evoked vivid childhood memories, Dr. Hirsch said.

"So one reason cheesecake might be so popular is because it induces this feeling of open nostalgia," said the doctor, who noted that 90 percent of taste is actually smell. "People also might merely be living for the moment. They could feel like they have to live their life while they can, therefore they like cheesecake and they're going to eat it, regardless."



Chicago's gusto for cheesecake also might be a matter of getting the better of the elements. "It tends to get colder here than it does in New York, and when it gets colder people tend to put more weight on, and cheesecake is one way of doing it," said Dr. Hirsch.

Personal image also plays a role in the affinity Chicagoans have for cheesecake, said Dr. Hirsch, who explained that Chicagoans are not as consumed with fashion as are those on the coasts, so they are not adverse to the potential of sacrificing a bit of waistline in the name of a rich piece of cheesecake.

"We don't have the same fashion

prohibitions in the Midwest as they do in Los Angeles, for instance, or even New York. In the Midwest, we tend to see more obesity than we do on either coast. So it's more acceptable to eat these sorts of foods," said Dr. Hirsch.

That's ironic, since cheesecake, which is widely believed to have originated in ancient Greece, was served to athletes in the first Olympic Games in 776 B.C., according to the History of Cheesecake Web site.

After Greece was conquered by the Roman Empire, cheesecake began spreading across Europe. As cheesecake flourished in Europe, it also began to appear in the U.S., as immigrants brought their



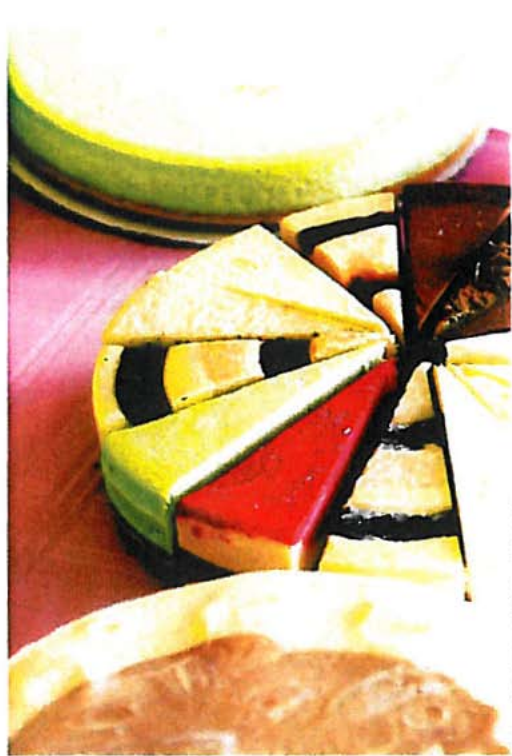


Photo by Rayman Photo by Jennie Bracken

recipes and techniques with them. In 1872, American dairymen, trying to duplicate the French cheese Neufchâtel, ended up creating cream cheese. In 1912, James L. Kraft developed a method for pasteurizing cheese.

The subsequent development and distribution of the Philadelphia brand cream cheese ignited a wave of interest across the country as virtually anyone now had the means to make cheesecake.

Worthington said that Chicago began developing its taste for cheesecake in the 1930s. "You talk to the older bakers, and people who knew the hot spots in Chicago, they'll tell you people flew to Chicago to eat cheesecake, just like in New York. Just because you read the write-ups about (restaurants in New York) doesn't mean we didn't have the same ones. They just weren't publicized. They were small, family restaurants, open seven days a week, where people loafed and ate cheesecake."

While Fine doesn't necessarily believe that Chicago cheesecake seduces the urge for something sweet anymore than rice pudding or chocolate cake does, he might get an argument from his younger son. "He just had his 18th birthday, and his favorite dessert is Chicago-style cheesecake. I corrupted him by moving to Chicago. Go figure!"

Nevertheless, Fine is a hold out. "I like New York cheesecake, just as I like the New York hot dog. I like Chicago pizza, hot dogs and cheesecake, but when you were raised in a certain region, it's sort of how you see things being. I can't imagine having pizza without oregano. I find it strange that Chicago people don't have oregano, or the way they'll eat hot dogs. They put all this glop on it," he laughed. "In New York, you have your hot dog, garlic based, and you have it with mustard."

Chased with a hearty dessert. Chicago-style cheesecake, perhaps? ■