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Pass the pie

Some of the county's most-loved bakers hand on their traditions

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BY SCOTT HEWITT

COLUMBIAN STAFF WRITER



Monica Santos, left of center, 21, of Vancouver rolls pie crust. The church's pie ladies get so many requests for recipes and tips, they scheduled two sessions of coaching — then had to add a third. (Photos by Zachary Kaufman/The Columbian)

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It's no surprise that the Community of Christ pie ladies have achieved a certain celebrity.

"This year, we had so many requests for the recipe and so many people wanting to learn how we do it, we decided to teach them," said Charlotte Zimmerly.

Drafted for their "pie clinic" was the church basement on Northeast 179th Street — just across the road from the Clark County Fairgrounds, where folks seeking fun and flavor have discovered both in the ladies' creations for half a century now.

There were two pie clinics in early November. But that wasn't enough: demand forced the ladies to put on a third clinic Friday night.

Dozens showed up to learn the finer points of coring and peeling, sifting and rolling, filling and glazing.

Not to mention baking and eating.

"Always sift a second time," said Kathy Groat, who staffed the dough station where a mob of eager apprentices raised a cloud of flour.

Flour that has been transported in trucks and sat on store shelves needs more attention than you'd think, she said.

"Size matters," advised Becky Swedblom, across the room at the peeling station. "If you make your slices too thin, you get applesauce. Too thick, they won't cook."

At the rolling station, pie veteran Kit Chapman was helping Robert Condon — one of a few brave men among the many women in the room — work the kinks out of his crust-to-be. Condon has long been the owner of the Steakburger restaurant on Northeast Highway 99, but he said he's never actually done any baking before.

So he was in good hands with Chapman, 86, whose home was the original laboratory for the Community of Christ pie ladies a half-century ago.

"We'd get together in my kitchen and make the pies ahead of time and then freeze them," she said. "We don't do that anymore. We make them fresh for the fair every morning."

Also different is the scale of the job. The ladies used to supply the fair with 25 or 30 pies per year, Chapman said; now it's more like 900. They also send regular pie shipments to Share, the downtown Vancouver homeless shelter. And they supplied 100 pies for Ridgefield's recent centennial celebration.

Clinic organizer Lisa Leonard said the church recently won a grant for a big new basement oven that helps keep the work flowing. That's how seriously the pie ladies take their job, she said.

But, she added: "You've still got to put up with a lot of jokes and doughball throwing."

Said Zimmerly: "If you didn't have a ball, it'd be quite a job."

After getting their students up to speed over the course of three clinics, Leonard said, the pie ladies were all warmed up for their Saturday task: another 100 pies for Share.

"It's very satisfying," said Chapman. "Pie fixes everything."

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