Audrey Campbell shows off one of her crawfish pies. Baking the pies is a tradition started by Campbell's mother in 1962.

Daughter carries on her mother's tradition making homemade...

Crawfish Pies

Bernard Chaillot
Vermilion Bureau Editor

ABBEVILLE - When Ouida Sonnier began making crawfish pies in 1962 as a home-based business, the recipe she used had already been handed down through her family for several generations.

Sonnier passed away in 1989, but the same secret recipe is used today to turn out pies prized from Houston to New Orleans and beyond, according to loyal customers of Sonnier's daughter, Audrey Campbell.

Campbell, 66, retired in 1988 after 22 years as a certified food service manager for the Vermillion Parish School Board. She and a sister, Mildred, had helped their mother for years, but Campbell wasn't sure she wanted to take over the business, having just retired.

"But all those longtime customers just wouldn't let me quit, so I keep it up as sort of a hobby," Campbell said. "I don't look on it as a regular job because I don't have any desire to work myself that hard or make a lot of money. I don't want to get too busy to enjoy life."

She said she and her husband, Floyd, with some help from another of her sisters, Ella Jane Hill, turn out pies and pop them in large freezers to fill orders, but also take a lot of time off to stay involved with their church, Pleasant Green Baptist, fish and visit with friends.

"I have people who want to invest and give me money to start shipping frozen pies all over, but I'm as busy as I want to be right now," Campbell said. She leaves her home number on the door of Ouida's Crawfish Pies at 1412 Martin Luther King Blvd., "as a courtesy in case people come by and we're not there, especially out-of-town customers. We get visitors from all over the state and even some from other states."

Hill, who lives next door to the pie kitchen, said the business provides a place for family and friends to gather, visit and reminisce. "I'm always here helping out, not for pay, but just to spend time with my sister," she said. "We've always been a close family."

Campbell uses the same huge cooking pot her mother used for 27 years in business, and before that at home, the lipped rim worn smooth and shiny from thousands of stirrings.

"When my mother was alive, she'd spend all her time here, feeding people who were hungry, always something cooking on the stove, sending food to shut-ins, and she loved to sit and talk and visit, just like it was a restaurant, but it wasn't," she said. "The pies have always been frozen to go only but she used to let people microwave them and eat here."

New Iberia insurance agent Karl Vincent said he's been giving the pies to customers for years. "A lot of my customers can't wait for their birthdays or other special occasions to roll around, because they know I'll be giving them some of Miss Audrey's pies," he said.

"I have an old horseman friend from Intracoastal City, Harold Kuehling, who I've been riding with for many years, and one day I guess I was a good boy, because he gave me some of Ouida's pies," Vincent said. "I've been hooked ever since."

Vincent said he has two sons in medical school in Shreveport "who were practically raised on those pies. They stay after me to keep them supplied with regular shipments."

Susan Caffery of Kaplan, who has worked as a chef and caterer, said Ouida Sonnier's sweet dough pies were "out of this world. They were the best anywhere. I still remember the fig pies and the coconut cream we'd drive to Abbeville to get, and I don't even like coconut."

Campbell said the business doesn't turn out sweet dough pies anymore, only crawfish, crab, shrimp, seafood combination and chicken pies for $8.50 apiece. The price for 10 pies is $85.00 apiece. For 20 pies, it's $170.00. An order of 100 pies costs $550.

"The crawfish is our most popular by far, but they all cost the same," Campbell said. "I'm just as happy to open my freezer and pull out one pie for a customer as I am to fill a box with 100 pies. If we can sit, visit awhile and have a nice conversation, I'm happy."

Campbell's crawfish pies can be heated up in the oven or microwaved.

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ARTHUR D. LAUCK

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