

Maggi Smith Hall's Minorcan Fromajardis (pdf)

St. Augustine, Florida

Maggi Smith Hall's family has lived in St. Augustine for four generations and is happiest when working to preserve the city's Old-World churches, stores, homes, and history. She relates tales of the Spanish explorers who landed here in the early 1500s, carrying the cattle that would become longhorns, and the missionaries who would attempt to create New Spain in the American Southwest. It was the Spanish, says Mrs. Hall, a former high school teacher, who created the vibrant Florida port, but it was the Minorcans—people brought from Greece, Italy, and the island of Minorca in 1768 and indentured to nearby indigo plantations—who turned St. Augustine into a pan-Mediterranean settlement. Their dishes were united by at least one ingredient: the tiny, hot datil peppers that are still grown in window boxes and kitchen gardens in St. Augustine today. Mrs. Hall was so captivated by the pepper that she created a community cookbook, researching and collecting recipes from the descendants of the original settlers. These Minorcan fromajardis (fried cheese tarts) were traditionally handed out to singers serenading the old neighborhoods on a spring night each year to celebrate the anniversary of the Minorcans' arrival in Florida. The "Fromajardis Serenade" still continues in St. Augustine the week after Easter. Today, says Mrs. Hall, the zesty little tarts are given most often to those who agree to stop singing.

For the Dough

3 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 tablespoon sugar
1 teaspoon kosher salt
Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
1 cup vegetable shortening
½ cup water

For the Filling

8 ounces sharp cheddar cheese, shredded (about 2 cups)
2 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour
4 large eggs, lightly beaten
½ teaspoon kosher salt
18 teaspoon Datil Pepper Hot Sauce (recipe follows)
Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, melted

1. Place the oven racks in the bottom and top positions and preheat the oven to 425°F. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. To make the dough: In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, sugar, salt, and nutmeg. Cut in the shortening with two knives or a dough blender. Add the water and stir until the dough comes together into a ball. Cover and set aside.

3. To make the filling: In a medium bowl, toss the cheese with the flour. Stir in the eggs, salt, hot sauce, and nutmeg.
4. To assemble the pastries: Roll out the dough on a lightly floured work surface until it is 1/8-inch thick. Using a 3-inch biscuit cutter, cut the dough into 24 circles. Place a well-rounded teaspoon of the filling on one side of each circle, then fold the dough over the filling to make a half-moon shape. Pinch the edges of the dough together to seal. Re-roll leftover dough to make more pastries with any remaining filling.
5. Brush the pastries with melted butter. Cut two 1-inch slashes in the tops to make a cross. Place on the prepared baking sheets.
6. Bake one baking sheet at a time on the bottom rack about 10 minutes, until lightly browned. The cheese will puff up through the crosses. Transfer the baking sheet to the top rack and bake for 2 to 3 minutes more, until well browned and crisp. Repeat with the second baking sheet. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes 24 pastries, serves 8 to 12

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