

Look Who's Cooking: Greenfield's Paul Shallers has 50 years of sticky bun experience

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For the Recorder

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Paul Shallers of Greenfield doesn't know exactly when making sticky buns became an obsession, but he thinks it was 1968, while living in Haddonfield, N.J., and teaching English at a local Quaker school. He was inspired by a winning recipe from a Best Sticky Buns contest created by the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Shallers moved to Greenfield five years ago and has settled in nicely, focusing on two of his other passions: framing art and singing. He has a framing business thanks to equipment he brought with him from New Jersey. His late wife was a very prolific fine artist and needed to have artwork framed regularly for shows. To save money on frames, Shallers decided to learn the craft.

As for singing, Shallers has sung for 60 years and wanted to continue after moving here. He's now a member of both the Franklin County Community Chorus and Quabbin Valley Pro Musica, where he sings base.

Since we're heading into the holiday season and our houses will begin to fill with overnight guests, his sticky bun recipe seemed quite appropriate to share. And not just any sticky bun, but Philadelphia sticky buns.

Combining nuts and sweetener to make bread dates back to Ancient Egypt. However, in 18th-century America, German immigrants brought the sticky bun recipe as we know it today with them when they settled in the Philadelphia area. They were originally known as Schnecken, and have been the pride of Philadelphia ever since, which is why they're called Philadelphia sticky buns.

Roxann: Tell me your sticky bun story.

Paul: I taught at Temple University in Philadelphia for several years, and knew about and consumed other people's sticky buns. However, we were living in New Jersey when I saw this recipe in the Philadelphia Inquirer, which was their award-winning recipe from their Best Sticky Buns contest. I thought it sounded fun and that I'd take a stab at it.

It was quite a bit of work, but I eventually got the hang of it. Then, it seemed, everywhere I worked I would make sticky buns. You know, in South Jersey and at the beach, sticky buns are far more important than wafers in Catholic churches.

RW: Is it safe to say that sticky buns became the thing you were famous for?

PS: It must have been, because I seemed to be making them all the time. I started by making them as a special treat for my students as kind of a reward for "a job well done." So that meant at least two dozen sticky buns. If I had more than one class, which at one point I had four classes, then it meant two-plus dozen per class. Well, then I realized I had to also make them for the teachers' break room and for the custodial staff and so forth. I was a teacher for 49 years. So over the years, I've probably made 60 or more dozen sticky buns. I'm pretty good at it now.

RW: What are the tricks of the trade in making sticky buns?

PS: You must be patient and have a lot of time set aside for preparation and cooking. They must be made from yeast bread and the dough needs to chill for at least two hours, but preferably overnight, and then it needs to rise for nearly an hour. Of course, that meant when I was teaching that I'd have to get up about 3 a.m. to begin preparing them in time to take them to school that day. You must also have baking pans large enough to accommodate the amount of rising dough.

Per the recipe I'm giving you, it's best to do steps one and two in the evening and allow the dough to rise overnight, then complete step three in the morning. If you're doubling the recipe, then use three eggs in the dough.



It's also important to know that you're making them upside down. The delicious wet gooey stuff and the nuts, raisins or currants must go in the pan first, and then you have to turn them over when they're cooked. Lastly, it is most important to have pans big enough and deep enough to accommodate the rising dough that doubles in bulk. My pans are 12 by 18 by 3. These freeze very well. So don't be afraid to make more than a couple of dozen at a time.

The scariest or hardest part of this is the big "turn over" of the pan after they've cooked. It's best to run a knife gently around the edge of the pans first to loosen them a bit from the sides.

RW: Is this it for you? Do you cook other things?

PS: When my wife was living, we alternated cooking and often cooked together. I like to make lots of things.

I've been cooking since I was 8 years old. My mother worked full-time from the time I was in the third grade. That's when I begged to be able to cook before she got home from school. My sister was older and would be there to "supervise." My mother said I could try it if our next door neighbor was available to come over and light the oven. She usually was and that's when I began cooking. I used to make up dishes. I don't even want to remember what they were now.

Philadelphia Sticky Buns

Dough ingredients:

3½ cups sifted flour

½ cup sugar

2 tsp. salt

2 packages of yeast

¾ cup milk

½ cup water

½ cup oil

1 egg (room temperature)

Note: If doubling the recipe, use three eggs. This recipe makes two dozen sticky buns.

In a large bowl, thoroughly mix one cup of flour with sugar, salt and yeast.

Combine milk, water and oil in a saucepan and heat to 120 to 130 degrees Fahrenheit. Gradually add the liquid to the dry ingredients and beat for two minutes at medium speed using an electric mixer. Scrape the bowl occasionally.

Add the egg and half a cup flour and beat for two minutes at high speed.

Add the remaining flour, stir thoroughly and cover the bowl tightly with aluminum foil. Chill for two hours or overnight.

Topping ingredients:

1¾ cup sugar (or 2 cups brown sugar)

¼ cup molasses

½ cup water

¼ lb. of butter

½ cup oil

¾ cup raisins, currants and/or chopped nuts per dozen

In a saucepan, heat the sugar, molasses, butter, oil and water over low heat. When the butter is melted, bring to a boil over moderately high heat, stirring constantly. Pour the syrup in the pan(s).

Spread the nuts, raisins and/or currants over the syrup in the pan(s). Cover each pan with foil or plastic wrap and let set. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

To roll and shape the dough, you'll need: enough flour to generously cover the surface on which you roll the dough; melted butter or oil to brush on the rolled out dough; and cinnamon and sugar to taste.

Turn out the dough onto a well-floured board. Divide it into two equal sections. Roll each into an approximately 9-inch by 12-inch rectangle. Brush with butter or oil, and sprinkle with sugar and cinnamon to taste. Roll up each fairly tightly, and slice into 12 equal sized rolls. Arrange in the pan(s) on top of the syrup.

Cover each pan with plastic wrap and let the dough rise for 40 to 60 minutes, until it has doubled in bulk.

Bake for about 30 minutes or until lightly browned. Remove from the oven and turn onto large plates or sheets of aluminum foil, greasing them first. Spoon any sauce that runs off back on top of the rolls. Let the rolls cool completely.

In the "Look Who's Cooking!" monthly column, Roxann interviews and shares the recipes of people from around Franklin County who may be well-known in their professional or political lives, but not necessarily for their lives as passionate cooks, bakers or all-around foodies. Send ideas for Look Who's Cooking to roxanndw6@yahoo.com.



