



By Mary Augusta Rodgers

**C**HURCHILL DOWNS in Louisville, Kentucky, the first Saturday in May. Flowers, flags snapping against a blue sky, boxes and stands packed with people. At five o'clock a sudden lull, and then the horses parade out onto the track on their way to the starting gate, the jockeys splendid in the silks that mark their stables. A band begins the traditional song, "My Old Kentucky Home," and the crowd, swept with emotion, surges to its feet. Soon there's the roar of "They're off!" and the Derby has once again begun.

It's a great day and always has been since May 17, 1875, and the first Kentucky Derby, when a crowd of ten thousand saw a little red horse named Aristides win the Derby trophy, a massive punch bowl costing a thousand dollars and composed of three hundred ounces of sterling silver. A history, published to celebrate the Derby's Diamond Jubilee in 1949, lists Aristides' owner as Price McGrath, "one of the most colorful of Kentucky horsemen." A poor man, McGrath went west to seek his fortune without success but later opened a gambling house in New York City, where he won \$105,000 in a single night. This accomplished, he retired to breed horses in Kentucky.

Short biographies and anecdotes indicate that most of the horsemen were colorful—and the women, too. In 1940, a horse named Gallahadion was the unexpected victor, paying thirty-five to one, the second largest winning odds in Derby history. Mrs. Ethel Mars, Gallahadion's owner, was ill at home at race time and listened to the event on the radio. "I'm sure Mother would have fainted," her daughter remarked, "if she hadn't already been in bed."

The Derby's founder was Colonel M. Lewis Clark, and the track was first known as the Louisville Jockey Club. The name was later changed to Churchill Downs in honor of the Churchill family who had owned the land and were "interested in a modest way in race horses." The first betting was done through auction pools, a system by which an auctioneer would "sell" each horse in the race; book-making began in 1882. The present pari-mutuel system was started in 1878. That was the year the first electric light was installed in Louisville, southern states suffered from an epidemic of yellow fever, the American Bar Association was established, and Tammany boss Tweed died in New York. (These little-known facts reflect the handicapper's passion for possibly significant detail.)

Always a popular success, the Derby and Churchill Downs lost money until Colonel Matt Winn took over active management in 1902 and built the "Run for the Roses" into the race classic it is today. Colonel Winn was thirteen years old when, seated in his father's buggy, he saw Aristides win the first Kentucky Derby. In later years, history relates, his boxes were filled with members of society such as Lord Derby, celebrities, and national figures.

**I**n Louisville, everything is dated by the Derby. "Before the Derby, we ought . . ." people say, or, "After the Derby, we'll have time to . . ."

Many famous Derby hostesses are off and running months before the event. One such lady orders the invitations for her Derby breakfast in February and starts

*Continued on page 54*

## Derby Day Breakfasts

Continued from page 16

thinking about the menu. "During March," she says, "I wander around the place making lists of bedding plants to use in the flower borders and wondering how early we can open the swimming pool. By the first week of April we are working in the rose garden and toward the end of the month I plant the terrace pots and urns—always in pinks and whites to harmonize with the pink and white dogwoods." Hams are ordered from Robertson's of Finchville—the best country hams in Kentucky, in this lady's opinion. Spring-cleaning rages through the house, julep cups are polished, and there is a conference on the number of beaten biscuits needed.

Before long the Derby festivities are under way: the Pegasus parade, the steamboat race, the coronation ball, and parties, parties, parties. Serious cooking starts in this hostess' kitchen on Friday morning. She arranges red roses with eucalyptus leaves for the dining table centerpiece and flanks the arrangement with three toy horses from her daughter's collection. Bouquets of yellow rosebuds and spring flowers are scattered throughout the house, and there's always an arrangement of mint somewhere. (A mint bed in the garden has apple, pineapple, and lemon mint as well as the usual varieties.) On Saturday morning, a last-minute check is made to see that everything is as it should be—the syrup ready for the mint juleps and the Bloody Marys prepared—before the hostess appears in her customary Derby breakfast dress, which includes a long skirt decorated with horses around the hem. "And then," she says, "we are all ready for that happy time when our friends arrive with their Derby guests." It will be a beautiful day and "with any luck at all, we'll have music from the calliope on the *Belle of Louisville* as it steams down the Ohio river below our terrace." Of course there'll be music and sunlight and a balmy breeze. That's the point. Everybody feels lucky at these lavish breakfasts.

The menu features many traditional favorites: country ham and beaten biscuits; scrambled eggs and sausage patties; fried apples; baked cheese grits; brandy snifters filled with cantaloupe, honeydew, and watermelon balls and strawberries, all garnished with mint; and assorted sweet rolls. Yankee visitors whose experience with grits may be limited to a poorly prepared commercial product should reserve judgment until

they try homemade cheese grits—hot and light, with a fine, buttery, egg-rich flavor.

Another couple hosts a notable Derby breakfast in their handsome Georgian brick house on a bluff overlooking the Ohio. This starts with mint juleps and mixed drinks, served with rounds of Brie and mild crackers, and moves on to a buffet laden with turkey hash, tiny cornmeal pancakes with butter and syrup, country ham, homemade green tomato relish, baked cheese grits and for dessert—it is illegal in Louisville not to indulge oneself on Derby day—strawberries with whipped cream and Derby pie, a sinfully rich chocolate concoction. An arrangement of pale pink tulips and white stock fills an antique punch bowl on the dining room table, and yellow and white daisies decorate tables covered with pink and yellow striped cloths set out on the canopied terrace or in the music room.

Derby breakfasts begin in late morning and are large and festive; and as indicated above, one can count on



country ham, with its dark mahogany color and distinctive peppery taste. The ham will be sliced paper-thin and served cold or sliced thick, fried, and served hot with red-eye gravy. There will probably be some discussion about the differences between Kentucky and Virginia country hams and why Kentucky hams are so much better. Other dishes include turkey or chicken hash, often served on corn cakes (made from water-ground cornmeal, of course); creamed sweetbreads or crab meat; beef tenderloin; fresh asparagus and Bibb or limestone lettuce (which originated in Frankfort, Kentucky); and perhaps a few surprises.

And finally, there's the mint julep, a noble drink made with the best Kentucky bourbon and served in a heavily frosted silver julep cup garnished with sprigs of fresh mint that are sniffed as the drink is sipped. One's host, without question, makes the best mint juleps in Kentucky—every host does—and he has a secret recipe, which he will be glad to share. Most secret recipes go something like this: Crush four or five fresh mint

leaves in the bottom of a silver julep cup, add half an ounce of simple syrup, fill the cup three-quarters full with crushed ice, add the bourbon, stir gently, add more crushed ice to fill the cup, and put the cup in the refrigerator to frost. When ready to serve, put a short straw through the ice, trim the ends of two sprigs of mint, and set them stems down in the cup. Instructions are explicit in all secret recipes, and still there is controversy over almost every detail. The only ingredient no one ever argues about is the best Kentucky bourbon, and plenty of it. Therefore, caution is advised: Mint juleps are very good; they are also very strong.

The downtown Pendennis Club, in whose Grill Bar the Old Fashioned cocktail is claimed to have originated, serves well over three thousand mint juleps during Derby weekend. Their excellent Derby breakfast features country ham steak, roast beef hash, shad roe and bacon, scrambled eggs, fried grits, fried apples, collard greens, corn bread, biscuits, and blueberry muffins, and for dessert, Derby and pecan pies.

At the Louisville Country Club, breakfast is set out on a large horseshoe-shaped table covered by a ruffled tablecloth lined with red roses. A large standing horseshoe surrounded with roses and American and Kentucky state flags adds color to the décor. Club members and guests are tempted by bowls of fresh fruit, green bean soup, Bibb salad, turkey hash, shrimps *à la maison*, scrambled eggs with bacon and sausage, corn cakes and syrup, fried apples, sliced country ham with red-eye gravy, biscuits, corn bread, and Danish pastry.

Other elegant breakfasts are offered at the Normandy Inn, a restaurant located at Seventh and River streets in an interesting old section of town near the Actor's Theatre, and at the Old House, which occupies a building believed to have been built by Judge John Rowan, owner of Federal Hill, the house that served as Stephen Foster's inspiration for "My Old Kentucky Home." Derby breakfast at the Old House may include a stirrup cup and Whiskey Sours, country ham and ham croquettes, Bibb salad, eggs *à la Cardinal Hill*, broiled deviled tomatoes, hot cheese bread, and minted strawberry pyramid and bourbon balls.

Food and drink are serious subjects in Louisville, especially at Derby time, which is one of the many reasons why the "Run for the Roses" is such a great

occasion and everybody has so good a time—even those who are only “interested in a modest way in race horses,” or not at all. Louisville is never more beautiful than in early May, with the fruit trees, azaleas, tulips, and daffodils all in bloom and the grass a new, bright green. There’s an excitement in the air that grows into Derby fever. This is a highly pleasurable emotional state that makes it possible to believe that all men are Kentucky colonels, all women Louisville belles, and all horses sure winners.

The following dishes are among those one can expect to enjoy at a Derby breakfast in Louisville.

#### *Ham Croquettes*

Put enough baked country ham through the medium blade of a food grinder to measure 1 cup and put it in a bowl. Make  $\frac{1}{2}$  recipe béchamel sauce (January, 1974), using  $2\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoons flour, and let it cool until it is room temperature. Add the béchamel sauce to the bowl with  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup toasted fresh bread crumbs, 1 egg, beaten, 1 tablespoon each of Worcestershire sauce and minced parsley,  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon dry mustard, and salt and white pepper to taste. Combine the mixture well and form it into 1-inch balls. Roll the balls in fresh bread crumbs, put them on a plate, and chill them for 30 minutes. Fry the croquettes, in 2 batches, in hot deep oil ( $360^{\circ}$  F.) for 30 seconds, or until they are browned. Transfer the croquettes with a slotted spoon to paper towels to drain and serve them immediately. Makes about 16 croquettes.

#### *Baked Cheese Grits*

In a large heavy saucepan bring 5 cups lightly salted water to a boil over high heat. Sprinkle in 1 cup hominy grits, stirring, and let the water return to a boil. Reduce the heat to moderately low and cook the grits, covered, stirring occasionally, for 25 to 30 minutes, or until the liquid is absorbed and the mixture is thick. Remove the pan from the heat and let it cool for 10 minutes. Stir in  $2\frac{1}{2}$  cups grated sharp Cheddar cheese, 1 stick or  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup butter, softened, 3 eggs, lightly beaten, 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce, and salt and cayenne to taste. Pour the mixture into a

buttered 2-quart casserole and bake it in a preheated moderate oven ( $350^{\circ}$  F.) for 1 hour, or until it is puffed and browned. Serves 8.

#### *Broiled Deviled Tomatoes*

Peel 3 large ripe tomatoes and halve them crosswise. In a bowl cream together  $\frac{3}{4}$  stick or 6 tablespoons butter, 5 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons hot pepper sauce, or to taste, 1 teaspoon each of dry mustard, minced parsley, and grated onion, and salt to taste. Sprinkle the tomatoes with salt and arrange them in a gratin dish just large enough to hold them in one layer. Divide the butter mixture among the tomatoes and broil the tomatoes under a preheated broiler about 4 inches from the heat, basting them every 2 minutes with the pan juices, for 8 minutes, or until they are soft and the tops are browned. Serve the tomatoes hot garnished with minced parsley.

#### *Turkey Hash*

In a large heavy skillet combine 2 onions and 2 stalks of celery, all minced,  $\frac{1}{2}$  stick or  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup butter, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup water. Cook the mixture over moderately low heat, stirring occasionally, for 10 minutes, or until the vegetables are tender and most of the water has evaporated. Add 2 cups each of minced light and dark turkey meat and combine the mixture well. In a saucepan reduce 3 cups turkey stock or chicken stock (January, 1974) over moderately high heat to 2 cups, add it to the turkey mixture, and combine the mixture well. In a small bowl dissolve 2 teaspoons cornstarch in  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup cold strong coffee and stir it into the turkey mixture. Add salt and pepper to taste and cook the hash, stirring, until it is thickened. Swirl in 2 tablespoons butter, softened and cut into bits, and serve the hash with lacy corn cakes.

#### *Lacy Corn Cakes*

In a bowl combine 1 cup water-ground white cornmeal and  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon each of baking soda and salt. Stir in  $1\frac{1}{4}$  cups buttermilk and 1 egg, lightly beaten, and beat the mixture until it is smooth. Heat a large heavy skillet until it is very hot and in it melt  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup lard or vegetable shortening. Drop the batter

by tablespoons into the hot fat and cook the cakes, in batches, adding more lard if necessary, for 2 minutes on each side, or until they are golden. Transfer the corn cakes with a slotted spatula to paper towels to drain and keep them warm until all the corn cakes are cooked. Serve the corn cakes with turkey hash or with butter and syrup. Makes about 24 corn cakes.

#### *Shrimps à la Maison*

Shell and devein 3 pounds shrimps. In a very large heavy skillet sauté the shrimps, in 2 batches, in 1 stick or  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup butter with 2 garlic cloves, minced, and the juice of 1 lemon until the shrimps turn pink and are just tender. Sprinkle the shrimps with salt and pepper to taste and transfer them with a slotted spoon to a bed of steamed rice (January, 1974). Pour the pan juices over the shrimps and rice and garnish the shrimps with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup minced parsley. Serves 6 to 8.

#### *Derby Pie*

Make  $1\frac{1}{2}$  recipes *pâte brisée* (January, 1974), substituting 1 tablespoon sugar for the salt, and roll it into an 11-inch round on a lightly floured surface. Drape the dough over a rolling pin and fit it into a 9-inch pie tin. Leave a 1-inch overhang and trim off any excess dough. Fold the overhang over the rim, pressing it onto the sides of the pastry shell and form a decorative edge. Line the shell with wax paper, fill the paper with raw rice, and bake the shell in the lower third of a preheated hot oven ( $400^{\circ}$  F.) for 15 minutes. Remove the rice and paper and bake the shell for 10 minutes more, or until it is golden. Let the shell cool on a rack.

Make the filling: In a bowl combine  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup sugar, 1 stick or  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup butter, melted and cooled,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup flour, and 2 eggs, lightly beaten, and beat the mixture until it is smooth. Stir in 1 cup each of chocolate bits and coarsely chopped walnuts and 2 tablespoons bourbon or 1 teaspoon vanilla. Pour the mixture into the shell and bake the pie in a preheated moderate oven ( $350^{\circ}$  F.) for 30 to 35 minutes, or until the filling is golden. Serve the pie at room temperature, topped with whipped cream if desired. \*

