



Butter Buns and Benedictines: Jennie Benedict, a Louisville Restaurateur Remembered

Photo of butter buns and Blue Ribbon Cook Book. Gourmasdin.com, 2023.

By Alex Luken, Cave Hill Heritage Foundation

No Kentucky Derby buffet would be complete without Benedictines, the iconic tea sandwiches with the cucumber-flavored cream cheese filling. Any reputable buffet would also include a plate of the melt-in-your-mouth yeast rolls known as butter buns that are often served with a slice of beef or ham slathered with mustard or Henry Bain Sauce inside the bun. If you have enjoyed those delicacies, you can thank noted Louisville cook and cookbook author Jennie Benedict, who is buried at Cave Hill Cemetery (Section G, Lot 52). Recipes for both can be found in Benedict's *The Blue Ribbon Cook Book*, first published in 1902, and updated and re-published in 2008.

Virginia "Jennie" Carter Benedict was born March 25, 1860, in Harrods Creek, Kentucky, to John C. and Mary Clelland (Richards) Benedict. Her father was a wholesale dealer of molasses and coffee.

Jennie Benedict began her cooking career in 1893, baking fruitcake and plum cakes in a kitchen she had constructed behind her parents' home at 1327 South Third Street. Within six months, she had raised enough money from selling cakes to pay off the carpenter who constructed the kitchen. Using what today would be considered a highly effective direct marketing campaign, Benedict sent out a mailer to solicit catering work from friends and family. Her efforts landed her a four-year contract to provide chicken salad sandwich lunches to school children.

Benedict taught cooking lessons out of her catering kitchen and ran a lunch program for the Louisville Businesswoman's Club. In 1900, she purchased a lucrative confectionery business that included a Ladies Ice Cream Parlor and Tea Shop. By the time she opened Benedict's Restaurant in 1911, she had a total of 65 employees. The Benedictine sandwich was invented at Benedict's and became part of the restaurant's afternoon tea spread.

In 1925, Benedict sold her business and her family's home on Third Street and relocated to a house off Mellwood Avenue, which she called "Dream Acre." The house, in the Indianola subdivision on Warren Road, still stands. She died there in 1928 of pneumonia.

Benedict's first cookbook, *100 Tested Receipts*, published in 1897, included a chapter on preparation of food for the sick. Her second cookbook, *The Blue Ribbon Cook Book*, published in 1902, was so popular that a second edition was printed in 1904. In total, five editions of *The Blue Ribbon Cook Book* have been published. The latest edition, published in 2008, included a forward written by the Louisville *Courier Journal's* food editor, Susan Reigler.

Jennie Benedict's Butter Buns

(Adapted from *The Blue Ribbon Cook Book*)

Benedict's butter buns are also called "Camelot buns" after the Camelot Bakery, which has been closed for many years. Versions of the buns are sold at various bakeries and grocery stores, but most don't match the quality of Benedict's recipe.

- 1/2 cup scalded milk
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1-1/8 teaspoon active dry yeast
- 2 tablespoons melted salted butter, with a bit extra for brushing
- 1 egg + 1 egg yolk, well beaten
- About 2-1/4 cups flour

Add sugar and salt to hot milk; dissolve in yeast when milk has cooled to just lukewarm.

Stir in 3/4 cup of flour. Cover and let rise for 30 minutes or until bubbly. Add melted butter and beaten eggs, then add enough flour to form a slightly sticky dough ball.

Knead (by hand or in a stand mixer) for about 3 minutes. Cover and let rise again until doubled in bulk.

Roll out dough to about 1/8-inch thickness. Cut into approximately 2-inch rounds. Place half of the rounds in a buttered baking pan. Brush with melted butter, then place remaining rounds on top.

Cover and let the rounds rise again until just about doubled in height. Brush the tops with butter, then bake in a 375° oven for about 10 minutes until golden brown.

Jennie Benedict's Benedictine

(Recipe courtesy of the Filson Historical Society)

Over the years, Louisville cooks have made changes to the original recipe, ranging from the type of bread used for the sandwich to the addition of grated cucumber. Variations on the spread have included one with dillweed and an exotic contemporary version that gets its green coloring from mashed avocado.

- 8 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 3 tablespoons cucumber juice
- 1 tablespoon onion juice
- 1 teaspoon salt
- A few grains of cayenne pepper or dash Tabasco sauce
- 2 drops green food coloring
- Mayonnaise to spread on bread

To get the cucumber juice, peel, seed, and grate the cucumber. Sprinkle with salt, then let sit for 30 minutes to draw out liquid. Drain and reserve liquid, then wrap the grated cucumber in a clean dish towel and squeeze the excess juice into a dish. Discard pulp.

Do the same for the onion.

Mix all ingredients together with a fork (not food processor) until well-blended.

Serve on soft white bread with crusts removed. Before spreading with Benedictine spread, gently roll bread slices with a rolling pin to achieve a genteel tea sandwich thickness.

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