

## Students lead charge for state dessert



By Doug Denison

Dina Vendetti's fifth- and sixth-grade class at St. John's Lutheran School in Dover researched the history of peach farming in Delaware and helped state Rep. Darryl Scott, D-Dover, draft a bill naming peach pie as the official state dessert. Kneeling are, from left, Vendetti, fifth-graders Cleo Bell, Giana Garronbone, Erika Wharff and sixth-grader Clara Greene. Standing are, from left, fifth-graders Jordan Hutchings, Liam Gallagher, Giles Darling, Jeff Morrow, Hayden Babione and Matt Nuzzo.

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By Doug Denison, Staff Writer  
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Dover, Del. -

When state legislators return from their spring recess April 28 they'll have their hands full with the budget, sports betting and state pay, but there's one issue that tops them all: the designation of an official state dessert.

Before the break, Rep. Darryl Scott, D-Dover, introduced a bill in the House that would name Peach Pie Delaware's first treat, a measure he put forward with the careful advice of Dina Vendetti's fifth- and sixth-grade class at St. John's Lutheran School in Dover.

Vendetti's students spent the last several months researching and investigating the history of peach farming in Delaware to gather the facts necessary to defend their dessert.

Fifth-grader Erika Wharff said Delaware was a peach growing powerhouse until the early 1900s, when many trees were struck by a blight.

"We decided on [peach pie] because there was a large amount of peach trees in Delaware, 800,000 peach trees. Then there was a disease called the 'yellow disease' that caused the trees to rot," she explained.

But the students learned peach farming was revitalized when agriculture boomed in Delaware after World War II.

"There were farmers who started growing peaches again, and peaches have made a real comeback in our state," Vendetti said. "One of the main reasons the rail system was expanded into Kent and Sussex counties was to transport peaches."

In the days before the blight, peach festivals were common and sprang up all across lower Delaware, something the Kent County Tourism Department would like to see revived as well.

At the start of their project, the students met with tourism director Cindy Small, who told them Delaware could attract a good number of visitors to events honoring the peach.

"She said she's been noticing that tourists are stopping in Maryland because they have a new dessert there called Smith Island cake. It's 10 layers of cake with icing in between," explained fifth-grader Giles Darling. "If we had festivals and stuff with peach pie, we could get some tourists, too."

But the class realized they might have some trouble convincing people that peaches are a Delaware commodity.

"We found out that there could be a problem with peach pie because Georgia has peaches as its state fruit," said fifth-grader Liam Gallagher.

However, Vendetti said Delaware agriculture statistics show the state boasts a bigger per-capita peach crop than its southern rival.

"We have more varieties of peaches, and for the size and population of our state, the growing is actually more intense," she said.

After preparing a first draft of the bill, Scott sent it to the class for final editing, and after some minor suggestions were incorporated, the bill was introduced.

In support of the bill the students also circulated a petition among their schoolmates and members of the community.

Vendetti's class will be at the upcoming House committee hearing on the bill and is ready to field questions and defend their position, even if they can't quite put their fingers on what makes peach pie such a tasty dessert.

"We're trying to find why peach pie is so interesting, what's different, what's unique but we can't find it," said Wharff. "But we have a lot of information that we've been gathering for a month or so, I think we're ready."

And if polite argument fails, the students are prepared to bring out the big guns.

"Some of the parents might make some peach pie to help convince the representatives to pass it," said fifth-grader Josh Morrow.

But the students are optimistic about their bill's chances and already are thinking of what kinds of fun events they can plan for the summer, including a peach pie day at St. John's and a contest to find the best peach pie recipe.

Vendetti also has been in contact with officials at the Delaware State Fair, who say they'd love to incorporate peach pie into the event.

"We think the timing is really good, because if it does pass it will be in time for the fair," she said.

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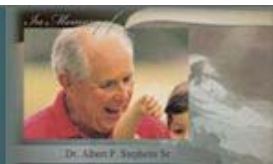
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