

Neenish Tarts History

A Neenish tart, is a tart made with a pastry base, sweet gelatine-set cream, mock cream, or icing sugar paste filling with jam, and icing on top in two colours, half one colour and half the other. The two coloured icings are usually brown ("Chocolate") and white ("Vanilla"), pink icing and white, or even brown and pink these days.

The tart was created in Australia and is still mainly only known here and in New Zealand. Alternative names such as Nienich (recorded in 1935) and nenische (1959) suggests a German origin, except Neenish was known before the alternatives, and it is suggested that these names were to give a "continental" flavour to the tart.

The earliest known reference to Neenish tarts that has been found so far appeared in the Melbourne Argus on 21 May 1924: '“Culinary” (Brighton) asks for a recipe for Neenish cakes’. The earliest recipe found so far is from the Cairns Post Queensland, Saturday 3rd October, 1925, page 12, 'Some Uncommon Recipes', with an almond pastry, thick sweet custard, optionally stiffened with cornflour, and a water icing, half covered with a strong-coffee water-icing.

Another early printed recipe is in Miss Drake's Home Cookery published in 1929 at Glenferrie in Victoria, calling for cream filling set with gelatine, and pink and white icing on top. The cases are made from: 8 ozs. almond meal; 6 ozs. icing sugar; 1 large tablespoon flour; essence almonds; 2 whites of eggs. The filling is made of: 1 gill cream; 1/2 gill milk; 1/4 oz. gelatine; 1 tablespoon sugar; essence vanilla. The icing is half white and half pink.

A 1932 recipe in Miranda's Cook Book calls for custard filling and chocolate and white icing.

The fifth edition of the Country Women's Association Cookery Book and Household Hints, published in Perth in 1941, has the following recipe, provided by E. Birch of Baandee: Cream 2 ozs. butter and add 1 tablespoon sugar, rub in 5 ozs. Self raising flour and a pinch of salt and mix to a stiff paste with an egg. Knead well. Roll on a well-floured board till very thin, line patty tins with paste and fill with a good thick custard. Glaze the tops with thin icing. Use chocolate and white alternately'. This time, the icing is half chocolate and half white. And no mock cream. More interesting is the fact that the cakes are called nienich tarts. This certainly has a Germanic ring to it, and the spelling continues to be used in the CWA Cookery Book as late as 1964. "

Wendy Kerr and Jenny Hawke, of the Forbes public library, found a reference in Patisserie, an encyclopaedia of cakes, by Aaron Maree: 'Thought to have been invented by cooks in outback Australia.'

Leo Schofield, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1988, said his mother made them from a Country Women's Association cookbook sold in Orange in World War II. When he asked for information, some readers suggested they had a Viennese or German origin. But a Mrs Evans said they were first made in her home town, Grong Grong. She and her sister, Venus, nominated Ruby Neenish, a friend of their mother's, as the originator. Mrs Evans said that in 1913, running short of cocoa and baking for an unexpected shower tea for her daughter, Ruby made do by icing her tarts with half-chocolate, half-white icing. From then on they were known as neenish tarts. That, said Leo, would account for the tarts' popularity in country districts and country cookbooks.

At Heather Brae we have been unable to track down the eponymous Ruby Neenish, and some of the 'authenticating devices' in this account are questionable. Just how 'unexpected' can a shower tea be?

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