By Mary Augusta Rodgers

Churchill 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 hush, 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; bookmaking 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.

In 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
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 cointreau, 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 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, shrimp 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 minced strawberry pyramidal 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 “in-
terested 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 Louis-
ville 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 1½ recipe béchamel sauce
(January, 1974), using 2½ tablespoons
flour, and let it cool until it is room
temperature. Add the béchamel sauce
to the bowl with 2½ cup toasted fresh
bread crumbs, 1 egg, beaten, 1 table-
spoon each of Worcestershire sauce and
minced parsley, ½ teaspoon dry mus-
tard, 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° 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 mix-
ture is thick. Remove the pan from the
heat and let it cool for 10 minutes. Stir
in 2½ cups grated sharp Cheddar
cheese, 1 stick or ½ cup butter, soft-
ened, 3 eggs, lightly beaten, 1 tablespoon
Worcestershire sauce, and salt and cay-
eene to taste. Pour the mixture into a
buttered 2-quart casserole and bake it
in a preheated moderate oven (350° 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 to-
gether ¾ stick or 6 tablespoons butter,
5 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce, 1½
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 garn-
ished with minced parsley.

Turkey Hash

In a large heavy skillet combine 2
onions and 2 stalks of celery, all min-
ced, ⅛ stick or ¼ cup butter, and ¼ cup
water. Cook the mixture over moderate-
ly low heat, stirring occasionally, for 10
minutes, or until the vegetables are
tender and most of the water has evapo-
rated. 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 (Jan-
uary, 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
¼ 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 ½ teaspoon
each of baking soda and salt. Stir in
1¼ 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 ¼ cup lard
or vegetable shortening. Drop the butter
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
tissue 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 ¼
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 ¼ cup minced
parsley. Serves 6 to 8.

Derby Pie

Make 1½ 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° 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
¾ cup sugar, 1 stick or ¼ cup butter,
melted and cooled, ½ cup flour, and 2
eggs, lightly beaten, and beat the mix-
ture 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° F.)
for 30 to 35 minutes, or until the filling
is golden. Serve the pie at room tem-
perature, topped with whipped cream if
desired.