

Sept. 9, 1998---

There is only so much you can do with a spud.

Mash it. Bake it. French fry it. Buy him a drink.

But Joy Bandemer cut five baked potatoes in half, stuffed them with small pieces from 10 White Castle hamburgers, threw on some cheese and baked them.

And now, the Bolingbrook, Ill. homemaker will receive a sack of 10 sliders a week for 52 weeks as the winner of the 7th Annual White Castle Recipe Contest held last month at the company headquarters in Columbus, Ohio.

I was a contest judge.

Bandemer's Castle Stuffed Potatoes beat a fueled-up field from across America that included White Castle Taco Fondue, Awesome White Castle Italian Style Pizza Burgers and Stubby's 3 Cheese White Castle Spinach Quiche. Belch!

Bandemer is an old pro at this. Last year her Castle Stuffed Pork Chops was the contest runner-up.

Bandemer is to beef cookies what Wolfgang Puck is to cheeseless pizza.

It's funny: Bandemer doesn't look like the type of person who would do weird things with White Castle hamburgers. She wears June Cleaver pearls and her eyes have the kind look that might offer a cup o' coffee - instead of a spud o' sliders. When a visitor gets lost on the way to her ranch house, Bandemer will stand out and wait in the driveway.

Bandemer, 62, has lived with her husband, Fred, for the past 23 years in southwest suburban Bolingbrook. He also likes White Castles; he has no choice. And they have a daughter, Karen, who is a schoolteacher in Minneapolis.

The Bandemers have a black and white cat, Osirus, and a miniature Dachshund named Heidi. And wouldn't you know it, Heidi adores White Castles.

"When we come home with White Castles, she sits and barks," Bandemer said during a conversation at her kitchen table. "Then we give it to her and she shuts up. She won't eat McDonald's, though."

This year Bandemer entered three recipes. She liked her White Castle Oriental with rice, cream of mushroom soup, celery, onions and soy sauce, but it did not make

the final cut. Fortunately, she was hip to the hot baked potato craze. "Everybody loves baked potatoes stuffed with everything," she said. "So why not White Castle?"

I got misty-eyed. I thought I heard Robert Goulet singing "The Impossible Dream" from the Bandemer living room.

"The green pepper and onions gives it flavor," Bandemer said, building to a crescendo. "I mix the potato that I scoop out of the baked potato shell with the sour cream and mix everything together at once. I make little mounds and put them back in the shell and sprinkle them with cheese and chives and bake them. They come out pretty good. Ten White Castles are just enough. You can still taste them, but I also like the taste of the potato and sour cream. Twenty White Castles would be overwhelming.

"They could be a whole meal, you could also cut them in sections for hors d'oeuvres. But I never thought I would win. I was just trying to think what I could mix White Castle with. Noodles? Turkey? Last year lasagna won (the Ultimate White Castle Stuffed Pasta Shells With Italian Sausage and mozzarella cheese), but I would never mix White Castle, bread and lasagna."

Bandemer is an avid cookbook collector and enters recipe contests for fun. As much as she loves White Castles, she has no idea what she is going to do with 520 White Castle hamburgers over the next year. One thing is for sure: Heidi will no longer be a miniature Dachshund.

Ironically, the Bandemers live less than a mile from the nearest White Castle. No, it's not that bad. The Bandemers came first. Bandemer explained, "We were here and (in 1983) two boys went around Bolingbrook with a wagon and got enough signatures to send to headquarters that they wanted a White Castle here. When it opened (in 1984) for the first couple weeks, people came from all over."

Bandemer was born and reared on the South Side of Chicago. A White Castle stand was always in the neighborhood. She attended Calumet High School and there was a White Castle at 79th and Loomis. As a teenager, she'd go to the beautiful Southtown Theatre and after the movies, Bandemer and her friends would stop at the White Castle at 63rd and Halsted.

"It's good to have a White Castle nearby," Bandemer said. "I don't care for breakfast much. Sometimes we hit the road at two or three in the morning for our cabin in Minnesota. We get a sack of White Castles and two or three cups of coffee and take off."

Between 1953 and 1965 Bandemer worked in the Chicago stockyards. She was a secretary to the president of the Pfaelzer Brothers Co. when she met her husband, who was operations supervisor. Bandemer knows meat makes the meal.

"There's only a small amount of meat on each (White Castle) patty," Bandemer said. "But it is good meat. There is no filler, even though it is less than an ounce."

Bandemer remains eligible to enter future contests. She is ready, willing and able to explore future trends such as Cajun White Castle, White Castle Cuban or Pierogi-A-Go-Go.

"Oh, my," Bandemer said. "Can you picture blackened White Castles on Creole rice? Or how 'bout if you battered them in deep-fried squares and put sweet and sour sauce for a Chinese White Castle?"

Bandemer seemed dizzy with all the possibilities. That's OK.

Time slides by when you're having a good time with White Castles.