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Pies and Cobblers

During frontier times, it was not uncommon for pioneer women to bake 21 pies a week, one for every meal. Few of us today eat pie at every meal. Pie pastry, which is also used to make cobblers is simple in terms of ingredients. Success or failure of the shell depends on how the shortening and flour are mixed. Technique is the key to a good pie pastry shell. Add a good filling and a decorative finish, and it's no wonder pies are still the favorite American dessert.

PASTRY CRUST INGREDIENT BASICS

Pie and cobbler crusts have only a few ingredients: flour, fat, liquid, and some flavoring such as salt or sugar. Occasionally egg is added to give strength and color to the crust. The proportion of these ingredients in the dough and how they are mixed give a distinctive characteristic — tender or tough, crumbly or flaky.

FLOUR

As the main ingredient, flour provides the structure of pastry dough. When liquid is added to flour, the protein gluten is developed. Gluten forms an elastic frame work that holds the dough together but allows it to be stretched and rolled out without breaking.

All-purpose flour or pastry flour are the best choices for pie and cobbler dough. All-purpose flour is a blend of hard and soft white wheat flours. Pastry flour, not to be confused with cake flour, is a soft flour, but it may be difficult to find. Whole wheat flour adds a nutty flavor to pie and cobbler crusts; however, if it is used alone, it produces a heavy dough that is difficult to mix and roll. A more acceptable crust is obtained when a combination of all-purpose and whole wheat flours are used.

FAT

Tenderness, or shortness, and richness are what fat brings to pastries. Fat coats flour particles so they can't mix with water to produce gluten, so a flaky pastry is composed of numerous layers of gluten separated by pieces of fat. These layers are a result of mixing in the fat so it doesn't completely coat the flour particles. As the pastry is baked, the pieces of fat melt, leaving empty pockets between the gluten layers.

A short pastry has a high proportion of fat to flour and has a crumbly, sometimes mealy texture. The fat in the pastry is spread over a high proportion of the flour particles. It is tender because the fat is well mixed with the flour, but since little gluten is formed, the pastry lacks flakiness.

Shortening and lard have more shortening power than butter. They don't contain moisture, and therefore don't encourage the development of gluten. They also produce a flakier, more tender crust.

The use of butter in the crust may cause a less tender and flaky, crust, but it also has a rich, buttery flavor and aroma. Oil produces a crumbly, rather than flaky pastry. Use all shortening, lard, butter, or a combination of these fats in any basic pie crust recipe depending on the effect you want. Keep in mind that if your recipe calls for all shortening, and you want to use butter, increase the butter by one-fourth.

LIQUID

Water is necessary to develop some gluten in the flour and give structure and flakiness to the dough. The liquid also acts as leavening when it is converted to steam during baking. Too much liquid will make a tough crust, so add the smallest amount of liquid suggested in a recipe. If additional liquid is needed, add 1 tablespoon at a time, until the desired consistency is reached. For flakiness, use ice water or ice-cold liquids so the fat does not melt. Using milk makes a richer dough that browns more quickly, but is less crisp.

ACID

Acids such as lemon juice, vinegar, or sour cream may be added to the dough to relax the gluten and tenderize the crust.

SALT

The flavor and color of the baked crust is improved by the addition of salt.

SUGAR

Not all dough contains sugar, but it is added for flavor and for the color it adds to the crust as the sugar caramelizes.

HOW TO MAKE PERFECT PASTRY

The crowning touch to a delicious meal is a homemade pie or cobbler. The crust can make or break any filling. Yet the perfect pastry isn't as elusive as you think. Fruit, custard, meringue, or chiffon pies make wonderful fillings. Or, fill the crust with a meat filling for a hearty main dish. Vary the size by using an 8-inch or 9-inch pie pan or make tiny tarts or individual pies. Muffin tins work well as tart pans, too.

Over the years, milling has improved the quality and uniformity of flour. There is no need to sift flour anymore unless you are using flour that has become packed. To properly measure a cup of flour, dip the dry measuring cup into the flour. Level off with a spatula or straight-edged knife. If the recipe calls for flour to be sifted with other dry ingredients, just stir to blend.

MAKING THE DOUGH

Pie dough can be mixed with the fingertips, a pastry blender, two knives, the paddle attachment of a blender, or a food processor. Cutting in literally whittles the fat into smaller and smaller flour-coated pieces. For flaky pie crusts, the fat should be in pea-size pieces. For best results, chill the fat. When combining more than one type of fat, soften the fats first, combine them, and then chill the mixture.

- ★ The most popular pie crust is made from pastry dough, but biscuit and yeast dough, crumbs, nuts, and meringues are used as well.
- ★ Use a flaky pastry for the classic pie crust.
- ★ Use egg pastry for moist custard fillings or rich pies.

- ★ For a nutty flavor, substitute ¼ cup of ground nuts of your choice for ¼ cup of flour in any pastry recipe.
- ★ Crumb crusts are a good choice for chilled or frozen fillings such as Bavarian cream, chiffon, or ice cream. Vanilla or chocolate wafers, gingersnaps, dry macaroons, graham crackers, and zwieback, or Melba toast are often used for crumb crusts. Be sure and use a flavor that will complement the filling. A crumb crust is not rolled out. Simply add a little sugar to the crumbs, stir in melted butter and press the crumb crust mixture into a pie plate. Then chill and fill. For a crisper crumb crust, bake at 350°F for 10 minutes before filling.

ROLLING OUT PASTRY

Roll the pastry on a lightly floured surface or between two sheets of lightly floured wax paper to form a circle about two inches larger than the pie plate or cobbler pan. Roll dough out from the center toward the edge, easing up on the pressure near the edge of the dough. The dough should be about ⅛-inch thick. Gently lift the dough and give a quarter turn after each rolling, flouring surfaces as needed to prevent sticking and tearing. If the dough tears, use water to apply a small flat piece of dough to the tear. Patching is preferred to rerolling because rerolling toughens the dough. To transfer the dough to the pie plate, fold the pastry in half or quarters and carefully drape into the pie plate. Fit the dough into the plate. Do not stretch the dough, or the crust will shrink as it bakes. To prevent soggy crusts due to juice exuded by fruits, brush the fully baked shell with a thin layer of melted apple jelly or currant jelly, which waterproofs the crust.

For a single-crust pie, trim the edge, leaving a 1-inch overhang. Fold edges of the dough under. Finish the edges and bake or fill and bake, depending on recipe instructions.

For a double-crust pie, trim the bottom crust even with the rim of the pie plate. To make the top crust, roll out the remaining dough, slightly thinner than the bottom crust. Fill the pie. Brush the rim of the bottom crust with cold water and place the top crust gently on the pie. Press the edges to seal, and trim the pastry, leaving a 1-inch overhang. Finish the edge with a decorative finish and bake according to the recipe. Prick or make a decorative vent in the crust to allow steam to escape.

PROPER PAN SELECTION

Selecting the right pan can make a difference in your flaky crust, too. For a well-baked, browned bottom crust, choose a pie pan made of heat-resistant glass or enamelware. Darkened tin pans or aluminum pans with a dull satiny finish give good results. Avoid shiny metal, as it deflects heat, and the crust will not brown well.

DECORATIVE FINISHES

To make attractive edges for single- or double-crust pies, extend the pastry 1 inch beyond the rim of the pie plate. Fold the dough under so it is even with the edge of the pie plate to create a raised, even rim. Finish with a decorative trim. Cutouts of your own design can also be applied to the top crust. A glaze made from milk and a sprinkling of sugar or from egg lightly beaten with a pinch of salt and 1 teaspoon of water may also be applied for a more even browning effect.

BAKING PIES AND COBBLERS

The recipe baking time is only a general guideline. The crust edge of a single-crust pie should appear golden brown, crisp, and dry with a set filling. The crust of a double-crust pie should appear golden brown, crisp, and dry with the filling bubbling through the steam vents. Fully baked crusts should be cooled completely before filling.

FREEZING PASTRY DOUGH AND PIES

Pastry dough may be frozen for six to eight weeks if well wrapped and thawed in the refrigerator before using. Unbaked pastry shells may be frozen in the pans for 6 to 8 weeks, but prebake or fill and bake according to the recipe without defrosting. To freeze unbaked filled pies, add extra thickening to compensate for the extra moisture that will exude while baking - an extra tablespoon of cornstarch or 1 to 2 tablespoons of flour per pie. Clear Jel[®], a modified food starch thickener, works well in frozen pies because it is very clear. If you plan to freeze a double crust pie, do not cut vents in the top until ready to bake. Wrap, label, and freeze for up to three months. Bake unthawed at 425°F for 15 minutes and reduce heat to 375°F for 25 to 35 minutes more. Pie shells and fillings may be frozen separately. A fully baked pie shell can be frozen for up to three months. Wrap well, label, and freeze. Loosen the wrapping and thaw in the refrigerator. Crisp an unfilled crust at 350°F for 5 to 10 minutes, then cool and fill.

Baked and filled double-crust fruit pies may be frozen for up to six months. Wrap well, label, and freeze. Loosen the wrapping and thaw in the refrigerator. Warm thawed, filled pies in 350°F oven for 10 to 15 minutes. Cover the edges of the crust with foil to prevent overbrowning.

FRUIT PIES

Fresh, frozen, canned, or dried fruits of high quality may be used to make excellent pie fillings. Fruits vary in sweetness. Add less sugar to fruits that are already naturally sweet, as the sugar will draw out more juices and make for a runny filling. If the filling is very juicy, bake the pie on a baking sheet to catch any juices that may overflow.

There are three different methods of making pie fillings: cooked juice, cooked fruit, and old-fashioned.

The cooked juice method is best used for cherry, blueberry, and other berries, peach, and frozen or canned apple fillings. Only the juice is cooked, allowing the fruit to retain its shape and flavor better.

Fresh apple, raisin, and rhubarb are excellent fruits to use in the cooked fruit method. The fruit must be cooked because there is not enough liquid present.

The old-fashioned method is best suited for pies made with fresh apples or peaches. All the ingredients are mixed together prior to being baked.

Common thickeners for fruit pie fillings are flour, cornstarch, arrowroot, and tapioca. Flour gives an opaque appearance, while the other thickeners are clearer. If you are planning on preserving your filling through canning first, Clear Jel[®] works well in canning pie fillings because it withstands high heat and thickens as a clear gel.

CUSTARD OR SOFT FILLINGS

Custard or cream fillings can use the same thickeners as in fruit pies. To avoid lumping, starches should be mixed with a cold liquid or with sugar before being added to a hot liquid. Sugar and strong acids reduce the thickening power of starch. When possible, all or part of the sugar and strong acids like lemon juice should be added after the starch has thickened.

Chiffon fillings are made by adding gelatin to a cream filling or to a thickened fruit and juice mixture. Egg whites or whipped cream are then folded into the mixture, poured into a baked pie shell, and allowed to set up. Always use pasteurized egg products if no cooking process is called for in the recipe, as raw eggs may be contaminated with illness-causing bacteria.

It is best to eat custard or cream pies soon after they are baked. These pies are prone to bacterial spoilage if not stored properly. Refrigerate immediately, if you don't plan to eat the pie within two hours. These pies develop a soggy shell if not eaten soon after baking.

MERINGUE BASICS

Meringue has long been a mystery even to experienced cooks and pie makers. It may be soft and fluffy as a cloud when the pie goes into the oven and yet quite different when it reaches the dinner table. Familiar problems include shrinkage, weeping (wateriness underneath), cutting difficulty due to stiffness, toughness, and beading (small moisture droplets over the surface). Beading is a result of overcooking causing overcoagulation of the egg whites.

Meringue-making studies show that the secrets of fine quality meringue are whipping the egg whites and sugar to just the right stiffness, placing the meringue on a hot filling, and baking at 350°F for 12 to 15 minutes.

For tender, moist meringue that holds its fluffiness, the right amount of whipping is important. For best results, leave the egg whites at room temperature for no longer than 30 minutes. Beat until the foam is relatively fine and forms rounded peaks when the beater is lifted out. Then add sugar gradually, 2 tablespoons per each egg white, and continue beating until the meringue is stiff but not dry.

Meringues baked on hot fillings cook more evenly and are less likely to weep than those baked on a cold pie. Baking meringue-covered pies at temperatures higher than 350°F provide more protection against leakage, shrinkage, and stickiness than baking at a lower temperature for a longer time. Lower temperatures are not recommended because the center of the meringue may not bake completely through, which is a safety concern. Meringues should be no higher than 2 inches to allow for thorough cooking.

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