

Apple Pie

When we first began coming to Bainbridge Island there was a farm on Miller Road that in the fall sold fresh-pressed cider from heritage apple varieties and something called “a pie in a bag.” This was simply a paper bag filled with assorted tasty varieties, and the idea was to make a pie from them in which all those flavors would be mixed together, resulting in a really delicious pie.

We tried it, and it worked.

The farm is gone, but every autumn I make another mixed-apple pie, and it gets raves; so I thought I’d share some tips on how I go about this.

When we lived in Pullman, we would go to the WSU Tukey Orchard stand where we could sample all sorts of rare and newly developed varieties, but today almost every grocery store offers an interesting variety beyond the bland Red Delicious and the super-tart Granny Smith.

Currently I’m using a slightly adapted version of Mark Bittman’s traditional apple pie recipe from my favorite cookbook: *How to Cook Everything*.

Filling recipe

½ cup light brown sugar
½ teaspoon cinnamon
⅛ teaspoon grated nutmeg
pinch salt
5 or 6 good-tasting apples
3 tablespoons tapioca

Directions

First, the crust. You already know whether you can make a nice flaky crust. I use Julia Child’s recipe, which involves half butter and half lard, made in a food processor.

If you’ve never mastered this art, don’t despair. You can buy an OK pre-made crust in the frozen-food department of your grocery store. Unfortunately these are only bottom crusts, and trying to flatten one into a top crust is a hassle. So you can make streusel topping. Or you can bag the whole pie idea and make an apple crisp. The filling will taste the same.

Gluten-free tips

I happen to be one of the unfortunate 1% who is actually gluten-intolerant, not just a gluten-free wannabe, so I use gluten-free baking mix. Some of these are rather gritty in texture because the brown rice that makes up the bulk of most mixes is not ground finely enough. If you’re ambitious enough to make your own mix, pay the extra for a bag of Authentic Foods superfine brown rice flour. It has an excellent texture. Authentic Foods also makes a piecrust mix which I haven’t tried. They don’t

make any claims to it being superfine, but it might be worth a try if you can find it—most likely in your local health-food store. Ordering their products by mail costs a fortune: they're not only pricey, but the shipping fees are huge.

Traditional piecrust recipes call for you to allow the crust mixture to “relax” in the refrigerator because the initial kneading develops the wheat gluten and makes the dough chewy. Using frozen butter and refrigerated lard I found that this wasn't really necessary, but guess what—you can skip this step altogether if you're baking gluten free because—no gluten!

However, the downside of GF dough is that it is really crumbly: it doesn't want to hang together and form nice flakes. So I add a teaspoon of xanthan gum to the crust mixture. Xanthan gum is used in all sorts of GF baked goods to make them chewy but it's pricey (buy it in bulk when you can) and this is a lot; however, I find using this much makes my crust hold together better.

If it's not a medical necessity, use regular wheat flour. It tastes much better and may actually be more nutritious.

Another crust tip

Adding the correct amount of water to piecrust mix is one of the trickiest things in the process. Too little, and the crust won't hang together properly. Too much, and it will be a soggy mess that bakes up into a hard, tough crust. Buy the cheapest vodka you can find and substitute it for half or more of the water. It will evaporate in the baking and make your crust lighter and flakier.

The filling

Now to the good stuff. Use apples that taste good.

Period.

What you like and what others like won't necessarily match. Pay attention to flavor, not crunch. This filling is meant to be soft and any apple baked long enough will do. I often choose five different varieties, one apple apiece.

Core, peel, and slice the apples. I prefer thin slices, $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{8}$ inch thick. That way the filling collapses to give a nice, solid texture without apple-free voids. You can also pack more apples into a pie when they are thinly sliced.

Bittman calls for half white sugar and half brown. I prefer all light brown. Suit your own taste, but don't skimp a lot on the sugar or your pie may not hold together.

Spices

I'm a cinnamon fanatic. A bottle of cinnamon that's been sitting in your spice cabinet for years has lost all the volatile oils that give a good cinnamon its magic. The good stuff is true cinnamon—otherwise known as Ceylon cinnamon. The hard sticks sold for putting in cider are usually Cassia cinnamon, which is much less complex in

flavor. Penzey's sells several kinds of cinnamon, including their own mix, which is wonderful. Always use Ceylon cinnamon if you can find it.

But my preference is to grind my own spices. They are much fuller-flavored when freshly ground. You don't need a mortar and pestle. I use a cheap electric coffee mill that is devoted entirely to this task, but wipe it out carefully after grinding spices—or if you like spiced coffee you can use it as is.

A popular line of Mexican spices used to sell true cinnamon sticks quite reasonably, but they've changed to cassia in recent years. The two are easy to tell apart: if the sticks are like hard curled pieces of wood, they're cassia. If they consist of soft shreds you can crumble with your fingers, they're true cinnamon. You can find true cinnamon sticks in specialty stores and buy just enough to use for a half-year or so. Grind it to a very fine powdery texture.

Nutmeg is even more important to use freshly grated. A cheap grater will do fine. If you need to grind a large quantity of nutmeg (like for a large batch of fruitcake batter), you can slice it with a heavy knife and put it in the electric mill with some flour or sugar from the recipe. Nutmeg is moist and will not become powdery by itself.

Why salt? Salt is a flavor enhancer. You don't want the pie to actually taste salty, but it enlivens the other flavors.

Bittman adds a tablespoon of freshly squeezed lemon juice. That's a matter of taste. Some apple varieties are more tart than others, and some people like an edgier taste than others. Suit yourself.

Thickening

Cornstarch or flour often makes for a runny or gooey filling. I use tapioca for all fruit pies. I made the mistake of going overboard with a recent blackberry pie that came out with a texture sort of like chewing gum. Bittman calls for 2 tablespoons of tapioca. I find 3 works better for me. This is the regular cheap little tapioca pellets that come in a box to make tapioca pudding: not pearls or tapioca flour.

Mix everything thoroughly so the spice mixture coats the apples and the various varieties and mixed together.

Topping it off

Most fruit pie recipes call for you to dot the filling with butter before applying the top crust. I usually forget, but it does make for a nicer finish.

You can brush the top crust with egg or milk to give it a nice smooth brown finish, and sprinkle it with white sugar if you like that look.

Baking the pie

Bittman calls for baking the pie at 450° for 10 minutes and at 350° for 40-50 minutes. I don't know why, but my pies always take much longer. The challenge is to get the top nicely browned and the bottom thoroughly cooked without burning any part of the pie. With standard recipes, the bottom crust often comes out underbaked or raw.

Things that will cause bottom crusts to bake too slowly:

- 1) ingredients too cold
- 2) mixture too moist
- 3) flour not ideal

Baking a fruit pie on a sheet to catch drips is a good idea if you hate cleaning the oven, but it will slow down the process of baking the bottom crust. Using a black cast-iron griddle to catch the drips should speed things up.

A metal pie plate, especially a black one, will brown the crust faster, but I always use a Pyrex one. It takes longer, but I can see how the bottom crust is doing. It will never be as dark as the top, but it should show some color. To my taste, as long as nothing is burning the pie isn't overdone.

The usual instruction to cook until the filling liquid bubbles up through the slits in the top crust (you did slit it, didn't you?) for me results in an underbaked pie. I always have to leave it in longer.

The pie will hold together better if you let it cool until it's just slightly warm. This can take a few hours.

My father always had a slice of Velveeta cheese on top of his hot apple pie, and for a lot of people this dish is not complete without vanilla ice cream; but first sample the pie by itself to savor its true deliciousity.

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