

Cooking Corner: Two experts share their pie-baking secrets

by Caroline Dipping

It's the time of year to put your flour prowess to the test. The people at your holiday table want pie - and lots of it. And whether you are making one pie or 100, take your crust cues from two bakers whose pie making reaches lofty proportions.

PIE SECRETS - With an apple juice glaze and atypical looks, this large rectangular Apple Slab Pie has all the flavor of a traditional pie, and it serves up to 20 people. CNS Photo by Anita L. Arambula. This Thanksgiving, Amy O'Hara made 50 pies a scant two weeks before the big day. She was waiting to be told what kind to make.

Told?

O'Hara is the pastry chef at Nine-Ten restaurant in the upscale San Diego community of La Jolla, and is among a legion of bakers who volunteer to craft pies for the annual "Pie in the Sky" fundraiser to benefit Mama's Kitchen's, a San Diego nonprofit that provides free, hot meals for people with AIDS and other critical illnesses. After Mama's Kitchen gets a sense of which way sales are blowing, O'Hara gets pressed into service to make apple, pumpkin or pecan.

Unlike O'Hara, Elizabeth Harris, owner and baker at Elizabethan Desserts in Encinitas, Calif., knew precisely what her marching orders were this year. Bake 500 apple pies and have them ready for pickup the day before Thanksgiving.

The two bakers approach the art of pie slightly differently. O'Hara treats each baking foray like research for a thesis, while Harris is more casually at ease and scoffs at the notion that "pastry is science."

"Being patient is the most important thing anyone should do when baking," O'Hara said. "And research the

recipe from start to finish before beginning. I don't like surprises."

Harris represents the other camp. "If you watched me bake, you would be horrified," she said. "I don't hardly measure a damned thing."

Here are some tips from the two bakers, who, despite their differing philosophies, get the job of holiday pie baking done on a grand scale:

- Find a recipe you really like and stick with it. Get to know it and understand how the ingredients work together. "That's how you get to be a better pie baker," O'Hara said.

- Use really good ingredients. O'Hara and Harris are fans of organic and fresh everything - eggs, fruit and high-fat butter such as a European-style butter that has a lower water content. "Don't knock the local markets," Harris said. "They have some wonderful stuff there."

- Use a dough that is all butter or at least mostly butter with a little shortening. The two chefs advise against using all shortening, which they say makes for a flaky but flavorless crust.

- For the dough, start with ice-cold ingredients. You should even chill your flour (as well as butter, shortening and water) in the freezer or refrigerator for at least 30 minutes.

- Use a light touch and work quickly so the dough doesn't get too warm. Overworking the dough gives gluten a chance to develop, resulting in a tough crust. Refrigerate the dough between steps to let it rest - after you have formed the dough into a ball, and again after you have rolled it out and placed it in the pie plate before filling.

- Use a wine bottle if you don't have a rolling pin, Harris suggests.

- Avoid a floury mess and roll dough out between two sheets of parchment or wax paper. This also ensures you don't use too much flour during the rolling process, which is another crust toughener, O'Hara said.

- Try sauteing your apples in butter rather than using a thickener for apple pie filling. Harris prefers this method because she believes thickeners such as cornstarch or flour lend a slimy texture.

- Try chilling pies before putting them in the oven. O'Hara said that when the butter melts, it releases steam, which creates the desired flakiness.

- Take steps to prevent soggy bottom crusts. Blind bake (par-bake) crusts for custard pies such as pumpkin and pecan. Cool the prebaked shell completely before adding the filling, about 15 minutes. "If you have hot dough that's not completely set up, it will be all sogged out if you add custard to it immediately," O'Hara said.

- Another trick is to swab a beaten egg white lightly in a thin layer over the blind-baked crust the minute it comes out of the oven. The egg white creates a barrier between crust and filling that keeps the crust flakier, O'Hara said.

- A nice finishing touch is lightly basting the top of a two-crust pie with cream or an egg wash (1 egg beaten with a teaspoon of water) and sprinkling it with sugar before baking.

- And finally, don't expect to be perfect. "The first time you make a pie, it won't be like your grandmother's," O'Hara said. "I'm a pastry chef, and my pies never turn out like my grandmother's."

APPLE SLAB PIE

8 Granny Smith apples (about 3 1/2 pounds), peeled, cored and sliced thin

8 Golden Delicious apples (about 3 1/2 pounds), peeled, cored and sliced thin

1 1/2 cups granulated sugar (divided use)

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 1/2 cups animal crackers

2 (15-ounce) boxes Pillsbury Ready to Roll Pie Crust

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled

6 tablespoons Minute tapioca

2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

3 tablespoons lemon juice

Glaze:

3/4 cup reserved apple juice (from filling)

2 tablespoons lemon juice

1 tablespoon unsalted butter, softened

1 1/4 cups confectioners' sugar

Yields 18 to 20 servings.

For pie: Combine apples, 1 cup sugar and salt in colander set over large bowl. Let sit, tossing occasionally, until apples release their juices, about 30 minutes. Press gently on apples to extract liquid, and reserve 3/4 cup juice.

Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 350 F. Pulse crackers and remaining sugar in food processor until finely ground. Dust work surface with cracker mixture, brush 1/2 of one pie round with water, overlap with second pie round to make a figure 8, and dust top with cracker mixture. Roll out dough to rectangle and transfer to large rimmed nonstick baking sheet. Brush dough with butter and refrigerate; roll out pie crusts from second box the same way for the top crust.

Toss drained apples with tapioca, cinnamon and lemon juice, and arrange evenly over bottom crust, pressing lightly to flatten. Brush edges of bottom crust with water, and arrange top crust on pie. Press crusts together and use paring knife to trim any excess dough. Use fork to crimp and seal outside edge of pie, then pierce top of pie at 2-inch intervals. Bake until pie is golden brown and juices are bubbling, about 1 hour. Transfer to wire rack and let cool 1 hour.

For glaze: While pie is cooling, simmer reserved apple juice in saucepan over medium heat until syrupy and reduced to 1/4 cup, about 6 minutes. Stir in lemon juice and butter and cool to room temperature. Whisk in confectioners' sugar and brush glaze evenly over warm pie. Let pie cool completely, at least 1 hour longer. Serve.

The pie can be made up to 24 hours in advance and refrigerated. Bring to room temperature before serving.

- From Cook's Country, November 2007

MAPLE-NUT TART

Our Favorite Pie Crust (see accompanying recipe)

2 large eggs

1/4 cup packed light-brown sugar

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 cup pure maple syrup

1 1/2 cups pecan pieces

1 1/2 cups walnut pieces

Yields 8 servings.

Preheat oven to 350 F. On lightly floured piece of wax paper or parchment paper, roll dough into 12-inch circle. Carefully fit into 9-inch removable-bottom tart pan, gently lowering dough into bottom and sides of pan without stretching. Roll rolling pin over edge of tart pan to cut off excess dough; set tart shell aside.

In medium bowl, whisk together eggs, sugar and salt; whisk in maple syrup. Add nuts, and mix filling to combine. Place tart pan on rimmed baking sheet, and pour in filling. Bake tart until filling is set and crust is slightly golden, 55 to 60 minutes. Cool completely in pan. Remove tart from pan before serving.

- From Everyday Food, November 2007

OUR FAVORITE PIE CRUST

1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for work surface

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon sugar

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, cold, cut into pieces

2 to 4 tablespoons ice water

Yields 1 single crust.

In large bowl using pastry blender, combine flour, salt and sugar. Add butter, and cut in with pastry blender until mixture resembles coarse meal, with just a few pea-size pieces of butter remaining.

Sprinkle with 2 tablespoons ice water, and continue to work dough with pastry blender until dough is crumbly but holds together when squeezed with fingers. (If needed, add up to 2 tablespoons more ice water, 1 tablespoon at a time.) Do not overwork dough.

Turn dough out onto a lightly floured work surface; form into 3/4-inch thick disk. Wrap tightly in plastic, and refrigerate until firm, at least 1 hour. (Or wrap in plastic, place in a resealable plastic bag, and freeze up to 3 months. Thaw in the refrigerator before rolling.)

- From Everyday Food, November 2007

SPICED BUTTERNUT SQUASH TART WITH FLEUR DE SEL CRUST

Butternut squash custard:

1 cup butternut squash puree (or pumpkin puree), see note

3/4 cup packed brown sugar

1/4 cup wildflower honey

2 large organic eggs

2 large organic egg yolks

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg

1/4 teaspoon ground cloves

1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt

1 cup creme fraiche or sour cream (see note)

Pate sucee (sweet tart dough):

1 3/4 cup all-purpose flour

1 cup cake flour

Pinch fine sea salt

1 cup (2 sticks) butter, at room temperature

1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar

1 large egg

1/2 to 1 teaspoon fleur de sel, or to taste

1 egg white (for brushing baked tart shell)

Yields 1 (9-inch) tart.

For custard filling: Preheat oven to 325 F. In large bowl, combine brown sugar, honey, eggs and yolks. Whisk gently until smooth. In another bowl, stir together spices and butternut squash puree. Mix in creme fraiche or sour cream. Add squash mixture to egg-sugar mixture; stir to combine. Refrigerate until ready to use.

For pate sucee: Sift flour, cake flour and fine sea salt, and set aside. Using stand mixer or hand-held mixer, cream butter and sugar on low speed, scraping sides of bowl frequently. Add egg; scrape sides of bowl again. Add flour mixture and mix just to combine. Separate into 2 equal rounds, wrap in plastic and refrigerate 1 hour.

Remove 1 dough round from refrigerator and let rest at room temperature for 15 to 30 minutes. (Use the other dough round for another use.) Roll dough on lightly floured surface to 1/4 inch thick. Line buttered 9-inch tart pan with dough round. Push into bottom and sides of tart pan gently; remove excess dough from sides with knife. Sprinkle fleur de sel on top and carefully press salt into dough. Freeze tart shell for 15 minutes.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Bake tart shell for 35 to 45 minutes, or until lightly golden brown. Brush with thin coat of egg white while tart shell is still hot. Cool shell, then fill with butternut squash custard. Reduce oven temperature to 325 F and bake for 25 to 35 minutes, until edges are set and center jiggles slightly. Cool to

room temperature, then refrigerate until ready to serve.

Note: You may use canned butternut squash puree or pumpkin puree, or roast your own squash and puree it.

To roast squash, preheat oven to 450 F. Cut butternut squash in 1/2 lengthwise. Remove seeds and stringy pulp by scraping cavity with a spoon. Line a baking sheet with foil, put squash cut-side down and cover with foil. Bake for 1 hour, or until a knife can be inserted easily. Let cool enough to handle.

Scrape squash flesh into a food processor. Process for 30 seconds. Line a bowl with cheesecloth or a large coffee filter and spoon squash puree into the middle. Gather sides, forming a bundle, and tie around the handle of a wooden spoon. Suspend puree bundle in a tall pitcher and allow excess liquid to drain for 1 hour. Yields 1 3/4 cups puree.

- From Amy O'Hara, pastry chef at Nine-Ten in La Jolla, Calif.

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