A History of Pies

Sheilah Kaufman

Simple Simon met a pieman going to the fair: Says Simple Simon to the pieman “Let me taste your ware”

WHAT IS A PIE? According to convention, a pie is a dish made by lining a shallow container with pastry and filling the container with a sweet or savory mixture. A top crust may be added, and the pie is baked until the crust is crisp and the filling is cooked through. Pies are baked in pans with flaring sides and in America are usually served from the pan.

“It was not until the end of the thirteenth century, however, that medieval cuisine reached the level of that of antiquity, by rediscovering the art of stews, sauces, and cooking in an oven, usually a bakery oven. Medieval cuisine also bore another resemblance to that of antiquity: a persistent abuse of spices, and a fondness for disguising foodstuffs- the habit, for example, of serving ‘dressed pheasant’ or ‘dressed swan,’ that is, birds cooked and then redecorated with all their feathers, and the fondness for novelties, tricks, and jokes” (Revel 1982:94).

Importantly, by the 14th century there was a new class in the population: the merchant class, points out Reay Tannahill in Food in History (1995:185). In Paris in 1393, a merchant’s guests might have been offered miniatures pastries with a variety of fillings; and desserts that were sweet and spicy confections. A mostly illiterate society, it compensated by being intensely visual, with pastries molded into splendid and fanciful representations of lions, eagles, crowns, or coats of arms. As the Middle Ages merged into the
Renaissance, people became fascinated with producing even more exotic conversation pieces, including an improved form of Trimalchio’s feast, a pie with live birds that would fly out when the pie was cut.

Sing a song of sixpence
a pocket full of rye,
4 and 20 blackbirds
Baked in a pie;
When the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing
And wasn’t that a dainty dish
to set before a king?

In Giovanni de Rosselli’s 1516 work, *Epulario, Or The Italian Banquet Wherein Is Shewed the Maner How to Dresse and Prepare All Kind of Flesh, Fowles or Fishes, As Also How to Make Sauces, Tartes, Pies, With an Addition of Many Other Profitable And Necessary Things*, he writes,

“Make the coffin [piecrust] of a great pie or pastry. In the bottom thereof make a hole as big as your fist, or bigger if you will. Let the sides of the coffin be somewhat higher than ordinary pies. Which done, put it full of flour and bake it, and being baked open the hole in the bottom and take out the flour. Then, having a pie of the bigness of the hole in the bottom of the coffin aforesaid, you shall put it into the coffin, withal put into the said coffin round about the aforesaid pie as many small live birds as the empty coffin will hold, besides the (small) pie aforesaid. And this is to be done at such time as you send the pie to the table, and set before the guests; where, uncovering or cutting up the great lid of the pie, all the birds will fly out, which is to delight and pleasure show to the company. And that they be not altogether mocked, you shall cut open the small pie” (de Rosselli, 1516).

The “Coffin Pie” was the heir to the ancient practice of using a flour and water paste to protect small meats, such as birds and rabbits, from the fierce heat of the fire when being roasted over an open hearth. The pie was designed to remain edible for a long time without refrigeration. Pies were meat, sauce and plate, all in one self contained package.

Many writings from the 15th to 18th centuries include food references and descriptions. Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* mentions Warden Pie, made from Warden Pears. In *Don Quixote*, Miguel Cervantes writes: “A finger in every pie”. Until the mid 1700s, kitchen equipment remained almost the same as in the Middle Ages, Then came the revolutionary large stove, with 12 to 20 burners permitting fires of different intensities, and from this point on three separate and distinct branches of the art of cooking were recognized, including, the *patissier* who ruled over the oven. During this period of culinary history, a cook who prepared any food baked in a crust was known as a *patissier* or pastry cook, a term still used today. In addition, from the end of the 18th century on, taverns, inns,
caterers, and pastry cooks were in abundance, and were strictly regulated according to the guild rules of old Europe.

In the United Kingdom, meat, game, and fish pies have been staple dishes since the Middle Ages according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica. The Cornish pasty, from Cornwall, was developed as a great “lunch box dish.” It was also easily transported down into the mines, onto fishing boats, and taken into the fields at harvest time. It was a well balanced meal contained in a pastry crust. These half moon meals even immigrated with the Cornish miners to the New World and the hot pie shop was well established in Victorian England.

Almost all cultures around the world have forms of pies that have contributed to American cuisine. Pies have been popular in America since colonial times, so much so that apple pie has become symbolic of traditional home cooking. The typical American pie is round, 8- to 10-inch in diameter, and 2- to 3- inches thick. It usually contains a sweet filling of fruit, custard, or a pastry cream. Pecan pie, pumpkin custard pie, lemon cream pie are specialties in America. When is a pie not a pie? “When it doesn’t have a crust on top,” according to the Pennsylvania Dutch, who call anything without a lid a cake! A well known Pennsylvania Dutch favorite is Wet-Bottom Shoofly Pie, which is a brown sugar and molasses cake in a crust.

REFERENCES


BEST AND MOST UNUSUAL LEMON PIE EVER

One minute sweet, one minute tart but a sure winner all the time, and guaranteed to have everyone begging for more! Freezes well

From: Simply Irresistible, Easy Elegant, Fearless Fussless Cooking by Sheilah Kaufman

2 large lemons, very thinly sliced with the peel on
2 cups sugar
4 large eggs
1 box pie crusts with 2 crusts, or 2 home made pie crusts

Preheat oven to 425°F.

Slice lemon “circles” in half (so they look like half circles), and remove any seeds.

Place lemons in a large bowl and cover with sugar.

Let this mixture sit for 2 hours at room temperature.

Place one crust in the bottom of a 9-inch pie pan.

Beat eggs well and mix with the lemon sugar mixture. Mix well.

Pour the mixture into crust and cover with remaining crust, pinching edges together.

With a sharp knife, make several slits in the top crust to allow steam to escape during baking.

Bake the pie for 15 minutes.

Lower the oven temperature to 350°F and bake another 35 to 40 minutes, or until the crust is golden brown. Cool the pie on a wire rack for 30 minutes.

Chill thoroughly before serving or freeze.

Serves 6 to 8

HINT: Citrus fruits yield nearly twice the amount of juice if they are dropped into hot water for a few minutes before you squeeze them, or roll them back and forth beneath your hand on the counter top first.

CRAZY CRUST PIE

A great recipe for those who love pies but who hate to make pie crusts, or like me, eats the inside and discards the crust! In the summer I use peaches instead of apples. This pie freezes beautifully.

From: Simply Irresistible, Easy Elegant, Fearless Fussless Cooking by Sheilah Kaufman

5 - 6 large apples, peeled, cored, and sliced
3 1/2 tablespoons sugar
1/2 to 1 teaspoons cinnamon (to taste)
4 tablespoons butter
1 cup sugar
2 large eggs
1 cup flour

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Place apple slices in a deep 9- or 10-inch Pyrex pie pan.

Combine sugar and cinnamon and sprinkle half over the apples.

In a medium bowl with an electric mixer at medium speed, cream together butter and sugar. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition.

Add flour, mixing only until ingredients are blended.

Spread the batter over the fruit, being careful to leave a 1 inch rim of fruit showing around the edge of the pie pan.

Sprinkle the remaining sugar-cinnamon mixture over the batter.

Bake the pie for one hour. Cool on a wire rack for one hour.

Serve the pie at room temperature or chilled.

Serves 6 to 8