



The Best Apple Pie



Picking apples this month, I got to thinking about apple pie. The most American of dishes. Made all over the country for hundreds of years. Johnny Appleseed, Mom, the stuff legends are made of.

Apple pie conjures up memories which we may have barely experienced. Apple pie cooling on the window sill. Apple pie and Cheddar served hot at a diner. Apple pie a la mode, steaming hot with smooth vanilla ice cream just starting to melt around the edges. The very idea of fresh pie is enough to make us think of home, even if there has never been a pie baked in that kitchen.

Although this is probably one of the simplest products, with only a few ingredients, a good apple pie is pretty hard to find. The stuff sold in fast food joints and convenience stores has pretty pictures, but it shouldn't be considered even remotely similar to a good fresh pie. But any home baked pie, if it's made with fresh apples can be good for the soul.

To find the best apple pie you really have to bake one. The whole process of baking is an easy and very enjoyable experience. You have to peel a lot of apples, or better yet, get someone else to peel them for you. You toss the apples in sugar and spices just enough to coat them. You roll them in freshly made dough, and then fill the house up with the aroma of freshly baked apple pie. Only cookies and bread made in your own kitchen rival this wholesome and delicious experience.

Now, the really good pie people, those who have been doing this for decades, have tricks which make a great difference. Don't try to work too much dough at a time. This will keep the dough cold, and easier to handle. It will also make for a smaller workspace, and thus less to clean up afterwards. The spice mixture can be critical. I like very few spices, but there are people who make apple pie with lemon, nutmeg, mace, orange peel, all sorts of spices. Some of these are Blue Ribbon pies, so I do not belittle them. You may add raspberries, cranberries, brandy, raisins, peaches, chocolate chips or walnuts. Personalize the filling but be careful to keep the apples as the major flavor.

Speaking of Blue Ribbons. The county or state fairs are the Roman Coliseum of pie contests. The Gladiator Pit of Pastries. The Olympics of fresh baked goods. These are not open to professionals and the bakers who enter these contests range from neophytes who have no idea what they are in for up to and including Grandmas who have been baking great pies for a half century. No great TV Chef Competition can compare with all the summer fairs and all the thousands of apple pies entered each year. The competition is enormous and anyone who has ever won a Blue Ribbon has a real reason to brag.

One of the trickier parts of a good apple pie is choosing which apples to use. Macs may end up too firm, Red Delicious will be mushy. There are dozens of varieties to work with. A good blending of several varieties will bring the best tastes and textures of several apples into the filling. Trial and error is the only way to really learn this technique as each type of apple will be a little different each year.

One point worth noting; if you are going to use a commercial bake-off pie for your establishment, you can play with that pie just slightly and change it considerably. Allow the pie to thaw just a little and have some fun with the crust. Crimp the sides to erase the machine made look that each raw frozen pie will have. Make a few decorative cuts in the top of the crust. In fact, if you cut some diamonds, or crescents out of the top crust, you can paste them back on in a different area with a little water. Do not use egg wash as it will burn black when it's baked. You may sprinkle the crust with a little sugar or cinnamon sugar, in fact you can do this in lines or circles to create a homemade look. Keep all these suggestions in mind if you are making your own crust

There are some shortcuts which can be used in large scale operations. Pre flattened pie crusts are very useful and can save a lot of time, although your own pie crust, with butter or lard will probably taste much better. There is a quick way to make pie filling by using 1 part canned apple filling to 2 parts IQF apples. This is acceptable, but I would suggest tasting the mixture and adding some sugar and spices to make it your own. These methods will not win a Blue Ribbon but the result will be a good tasting product that will fill your place up with the aroma of fresh baked pie.

RECIPES

Here is my (wife's) recipe for apple pie. Note that it is pretty generic, but the basics are all in this recipe.

APPLE PIE

makes 2 x 9" pies

5 cups flour all purpose
1 Tbsp sugar
1 tsp salt
1 cup crisco or lard
1/2 pound butter
2/3 cup water, very cold
12 mixed apples (*Cortland, Red Delicious, Mutsu, and Empire*)
2 Tbsp flour
3/4 cup sugar
1 tsp cinnamon

Start with everything very cold, even put the flour in the cooler for a while. Crumble the shortening, and butter, into the dry ingredients with the fingertips, not the palms, until the shortening is well blended, but a lot are still pea sized. Add the water, and mix with a spatula, and your hands, until it is doughy. You may want more water. There should still be some flour loose in the bowl, do not over mix. Put back in cooler. Peel the apples, and slice rather thick. Mix with the second flour, sugar, and cinnamon.

Divide the dough into 4 sections, and roll each out into a circle 10" or so. Line 2 x 9" pie shells with dough, and divide the apple mixture into each. Cover each pie; brush the edges with water, and crimp the sides well to seal. Wash the top with some water, and sprinkle some sugar lightly over each pie.

Bake at 425°F for 10 minutes, and turn oven down to 350°F, for another 45 minutes. Cut off 50 degrees if you have a convection oven. Allow to cool on a windowsill before cutting, as it will make for a better slice.

Some variations include **Dutch Apple Pie**, with a sweet baked crumb topping instead of the top layer of pie crust.

Butter	1 cup
Brown sugar	1 cup packed
Cinnamon	1 tsp
Flour	2 cups

Cream the butter and brown sugar in a mixer, with the cinnamon until very well blended. Add the flour, and mix just enough so that it is crumbly. Sprinkle pretty heavily over the pie filling before baking.

You may also add raspberries, cranberries, brandy, raisins, peaches, or walnuts. Personalize the filling but be careful not to keep the apples foremost in taste. To serve, slice and reheat with Cheddar, add some ice cream for a real A La Mode, or don't slice, and just eat right out of the pan. That's the American Way.

APPLE FRANCHIPAN TART

makes 2 x 9" tarts



3 pounds A/P flour
2 pounds butter
1 pound 10X sugar
3 eggs
1 Tbsp pure vanilla
1 1/2 pounds almond paste
1 pound butter
1 pound sugar
10 eggs
2 tsp pure vanilla
7 oz Cake Flour
+/- 6 pounds Sliced apples
(*Empires, Delicious, or Granny Smith, best to use a combination of them all*)

Dough: Blend flour and butter until butter is in tiny chunks. Blend eggs, the first vanilla and the first sugar in a separate bowl, and then combine the two mixtures. Chill the dough for a few hours. Either roll out, or press the dough into pans, about 1/2" thick on the bottom and up the sides. Fork the dough all over when it is raw. Lay a piece of parchment paper over the raw dough, and weight it down with some dried beans, to keep shape when baking.

Franchipan: Beat the almond paste and the second sugar. Add 1 egg, blend to smooth. Add the butter in chunks, while beating. Add the rest of the eggs, and vanilla. Sift the flour into the mixture, and blend.

Construction: Smear the parbaked dough with the franchipan, and lay out the thinly sliced apples decoratively. Bake at 325°F until the apples are soft. If the crust starts to burn, cover the edges with foil. Coat the tart with apricot glaze after cooling.