

Easy *as* PIE

Tips to help you conquer the fear of making pastry

Pastry can be fickle. One time it rolls like velvet. Another, it emerges from the bowl more like concrete than dough. If pastry is your nemesis, don't despair. Cold ingredients, a hot oven and a bit of patience will guarantee results.

Chill out

Make sure the fat you use is cold. If your kitchen is warm, chill the mixing bowl as well to give your dough a fighting chance. When the dough is mixed, wrap it in plastic wrap, and pop it in the fridge for at least an hour before rolling. Not only does this relax the gluten in the wheat, making it more tender, but also chilled dough is easier to handle.

Measure twice, blend once

Scooping can compact flour up to 30 per cent. Since too much flour makes pastry tough, accuracy is key. For a tender crust, give the flour a quick whisk, spoon it into a dry measure and then level off with a knife.

Cut the fat — literally

Unlike cakes and cookies, where fat is blended into the batter, pastry dough needs little blobs of fat suspended in the flour. No matter what method you use, cut in cold fat until it is about the size of peppercorns — not coarse crumbs as some recipes suggest. In my all-butter pastry (see page 128), frozen butter and a box grater deliver perfect results.



Charmian Christie

Take a hands-on approach

Unlike the flour, the amount of moisture you add is not precise. You'll have to rely on feel, working quickly so the warmth of your hands doesn't melt the fat. The dough needs enough water to hold together when pressed between your fingers, but not so much that it forms a ball.

If your recipe suggests a range of measurements, use the smallest amount and add more until you reach the right consistency.

Use ice-cold water and sprinkle it over the flour-fat mixture so it distributes evenly. Don't dump it in one spot.

Ready to roll

Rolling pins are a personal choice. I like a tapered French rolling pin made of maple. My mom's trusty pin has ball bearings in the handle and is older than I am. Modern silicone ones are inexpensive, come in different styles and are easy to clean.

Don't fuss too much about the rolling pin. Timing and technique are more important.

Before rolling, let the chilled dough warm up; otherwise, it will crack. But don't let it

get too warm or it will stick.

The dough is ready to roll when your finger can make an indentation without going all the way through. If your finger sinks to the counter, the dough is too warm. If it barely dents the surface, it's too cold.

When your dough is ready, dust your surface with flour. Any flat surface will do — wood, marble or even an old-fashioned pastry cloth. To prevent the rolling pin from sticking without working too much flour into the dough, dust the pin, not the top of the dough, with flour.

When you roll the dough, don't use a back-and-forth motion. Instead, roll from the centre out, stopping about an inch from the edge. Turn the disk a quarter turn after each roll. Continue the roll-and-turn technique until the dough is about 8 inches (20 cm) wide.

Then roll from the centre out in all directions until the dough is not quite 0.6-cm (1/4-inch) thick and a couple inches wider than the pie plate. Transfer the dough to the pie plate, trim and chill for 15 minutes before filling to help keep the pastry from shrinking.

Turn up the heat

You want the dough cold and the oven piping hot. Preheat the oven for a good 20 to 30 minutes to ensure stable heat.

Now, roll up your sleeves and bake.



NO-FAIL BUTTER PASTRY

(Makes enough for two single pie crusts, one double-crust pie or about 24 tarts)

Grating frozen butter delivers consistent results. Butter produces a tender, flaky pie crust that melts in your mouth. Unsalted butter delivers consistent results, but if you have only salted butter, use it and cut the salt in half.

600 ml (2½ cups) all-purpose flour
2.5 ml (½ teaspoon) fine sea salt
175 ml (¾ cup) frozen unsalted butter
1 egg yolk
15 ml (1 tablespoon) white vinegar
60 to 90 ml (4 to 6 tablespoons) ice water

1. In a large bowl, whisk the flour and salt to combine. Using the large holes of a box grater, grate the frozen butter over the flour. Toss quickly with your hands to distribute the butter.

2. In a small bowl, whisk the egg, vinegar and 60 ml (4 tablespoons) of ice water. Pour the egg mixture over the flour and stir, adding more ice water as needed.

The dough should be a bit ragged but will hold together when squeezed in your fingers.

3. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and knead briefly until it comes together. Divide the dough in half and form each piece into a disk about 15 cm (6 inches) wide and 5 cm (2 inches) high. Wrap each disk in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least one hour before rolling and baking according to recipe directions.

4. Properly sealed, pie dough will keep in the refrigerator for up to three days or in the freezer for three months if double wrapped.

To defrost frozen dough, refrigerate overnight or leave at room temperature for a couple of hours.

TWO-BITE BUTTER TARTS

(Makes about 24 tarts)

Sorry raisins. Currants are the original butter-tart filling. Because butter tarts tend to create a flaky, drippy mess, I make mine on the small side using disposable tart liners. This makes them easy to serve at parties.

125 ml (½ cup) melted butter and cooled
2 large eggs
500 ml (2 cups) brown sugar
30 ml (2 tablespoons) white vinegar
250 ml (1 cup) dried currants

1. Preheat oven to 400°F (200°C). Place 6-cm (2½-inch) tart liners on a sturdy baking pan and set aside.

2. In a medium bowl, mix the butter, eggs, brown sugar and vinegar until smooth. Add currants and stir again.

3. Roll pastry to 1/8-inch 0.3-cm (one-eighth-inch) thick. Cut 9-cm (3½-inch) circles and press gently into the tart liners. Stir filling and spoon into tart shells, filling no more than two-thirds full. Bake 20 minutes or until the crust is golden and the filling is bubbly. Cool on wire rack.

Prep time: 20 minutes

Cooking time: 20 minutes

Modern twist: apple butter tart galette

Roll 1 disk of dough into a circle no more than 0.6-cm (¼-inch) thick. Wash, core and slice 2 apples into 16 wedges each. Leaving a generous generous 5-cm (2-inch) edge, arrange the wedges in a circle on the pastry, slightly overlapping.

Stir butter tart filling and spoon 125 ml (½ cup) over the apple wedges. Fold pastry edge inward over the filling to form a rim, pleating the dough as needed. Brush the pastry rim with egg wash.

Bake in a 400°F (200°C) oven for 35 to 45 minutes or until the crust is golden and the apples are tender.

TOURTIÈRE

(Makes 8 servings)

Tourtière is a classic French-Canadian comfort food often enjoyed on Christmas and New Year's Eve. This version swaps ready-made breadcrumbs for from-scratch mashed potatoes.

Filling

375 ml (1½ cups) chicken stock
750 g (1½ pounds) lean ground pork
1 large onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
5 ml (1 teaspoon) dried savory or herbs de Provence
2.5 ml (½ teaspoon) dried thyme
2.5 ml (½ teaspoon) fine sea salt
1.5 ml (¼ teaspoon) cinnamon
0.6 ml (⅛ teaspoon) cloves
Fresh ground black pepper
60 ml (¼ cup) bread crumbs

Pastry

1 recipe No-Fail Butter Pastry (page 128)
1 egg yolk
15 ml (1 tablespoon) milk

1. In a large skillet over medium-high heat, bring the stock to a boil.

2. While the stock heats, mix the pork, onion, garlic, savory, thyme, salt, cinnamon, cloves and black pepper together in a large bowl. Stir the pork mixture into the boiling stock, reduce heat to a simmer, and cook uncovered for 20 minutes, or until the pork is cooked and tender and most of the liquid is absorbed.

3. Stir in the bread crumbs and continue to cook, uncovered, until the liquid has evaporated, about two to five minutes. Remove from heat and let cool.

4. When ready to bake, preheat the oven to 425 F (220 C) with a rack placed in the bottom third of the oven. In a small bowl, whisk together the egg yolk and milk. Set aside.

5. On a lightly floured surface, roll out



one disc of the pie dough 0.6-cm (1/4-inch) thick and line a 9-inch pie plate. Spoon in the cooled tourtière filling. Roll out the remaining dough to the same thickness, cut a hole in the centre for steam to escape and place on top of the filling. Trim and then pinch the edges of the crust together and brush the top crust with the egg wash.

6. Bake for about 15 minutes, reduce the heat to 375°F (190°C) and cook another 25 minutes or until the pastry is a rich golden brown. Let cool for 15 minutes before slicing to serve.

7. The tourtière can be made up to two days in advance and reheated in a 325°F (160°C) oven.

Prep time: 45 minutes

Cooking time: 40 minutes

Modern look: Skip the vents and use stamped pastry cutouts for the top crust. Special pastry/fondant stamps are available at cooking stores.

Modern twist — Apricot tourtière hand pies: Cut the pastry into 10-cm (4-inch) rounds. Spread 5 ml (1 teaspoon) of apricot jam on one round, leaving 1.25 cm (½-inch) edge. Spread 15 ml (1 tablespoon), heaping, tourtière filling over the jam.

Wet edge with a finger dipped in water. Place second round on top.

Pinch the edges together then crimp with a fork. Brush top with egg wash. Cut two slits on top.

Bake 15 to 18 minutes at 400°F (200°C). 