

# spirit

**SOUTHWEST AIRLINES**



**Pie**

*Don't worry, there's plenty more inside.*

**S**ummer is many things: the season of skimpy clothes and gleeful romps around a lawn sprinkler. It is about family picnics, too, and church bazaars and state fairs and neighborly acts of kindness, all of them made sweeter by the presence of ... a pie. Cold-weather fans think they have the pie thing cornered. But, really, where would you rather be? On a big blanket in a field of green with a lover in blueberry-pie bliss? Or fending off tryptophan fatigue at a Turkey Day feast? Yeah, that's what we thought. No matter how you slice or bake it, pie is forever.

## **In Search of *Piefection***

BY KATHRYN O'SHEA-EVANS AND JENNIFER REESE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX FARNUM



A top-down photograph of a kitchen counter with a rolling pin, flour, butter, and a pie crust. The rolling pin is wooden with a red handle. The flour is piled on the left. The butter is in small cubes on a piece of parchment paper. The pie crust is on the right. A small metal sifter with white powder is at the top right.

# A Pie Romance: The Brief History

If your memory doesn't go back farther than the introduction of McDonald's hot apple pie (1968), you'll be surprised at just how deep this dish is.

WAS IT AS EASY as you-know-what? Hardly. The evolution of pie, and America's undying love affair with it, was a slow and messy process—not unlike making a pie itself.

Historians believe that pie started, like so many essential pursuits (democracy, plumbing), in ancient Greece, where bakers concocted the first pastry dough out of flour and fat. For the eons worth of meals served up before the invention of bakeware, this early crust served as a casserole of sorts—a vessel for cooking and preserving the goodies within—and may have even gone uneaten by, well, the upper crust of society.

Romans took the pie concept on the road, filled it with mussels and other fruits of the sea, and touted it hither and thither until pie was the delight of Europe. The Brits stuffed theirs with partridges and other savory offerings; the French with creamy marzipan. Cherry pie, that long-esteemed American favorite? First baked by Queen Elizabeth I, according to lore. Pies hit their low

point in 1644, when England's Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell banned them as "a pagan form of pleasure."

Janet Clarkson, an Aussie writer who ate her way through 12 glorious months of research for her book, *Pie: A Global History*, is a fount of weird pie facts. "Over a couple centuries, in England's tiny village of Denby Dale," Clarkson says, "a series of giant pies have been made. The first was in 1788, as a gift from the town to King George III, who was recovering from a bout of madness." In 1877, pie weighing one and a half tons marked Queen Victoria's jubilee.

It was in the New World that pies truly progressed. By the time the pilgrims had wizened up from their first Thanksgiving in 1621, they'd learned enough to regularly put pie on the table. (As far back as 1623, the Turkey Day pie of choice was pumpkin.) Although early colonists, like the Greeks, used piecrusts as Tupperware, it wasn't long before the crust itself came to be considered the tastiest part of the dish. In 1957,

"Betty Crocker's Pie Parade," a booklet on baking, included recipes for cookie crumb crusts, nut crusts, and fillings that ranged from streusel cream peach to rhubarb custard.

Today, Americans buy some 186 million pies a year at grocery stores. According to Linda Hoskins, executive director of the American Pie Council, 75 percent of all pies sold are done so in the last three months of the year. America's pie obsession has even entered the political realm. Joel Weiler, the blogger behind MakeMeSomePie.com, says, "Pie is to President Obama as jelly beans were to Reagan. He is a huge fan of pie, and talked about it a lot when he was campaigning. It helped him, I think, gain the people's trust. Because who doesn't like pie?"

The current focus of pie-oneers? "Portion control," Hoskins says. "Handheld versions of pies are becoming increasingly popular—pies on a stick, pies in a jar." You'd think this would have to do with swelling waistlines and health-

consciousness, but another theory persists: So-called "personal pies" all but guarantee you'll get the last bite.

In a time when a simple cup of joe has been superseded by a "Skinny Caramel Macchiato, No Foam," it makes sense that traditional pies are seen as passé. From coast to coast, bakers are putting oomph in the tin—Portland, Oregon caterer Meat à la Mode offers savory creole-style alligator pie; NYC's Momofuku sells a "Candy Bar Pie," a mix of toffee, nougat, chocolate cookie crust, and pretzel-chocolate topping, for a mere \$44.

Still, we're of the thought that pie is never more scrumptious, more redolent of *goodness* and all that that implies, than when it involves little more than a perfectly ripe berry, a heavenly dollop of coconut cream, a crust.... Who's to say precisely what Socrates had in mind when, more than 2,400 years ago in Greece, he sat at a table cooking up his definition of *piety*. But we're reverent enough about pie to bet that a round of phyllo and bowl of fruit were nearby.

## A DELECTABLE DEBATE

### The Perfect Pie? It's a Matter of Crust. Maybe.

A useful and enduring definition of pie doesn't get more bite-sized than this: Any food, from four-and-twenty blackbirds to peaches to coffee mousse, that is contained in a crust. So, yes, crust matters. But does it *distinguish* a pie? The debate is both heated and flaky.

Nancie McDermott, author of *Southern Pies*, argues for the primacy of filling. "Crust, to me, is the bread that delivers the sandwich, the chip that scoops up the guacamole," she says. "I hold fine piecrust in high esteem, but, for me, it will always be about the filling, the present inside the

wrapping—the cherries, sweet potatoes, or black walnuts that name and fill the pie."

Michele Stuart, owner of Michele's Pies, a bakery with branches in Westport and Norwalk, Connecticut, disagrees: "Everyone can make a good filling, but not everyone can make a good crust." Stuart swears by a shortening crust she makes using her late grandmother's recipe (see page 82). It's hard to argue with Stuart on the subject of pies: Over the years, she has brought home 26 awards from the American Pie Council's Crisco National Pie Championships. In fact, it well might be her flaky crust that won those blue ribbons. Of course, it could be the sumptuous fillings, like her signature chocolate pecan bourbon.

Or, as seems most likely, the judges, like pie eaters everywhere, were won over by the sublime marriage of the two.

# How Do You Top Apple?

**You don't. How could you top the Oprah, the Olympus, the *ne plus ultra* of pies?**

WHEN I ASK PEOPLE, 'What is your favorite pie?' they often answer cherry or blueberry," says Kate McDermott, who teaches pie-baking workshops in Seattle. "I say, 'What about apple?' Then they say, 'Oh, I meant after apple, *of course*.'"

We take apple pie for granted, but according to surveys, apple—sweet and tart, tawny and lightly freckled with cinnamon—is still the most popular pie in the United States. After all, it's as American as baseball and.... Except apple pie *isn't* American, as food historians have pointed out. Its lineage is British. In his wonderful book, *Apple Pie: An American Story*, John T. Edge postulates that apple pie may have taken hold in the States during Prohibition, when people stopped drinking hard cider. What else to do with our abundant apples but make pie?

What, indeed. In his search of all things apple pie, Edge encountered apple pie shakes; apple pie made with chiles; an improbably tasty apple pie made with Red Hots; and all too many uninspired pies. Though he is frequently disillusioned, Edge finishes his odyssey even more obsessed with the iconic dessert than when he began. "In the end, it was the everyday alchemy that turned my head: mornings that began with a sack of flour and a pile of apples and reached their apogee when someone—most often my wife—pulled a sugar-shellacked pie from an oven and set it on a trivet to cool," Edge writes. "In that moment of promise, as cinnamon vapors spiraled from the steam vents and candied apple juice sought a gap in the crimp, I fell in love all over again with apple pie."



**WHAT IS THAT?**  
**Brown Sugar Apple Pie**  
 A fave of Ken Haedrick, author of the definitive book *Apple Pie*. Find the recipe on page 82.



**BLUEBERRIES**  
 The peak season for blueberries usually hits in late June/early July. They freeze well, so stock up.



**PEACHES**  
 Varietals of this sublime summer fruit begin ripening in May and wrap their sweet run in August.



**RHUBARB**  
 A greenhouse variety is available year-round. Like yours field-grown? Think spring.



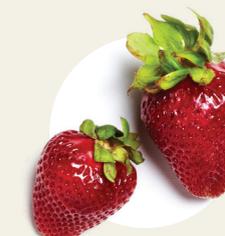
**PEARS**  
 The best pears are a fall/winter affair, but plenty of great imports make them a summer treat, too.



**CHERRIES**  
 Early June is when the California crop peaks. Precious rubies from the Northwest arrive in mid-July.



**BLACKBERRIES**  
 They're harvested from May to September. Montereys from Cali and the Ouochita from Georgia? Yum.



**STRAWBERRIES**  
 We enjoy this dimpled delight 12 months a year, but it bursts with ripe pride on the Fourth of July.

## FRESH CALENDAR

### Seasons Out In the Sun

The most delicious apples, we know, fall in the fall. But what are the ripest times to buy seven other essential pie fruits? Hint: You better snatch up those cherries—fast.

EXPERT ADVICE

# Ten Q's for Martha Stewart

America's reigning Queen of the Kitchen recently released another must-have cookbook: *Martha Stewart's New Pies & Tarts*. It's an updated edition of her 1995 gem, complete with 150 recipes for everything from classic pecan pie to the only-in-Marthaville Persimmon Tartlets with Caramel Cream. Perhaps the most pleasantly persnickety woman on the planet, Stewart has arranged the recipes into aesthetic categories—including Sleek (Marbleized Lemon Tart with Sage), Free-Form (Chocolate-Almond Tart with Fleur de Sel), and Dreamy (Pumpkin Ice-box Pie). Given our kitchen klutziness, we asked her a few burning questions.

- 1. What's your favorite recipe in the book?** Shingled-Leaf Brandy Apple Pie.
- 2. What's the most under-appreciated one?** Chess pie (a.k.a. "Chewy Chess Tart").
- 3. What's new in this version of the book?** There are new recipes, and we have added to some of the original ones to make them even better. But the *pâte brisée* [that's pie dough, for those of you that do more eating than baking] is still the best.
- 4. Speaking of that, what's the secret to a great crust?** Make it cold, which means all ingredients should be icy cold. Be sure to not overwork the ingredients. And bake it hot!
- 5. What else is as American as apple pie?** Lemon meringue.
- 6. Do you prefer your pie à la mode or straight up?** Straight up. I always like my pies plain.
- 7. How do pies and tarts differ?** Generally, pies have two crusts while tarts have a single, thin crust. They are also made in different types of pans.
- 8. What's an easy tart recipe for beginners to make?** Any type of galette or free-formed tartlet.
- 9. What's the toughest part of baking a pie or tart?** What confuses everyone most is the crust, but if one follows the recipes in this book, success—although not guaranteed—is pretty much a given.
- 10. Have you ever had a pie mishap, or has a pie ever saved the day?** Pies *always* save the day.

**Follow Up** Scan this tag with your smart phone (using a Tag reader app) or visit [spiritmag.com/martha](http://spiritmag.com/martha) for a chance to **WIN** one of 10 copies of the deliciously pictorial, recently published *Martha Stewart's New Pies & Tarts*.

**WHAT IS THAT?**  
**Cherry and Almond Galette**

When is a pie not a pie? When it's a galette. Find Martha's recipe on page 82.



# Pies for a Dessert Island

Imagine a place where fruit won't grow, but where fresh coconuts (and cream!) are aplenty.

**WHAT IS THAT?**

**S'mores Delight Pie**

Champion pie maker Michele Stuart whipped this one up. Find the recipe on page 82.



BASICALLY, THERE ARE two kinds of dessert pies: Fruit pies and everything else. While you can fool yourself that fruit baked in a crust is healthy and you might, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, even eat a piece for breakfast, you have to be reckless to start the day with chocolate cream pie or coconut chiffon. Non-fruit pies are, unapologetically, *dessert*.

After apple, the two most beloved pies in America are non-fruit pies: pumpkin and pecan. Would Thanksgiving be worth celebrating without them? A recipe for "pompkin" pie

appears in the first American cookbook, Amelia Simmons' *American Cookery*, published in 1796. The recipe calls for "pompkin," milk, sugar, and spices, and it is almost identical to the pumpkin pies we make today. Pecan pie, on the other hand, is a relative newcomer, first popping up in cookbooks during the Depression, when it was heavily promoted by the corn syrup manufacturer Karo.

"True Southern pecan pie is one of the richest, most deadly desserts of my knowledge," Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings writes in her great memoir-

with-recipes *Cross Creek Cookery*—and then confides that she only nibbles at it herself.

Around the time that the pecan pie came into its own, so did cream pies—decadent and lofty creations of bananas, coconut, chocolate, and the like, topped with great swirls of whipping cream or fluffy meringue. It is in the 1920s and '30s that pie throwing becomes a staple of comedy routines: To throw a fruit pie at someone's face seems wasteful and hostile. To throw an over-the-top cream pie? That's funny.

OH, HOW COULD WE NOT?

## The Pie Chart

Some factoids you'll just want to eat up.



The average American consumes **SIX SLICES** of pie per year.\*

\*By this measure, Spirit staffers are not average Americans.

"Good apple pies are a considerable part of our domestic happiness." — Jane Austen, *October 17, 1815*

Last year, the top supplier of frozen pies was **Schwann**. (American Pie and Sara Lee placed second and third.)

At 2007's Stand By Me World Pie Eating Championship, Patrick Bertoletti consumed a **9.17 pound blueberry pie in 8 minutes**—without using his hands. Call him Bluebeard.

In 1935, a recipe for Mock Apple Pie was printed on Ritz Cracker boxes, substituting Ritz crackers for apples.

### THE BEST PIE JOINTS IN AMERICA\*

- Cutie Pies**  
*Austin, Texas*
- Dangerously Delicious Pies**  
*Baltimore, Maryland*
- Four & Twenty Blackbirds**  
*Brooklyn, New York*
- Hoosier Mama Pie**  
*Chicago, Illinois*
- Pielab**  
*Greensboro, Alabama*
- Random Order Coffee-house & Bakery**  
*Portland, Oregon*
- Scratch**  
*Durham, North Carolina*

\*According to Travel & Leisure, Good Morning America, and other reliably stuff-to-the-gills sources.

When asked what dessert Americans would prefer a friend or family member to bring to their house for a holiday dinner, **pie was the winner with 29 percent**, followed by cake (17 percent) and cookies (15 percent).

Boston cream pie is a **CAKE**, not a pie.

McDonald's first introduced their famous apple pies on May 11, 1968. Non-apple McDonald's pies around the globe include...



**WHAT IS THAT?**  
**Summer Squash Custard Pie**  
 Nancie McDermott, author of *Southern Pies*, goes ... veggie!  
 Find the recipe on page 83.

# What Are the Odds?

You'll know them by their weird names, the pies that make people go, "Huh?!"

**SHOOFLY PIE.** Marlborough pie. Vinegar pie. There are wallflowers in the pie world, eccentric regional confections that seem never to catch on with the America mainstream. In Vermont, you might fall in love with the intense, delicious boiled cider pie, but good luck finding any in Pennsylvania, where they're all about funeral pie, a double-crust pastry packed with raisins. A few states away in Kentucky, they've never heard of funeral pie, but you might, if you're lucky, score a slice of old-fashioned Osgood pie (raisins and nuts) or Derby pie (pecans and chocolate chips).

Although you'll find quirky pies in pockets all across the country, nowhere are there more oddball varieties than below the Mason-Dixon Line, home of the chess pie (super-sweet, jelly-like custard) and soda cracker pie (broken Saltines mixed with super-sweet, jelly-like custard). Why did such a vital and diverse pie culture blossom in the South? According to Nancie McDermott, the tradition can be traced to the region's rural roots. "In the South, if you wanted to eat dessert you couldn't just go to the corner and get something from a bakery," McDermott says.

To put dessert on the table, frugal farm wives had to make do with ingredients at hand, like a cup of soda crackers, a few sweet potatoes, leftover boiled navy beans. Yes, boiled navy beans. "If you say, 'Hey, want to have a piece of bean pie?' it's an uphill climb," concedes McDermott. But a well-made bean pie is a treat—akin to a rich pumpkin pie. Indeed, like most of the obscure pies—oh, let's face it, like just about *any* pie you'll have the good fortune of tasting in your lifetime—it's a knockout.



# A Piece At Last

We've done the work of whetting your appetite. It's your turn, now, to get elbow deep in the dough. Sharing, while polite, is optional.



## GET STARTED WITH A... Traditional Pastry Piecrust

From *Perfect Pies: The Best Sweet and Savory Recipes from America's Pie-Baking Champion*, by Michele Stuart

### INGREDIENTS

Makes two 9- or 10-inch crusts.  
2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon salt  
¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons cold Crisco  
5 tablespoons ice-cold water

**INSTRUCTIONS** In a medium bowl, mix the flour and salt, then add the Crisco. With a pastry blender or your fingertips, mix the ingredients together with an up-and-down chopping motion until the dough forms coarse, pea-size crumbs. (Note: I prefer the old-fashioned fingertip option, but take care not to overhandle the dough, because it will become difficult to work with. In the perfect pie, the Crisco will have a marbled look, and you will be able to see Crisco swirls within the uncooked dough.)

Add the cold water, 1 tablespoon at a time, delicately incorporating each tablespoon before adding the next. You may have to use 1 more or 1 less tablespoon of water than the amount recommended, depending upon the humidity in your kitchen at the time of baking. You will know you have added just the right amount when the dough forms a ball that easily holds together.

Wrap the ball of dough with plastic and chill it in the fridge for at least 30 minutes. Once the dough has chilled, divide it in half. You now have enough dough for either one 9- or 10-inch double crust (1 pie shell and 1 top crust) or two 9- or 10-inch single crusts.



## APPLE? THINK DIFFERENT. Mom and Dad's Brown Sugar Apple Pie

From *Apple Pie: 100 Delicious and Decidedly Different Recipes for America's Favorite Pie*, by Ken Haedrich

### INGREDIENTS

8 cups McIntosh apples, peeled, cored, and sliced  
½ cup firmly packed light brown sugar  
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice  
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg  
2 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces  
Milk  
Granulated sugar

**INSTRUCTIONS** Prepare crust, fit pie shell into a pie plate (with overhang), and refrigerate. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. While the pie shell chills, combine the apples, brown sugar, lemon juice, cinnamon, and nutmeg in a large mixing bowl; toss well. Set aside while you roll the top pastry.

Pour the filling into the refrigerated pie shell, smoothing the apples with your hands. Dot the pie with the butter, scattering pieces over the apples.

Lightly moisten the rim of the pie shell with a wet finger or pastry brush. Invert the top pastry over the filling and center it. Press the top and bottom pastries together along the dampened edge. Trim the pastry with scissors or a paring knife, leaving a ½-inch overhang all around, then sculpt the overhang into an upstanding ridge. Make 2-inch-long slits in the top pastry at the 12, 3, 6, and 9 o'clock positions; the bottom of each slit should just reach the edge of the pie. Lightly brush the top pastry with milk and sprinkle with granulated sugar.

Place the pie on the center oven rack and bake for 30 minutes. Remove the pie and place it on a large, dark baking sheet covered with aluminum foil. Reduce the oven temperature to 375 degrees. Put the pie (on the baking sheet) back in the oven and bake for an additional 30 minutes. When the pie is done, you should be able to see the juices bubbling up onto the crust.

Transfer the pie to a cooling rack and let cool for at least 1 hour.



## MARTHA RECOMMENDS... Cherry and Almond Galette

From *Martha Stewart's New Pies & Tarts*

### INGREDIENTS

For *pâte sucrée* (or "sweet pastry"):  
2 ½ cups all-purpose flour  
¼ cup sugar  
¼ teaspoon salt  
1 cup (2 sticks) cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces  
2 large egg yolks, lightly beaten  
2 to 4 tablespoons cold heavy cream or ice water

### For filling:

¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar  
¼ cup whole raw almonds, toasted and cooled  
¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg  
¼ teaspoon salt  
1 ½ pounds (about 4 ½ cups) sweet cherries, pitted  
2 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces  
1 large egg yolk, for egg wash  
1 tablespoon heavy cream, for egg wash

**INSTRUCTIONS** To prepare the *pâte sucrée*: Pulse flour, sugar, and salt in a food processor until combined. Add butter, and pulse just until mixture resembles

coarse meal. Add yolks and drizzle 2 tablespoons cream evenly over the mixture; pulse just until dough begins to come together, no more than 30 seconds. If the dough is too dry, add remaining cream, 1 tablespoon at a time, and pulse. Pat dough into a disk and wrap in plastic. Refrigerate 1 hour or up to 2 days, or freeze up to 3 months (thaw in fridge before using).

On lightly floured parchment, roll out dough to a 16-inch-long oval, ¼ inch thick. Transfer dough and parchment to a rimmed baking sheet. Refrigerate or freeze until firm, about 30 minutes.

To prepare the filling: In a food processor, pulse ¼ cup sugar, almonds, nutmeg, and salt until almonds are finely ground. Gently toss mixture with cherries.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Spoon cherry mixture over dough, leaving a 2-inch border. Dot with butter. Fold in edges, pressing gently. Refrigerate or freeze until firm, about 30 minutes.

Whisk egg yolk with cream; brush over edges of tart. Sprinkle entire surface of tart with remaining 2 tablespoons sugar. Bake until golden, 45 to 50 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack, let cool completely.



## THE CROP OF THE CREAM: S'mores Delight Pie

From *Perfect Pies: The Best Sweet and Savory Recipes from America's Pie-Baking Champion*, by Michele Stuart

### INGREDIENTS

1 prebaked 9-inch graham cracker crust  
For Hot Fudge Sauce:  
1 cup sugar  
3 cups heavy cream  
¼ cup light corn syrup

4 ounces unsweetened chocolate  
4 tablespoons (½ stick) salted butter  
1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract

For Marshmallow Vanilla Cream:  
1 ¾ cups plus 2 tablespoons sugar  
3 ½ tablespoons cornstarch  
1/8 teaspoon salt  
2 ½ cups whole milk  
4 large egg yolks  
2 tablespoons unsalted butter  
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract  
2 cups mini marshmallows

For Fluff Whipped Cream:  
2 cups heavy cream  
¼ cup confectioners' sugar  
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract  
½ cup Marshmallow Fluff

For S'mores Filling:  
1 cup Hot Fudge Sauce  
12 graham cracker squares  
1 cup mini marshmallows  
2 cups Fluff Whipped cream

**INSTRUCTIONS** To prepare the hot fudge sauce: In a medium saucepan, combine sugar, heavy cream, corn syrup, chocolate, and butter over medium-high heat and bring to a boil. Keep the pan over heat, whisking constantly for about 5 minutes, or until the sauce begins to bubble. Remove sauce from heat and add vanilla. Transfer sauce to a container and allow to cool before placing in the fridge. Chill sauce until it thickens, for at least 5 hours. (Makes 4 cups. Sauce can be refrigerated in an airtight container for about 2 weeks.)

To prepare the marshmallow vanilla cream: In a medium saucepan, whisk together sugar, cornstarch, and salt. Whisk in milk and egg yolks. Place saucepan over medium heat and cook, whisking constantly until the cream starts to bubble and thicken, about 4 minutes. When it has thickened, add in butter, 1 tablespoon at a time. Whisk in vanilla. When combined, remove saucepan from heat and allow to cool for about 10 minutes. Add 1 cup of mini marshmallows and mix until they have melted in with the other ingredients. Pour marshmallow cream into a bowl

and let cool in the fridge for at least 1 ½ hours. Fold in the remaining 1 cup mini marshmallows.

To prepare the fluff whipped cream: Place a medium-sized metal bowl in freezer and chill for at least 15 minutes. In chilled bowl, using a mixer on high, combine heavy cream, vanilla, confectioners' sugar, and Marshmallow Fluff. Mix for about 1 minute, until peaks are stiff.

To assemble the pie: Pour ½ cup hot fudge sauce over the bottom of the crust. Place 6 graham cracker squares on top of fudge. Pour marshmallow cream over the graham crackers. Dip remaining 6 graham crackers in the remaining ½ cup hot fudge sauce and then arrange them over the marshmallow cream. Refrigerate for at least 12 hours before continuing.

Ready to serve: Preheat broiler. Remove pie from fridge and spread fluff whipped over the chocolate-dipped graham crackers. Finally, arrange 1 cup mini marshmallows over the entire surface of the pie. Broil until the marshmallows turn a golden campfire color, rotating the pie frequently for an even finish, about 2 minutes. Serve immediately or refrigerate until you are ready to serve.



## AGAINST ALL ODDS... Aunt Marian's Summer Squash Custard Pie

From *Southern Pies: A Gracious Plenty of Pie Recipes*, From *Lemon Chess To Chocolate Pecan*, by Nancie McDermott

### INGREDIENTS

1 pastry for a 9-inch single-crust pie  
6 medium zucchini or yellow squash (about 1 ½ pounds)  
¾ cup sugar

1 tablespoon cornstarch  
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg  
¼ teaspoon salt  
½ cup heavy cream  
3 eggs, beaten well  
¼ cup butter, melted  
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract  
½ teaspoon white vinegar

**INSTRUCTIONS** Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Line a 9-inch pie pan with crust and then crimp the edges decoratively.

Trim ends of the zucchini and cut each squash lengthwise into quarters, turning each into four long strips. Cut away the pointed edge of each strip, removing and discarding seeds. Line up strips and cut each one crosswise into ½-inch chunks. You should have about 6 cups of chopped zucchini.

In a medium saucepan with a tight-fitting lid, bring ¾ cup water to a rolling boil. Add chopped zucchini, cover, and cook until zucchini is tender and bright green, softened, but still holding its shape without turning to mush, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from heat and drain well.

In a small bowl, combine sugar, cornstarch, nutmeg, and salt. Stir with a fork to mix everything well. In a medium bowl, combine cream, eggs, butter, vanilla, and vinegar. Using a whisk or a fork, stir to combine well. Add sugar mixture and stir to dissolve the dry ingredients and mix together into a thick, smooth filling.

Transfer the zucchini back to empty saucepan and mash it to make it as soft and smooth as possible. Drain any extra liquid the zucchini releases. Measure out so that you have about 2 ½ cups. Fold mashed, drained zucchini into filling and stir to mix together well.

Pour filling into the piecrust. Place pie on the middle shelf of oven. Bake for 10 minutes. Reduce the heat to 325 degrees, and bake until the filling is firm and nicely browned, and a knife inserted in center of pie comes out clean, 30 to 40 minutes.

Place the pie on a cooling rack or a folded kitchen towel. Let cool to room temperature. Serve at room temperature or slightly chilled.

### ESSENTIAL TOOLS AND TIPS

A few things to keep in mind.

**Remember Shelf Life** Fresh fruit pies are fine at room temperature for up to two days. Custard and cream pies, both of which should be refrigerated immediately after cooling, will keep for three days.

**Keep an Eye on Crust** Sometimes a pie's crust cooks faster than the filling. If it's looking too brown, cover it with aluminum foil.

**Choose Your Pan Wisely** Cheap aluminum pans can keep the pastry from browning properly. Stick to Pyrex or ceramic dishes to get crust golden throughout.



# Home Sweet Home

When Grant Wood created “American Gothic,” he almost certainly didn’t think dessert—or imagine that his painting would cook up business for a citified pie hustler. BY KATHERINE LAGOMARSINO

Pie is Beth Howard’s reason for existence—literally. Without a certain decadent banana cream treat whipped up by Marie Finn for her sweetheart, Tom Howard, which inspired him to change their status from boyfriend and girlfriend to wife and husband,

their daughter would never have been born.

“To make the meringue,” Beth explains about the pie that sparked the marriage that created her, “you gouge the spoon in there, and pull it out. That forms the peak. Then you move to the next spot and gouge in, in a haphazard pattern.”

Throughout Howard’s peripatetic life, pie has provided one of its recurring themes and served as stability when things fell apart. With them, Howard has lured lovers, healed wounds, salvaged dot-com boom burnout, and, lately, forged alliances with politicians in Eldon, the tiny (population: 967) Iowa town she now calls home.

In early June, on the morning of her 49th birthday, Howard—freshly showered, wrapped in a towel, shoulder-length blonde hair dripping wet—was paid a surprise visit by Shirley Stacey, Eldon’s mayor. Stacey, who also occasionally works the cash register at the local gas station, isn’t bearing flowers, balloons, or a cake. Instead, she’s holding Polaroid pictures of Howard’s dogs: Daisy, a white terrier mix, and Jack, a Yorkshire-Jack Russell blend.

“Evidence,” Howard says, arching her brow later that day, as she recounts the story. The photos had been passed off to Stacey the night before at a city hall meeting. Howard’s canines have a habit of chasing squirrels across the street and, much to her neighbors’ ire, into their yard. These pics of Daisy and Jack in the act are the latest attempt to have Howard’s pooches put in lockdown.

“I said to Shirley, in tears, ‘What am I suppose to do, move?’” Howard says. “I mean, one cranky neighbor out of the entire town? They’re not going to drive me out of Eldon.”

“I DO MY BEST to suck up to people around here,” Howard says, darting around her minuscule kitchen and doing the hands-flying work of a business that has turned her into Eldon’s version of a celebrity. Howard makes pies. Lots of them. About 60 per week.

What gives her story its delicious twist is that she runs this personal pastry empire out of—and, in fact, lives in—the American Gothic House, the petite Eldon residence made famous by Grant Wood’s iconic 1930 painting of a pitchfork-toting farmer and his dour-looking spinster daughter. (In reality, a Cedar Rapids, Iowa, dentist and Wood’s sister.) Since last August, the 700-square-foot house—added, in 1974, to the National Registry of Historic Places—has been HQ to this blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Mini Cooper-driving journalist-turned-pie queen, who sells her confections on summer weekends at the Pitchfork Pie Stand. That’s Howard’s fancy name for the couple of folding tables set up just inside her front door.

“People call me ‘the pie lady,’” she says, pulling out a large bin of flour, in preparation for giving a crash course in dough making. “Why not ‘the pie girl’? ‘The pie lady’ sounds old.” Most days, Howard works her look with the same vigor she

applies to a round of dough, rolling out a Hollywood version of the Iowa farm girl—two braided pigtails and standard-issue Tractor Supply overalls—lacking only the hand-drawn cheek freckles. But it has to be said: Howard has the exuberance and energy of someone a third her age.

“I’ve got this formula worked out for the crust,” she says, digging a measuring cup into the flour bin. “I call it three to one: three cups flour to one cup fat. I do a half cup butter and a half cup vegetable shortening. It’s easy to remember, so you don’t have to travel with your cookbooks.”

Having spent much of her life in perpetual motion, Howard is not one to be weighed down with heavy books, although her life of pie is filled with the ingredients of a best seller: two cups restlessness, a half cup destiny, one cup love, three cups grief, one cup faith. In fact, she has just finished writing a book, the result of a long, quiet first winter in Eldon.



**Classic Cuisine**  
Beth Howard peddles pie out of the American Gothic House.

*Making a Pie: A Memoir About Love, Loss, and the Healing Power of Pie*, arrives next spring.

Skeptics might well catch a whiff of *Eat, Pray, Love* in this tale of soul-searching through food, but Howard is adamant that her story is not that

of Elizabeth Gilbert, whose memoir entails leaving a marriage to find independence, spirituality, and, of course, love in faraway places.

“I’ve spent my life traveling the world,” Howard says, “so while venturing out there alone and indepen-

dently to foreign places resonated for many of [Gilbert’s] readers, it wasn’t new for me. Been there, done that, still doing that. I’ve never lived my life by the *shoulds*—should be married, should have kids, should have a regular job, should follow the norms. I’ve always been able to listen to—and hear—what my gut feeling is telling me to do.”

HOWARD WAS BORN in nearby Ottumwa, Iowa—home to Tom Arnold and *M\*A\*S\*H*’s Radar O’Reilly. Remarkably, she had never heard of the American Gothic House despite growing up only 18 miles away. The middle child of five, Howard was raised by a father with a rebellious streak, a dentist who routinely took his kids for secretive pre-dinner trips to Dairy Queen or to see expressly adult films like *Dirty Harry* and *Taxi Driver*. “We were in grade school,” recalls Howard. “Not appropriate.”

Her parents loved to travel, and took their young children with them on trips to France, Germany, England, and annual jaunts to the Bahamas, sometimes staying on longer than the kids, who were taught to make their own way back to Iowa.

“We would allow them freedom when they were on vacation,” says Tom Howard, Beth’s father, who relocated with his wife Marie years ago to Playa Del Rey, California, to be closer to their children, most of whom now live on the west coast. “We taught them how to use the airports—to make the phone calls. They learned early how to handle themselves, and Beth falls into that category.”

Craving more excitement than sleepy Ottumwa could offer, the Howards relocated to livelier Davenport, Iowa. There the ever-spunky Beth took up with an adventurous troupe of friends,

whose impromptu bicycle trip to Washington State led the then 17-year-old to her first lesson in pie making. It came the hard way: A retired pastry chef caught her stealing apples from his orchard.

“Pie is nostalgic,” Howard says as the late afternoon sun streams into her kitchen through an open door. She’s using her fingers to break up the blobs of butter and shortening into the flour, a technique she simplified from the one taught to her by the pastry chef—in his kerosene-lit kitchen—who cut butter into the flour using two knives. “Pie is about taking you back to that simpler time when life didn’t feel so complicated.”

Life, in fact, became much more complicated for Howard, who has a knack for finding—perhaps even adding—complexity where others seek simplicity. Having fallen in love with the Pacific Northwest, she attended The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington,

a school known for its create-your-own-curriculum style of learning. After graduating with a liberal arts degree, she spent the next several years sampling disparate careers (resort representative, PR executive, coffee importer) in far-flung locales (Jamaica, Hawaii, Kenya). She touched down in San Francisco at the height of the dot-com boom, scoring a lucrative gig producing websites for the successful (but now bust) startup Quokka Sports, which often entailed 16-hour days.

*Beth Howard is not one to be weighed down by heavy cookbooks, but her life is filled with all the ingredients of a best seller.*

By the age of 38, Howard had had enough. “I wanted to create something real, something with my hands. I just wanted to do something like—bake,” she says. “And so I did.”

Just like that, Howard uprooted her life and headed to California.

For a year, in Malibu, she baked pies at Mary’s Kitchen & Gourmet Country Mart. Biking to work along the Pacific Coast highway and crafting pies all day by the ocean (often for such celebrities as Robert Downey, Jr. “Handsome,” Howard says with a sigh) was exactly the sort of corporate detox she’d been yearning for. The job was a physical one, thanks to her mentor-teacher, Mary Spellman, who did everything by hand.

“These are my two best tools,” says Howard, setting aside some dough to hold up her fists. “I can feel the dough to see if it’s moist enough. If it’s too sticky, I’ll sprinkle a little more flour

on the surface. You work with it, you improvise, you feel it. It’s a tactile experience.”

But making minimum wage got old, and Howard moved on, ditching pie making as a vocation to take a job in Seattle as an online producer for MSNBC, which led to freelance work for Bill Gates’ annual CEO Summit, which led to an impromptu—and fateful—solo sojourn to Oregon’s Crater Lake.

Until then, marriage had eluded the 41-year-old. Not that she was looking for it. Howard met Marcus Iken by chance in a hotel lobby near Crater Lake National Park. He was tall and handsome, with almond-shaped green eyes and a hybrid accent that revealed his Stuttgart, Germany, upbringing and years spent in London. Vacationing alone, Iken thoroughly chatted up Howard before they exchanged numbers. Six months later, out of the blue, he called and, just like old friends, they talked for hours.

It just so happened that Howard was heading to a wedding in Tuscany the next month. Iken suggested that she make a side trip to visit him in Stuttgart. Instead, she invited him to the wedding. Weeks later, the dashing German arrived via motorcycle in Tuscany to meet his date—and future wife.

It’s up for debate as to whether Iken would have proposed without Howard having baked him an apple pie heaped high with fruit and smelling of cinnamon and butter. Maybe it was the pie, or maybe it was the fact that she had lugged it, one week after the wedding, on a four-hour train ride from Switzerland to Germany in order to deliver it to his door. The courtship ritual was familiar.

Beth and Marcus married on August 22, 2003, and led an itinerant life. Because his work with the German automotive giant Daimler required flexibility, the couple

spent the first five years of their marriage hopping from Stuttgart to Oregon to Saltillo, Mexico. It seemed the perfect moveable feast for a woman with an appetite for travel. “But it was hard,” Howard admits, “and harder to do it on his terms than on my own.” Particularly the nesting in Germany.

“It’s difficult, in Stuttgart, to break into the culture,” she says. “The language is tough. And Marcus worked long hours. I didn’t have many ex-pat friends, so it was a lonely place for me to live.”

Things began to worrisomely unravel when the couple moved to Saltillo. Although she worked as a writer and attempted to build a social life by teaching pie-making classes, Howard was once again undone by the language barrier.

“So I took a job in L.A.,” she says, “and Marcus and I continued to see each other often. But then he got transferred back to Germany, and there was no way I was going to return there.” Howard had begun working on a manuscript, a memoir about quitting her dot-com job to bake pies in Malibu. But that story, and Howard’s life of pies as she knew it, would soon take a very tart twist.

In August 2009, Iken planned, with his three-week sabbatical from Daimler, to visit friends in Portland, Oregon, then swing down to Terlingua, Texas, where Howard was now settled into a writer’s cabin near Big Bend National Park, an ideal location for reflection—and pie making. But Iken was non-committal about exactly when he would see Howard, a recurring theme in their relationship.

In fact, he’d never see her again. On August 19, Howard received a call from a medical examiner in a Portland suburb. Iken, just 43, had died suddenly of a ruptured aorta, the result of a congenital heart condition.

JUST INSIDE THE front door of the American Gothic House, now glowing like a lantern on this cool night in June, hangs a corkboard papered with news clippings about Howard—pie press, if you will. She scrutinizes one photo taken of her in Terlingua, on June 14, 2009—her 47th birthday. Her father had come down to celebrate, which explains the banana cream pie sitting on the table in front of her. She’s wearing a floral sundress and a red-and-white apron tied snugly at her waist. “That was two months before Marcus died,” she says.

Whenever the conversation turns to her husband, Howard’s youthfulness fades and her braids appear uncomfortably at odds with her inescapable middle age. Even her voice, typically full of confidence, reduces to a strained whisper. Referring again to the photograph, she says, “You might not be able to see it, but there’s a lightness about me. You can’t tell, but I can see it.”

Soon after Iken’s death, a grief-stricken Howard quickly found Texas too quiet. She returned to Portland, the place she felt closest to her husband, and, like she had done eight years before, turned to pie to find some peace—or at least to stay exhaustingly busy in order to keep the loss at bay.

In the summer of 2010, with the one-year anniversary of Iken’s death approaching, an unemployed and admittedly unmoored Howard called the organizers of the Iowa State Fair and volunteered to judge, along with other well-rounded pastry authorities, their August pie contest. Her old stomping grounds, she thought, might provide some comfort during this trying time.

“Originally, I’d planned to do a pie tour of Iowa after the fair,” Howard remembers. “But, frankly, having judged every single con-

test that day—and there were at least 20 of them—I'd become a little sick of pie."

Instead, on a whim, she took a trip to her childhood home in Ottumwa. "And that's when I stumbled upon the AMERICAN GOTHIC HOUSE sign." Veering off Highway 34 at exit 199, she followed the route through Eldon, passing tidy prairie-style homes, not-so-tidy farmhouses, and, finally, climbing a small hill to the tiny white house immortalized by Grant Wood.

"I fell in love with it," recalls Howard. "I could picture myself there." The house not only seemed an ideal place for her to continue her memoir, but also a grounding locale to grieve. When she entered the visitor's center, she spotted the time line that runs along its north wall, a chronicle of the structure's history and its decades of occupants. "I saw that someone had lived in the house as recently as 2008, so that meant you could probably rent it."

She started making phone calls and, as fate would have it, the property's landlord was a member of the Iowa State Historical Society, an affiliation shared by the very friend Howard was crashing with in nearby Des Moines. The deal was done in a matter of hours. The lease Howard signed (for a stunningly modest \$250 per month) assured her that the landmark would not be open to tours but required that she be at least hospitable to curiosity seekers. It also granted her permission to sell pies out of its front door.

"I got here in Eldon, and that was it," she says. "I made a phone call and had my stuff shipped." Fortuitously, her furniture—including a modern, red sectional from her uneasy years in Stuttgart—fits the place like a glove. For the girl who swore she'd never return after she left Iowa at 18, the

state and small-town life fit her like a glove, too. Most of the time.

Howard's so-called simple life of baking pies in Iowa has gotten complicated. On weekdays, she tackles book revisions while keeping an eye on her wayward terriers. On weekends, she and her pie-making protégé, 17-year-old Dakota McElderry, whom she met while leading a baking seminar, work at a frenetic pace. The self-imposed mass production of pies she has undertaken—not to mention the endless pie demos she does for everyone from the local Wapello County Fair to Kohler, the Wisconsin-based kitchen and bath empire—has, once again in her life, left her frazzled.

Like finding the right balance of moisture and pliability in pie dough, Howard continues to search for an internal balance—the deft kneading together of her public persona as Eldon's feisty pie queen and her private side, the person still looking to make sense, in book form and otherwise, of her life of endless flight.

“If she's still in Eldon in three years,” says her father with a knowing laugh, “that would be surprising to me.”

Howard is insistent, however, that “this is not a ‘for now’ thing.” In fact, she just re-upped her lease. What's the point of venturing out into the world, she figures, when the world is coming to you—especially when the front door to the American Gothic House is open and the scent of baking apples and buttery crust wafts through the screen and out over the lawn? “This is like living on a river,” she says, “with a flow of people coming to my door. You just never know who is going to show up.”

*Katherine Lagomarsino is an Associate Editor at Spirit. If you've got a pie tale worth telling, email her at [katherine.lagomarsino@paceco.com](mailto:katherine.lagomarsino@paceco.com).*