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SECRETS OF THE PERFECT PIE CRUST

By Jennifer Burcke

When asked to declare my favorite food to prepare and enjoy with my family, the answer is simple: pie. I love to make pie almost as much as I love to eat a delicious, flaky pie crust filled to the brim with the best of what the season has to offer. If I can share that pie with friends and family, then all the better. I was blessed with a grandmother who was a gifted pie baker. When we visited her, she would always

greet me with a warm embrace and then humbly proclaim, "There might be a little pie." My feet could barely carry me fast enough to discover what sort of pie she had made in anticipation of our arrival. More often than not, she would delight with not one, but two or three freshly baked pies cooling on the counter.



I don't have any of my grandmother's recipes for pie. In fact, I doubt that she had one written down on paper. She cooked and baked by feel, adding a bit of this or a bit of that until it was just right. She honed her skills for decades, cooking for her large family. Written recipes were no longer necessary by the time I was sitting in the kitchen watching her work her magic.

It's no wonder that pie was one of the first dishes that I taught myself to make. I was around 11 years old when I first attempted to make a pie from scratch. Perhaps it was the act of missing a grandmother who had left us a few years before, but I wanted so badly to master that flaky, delicious crust my grandmother seemed to make so effortlessly. I tried in vain, turning out pies that had tough, chewy dough where I hoped the light, flaky crust would be.

With each pie, my skills improved. Thankfully, my parents were happy taste-testers and never refused to eat a slice of pie no matter how tough the crust turned out. It wasn't too long before I had read enough cookbooks and made enough pies to hone my own skills and realize I could indeed make a pie crust that would have made my grandmother proud.

Along the way, I picked up a few tricks for making flaky, light pie crusts without fail. These methods are so simple to use and will help you create delicious homemade pies to share with your friends and family during the holiday season and for years to come. I hope you will find my four favorite tips helpful and you'll be enjoying a delicious homemade pie to finish your Thanksgiving feast!

1. GRATE THE COLD BUTTER AND USE CHILLED FAT

One of the main contributors to a flaky pie crust is the solid fat (butter, lard, shortening) that is used. If the fat is properly incorporated, it will remain in small visible pieces within the dough. When the pie is placed in the hot oven, those bits of fat begin to melt, releasing steam. That steam creates tiny air pockets in the dough, separating the layers of dough slightly and resulting in a flaky crust. The larger the bits of fat remain in the dough, the flakier the baked crust will be.

Working the fat into the dry ingredients can be tricky. If the fat is too cold, it can be difficult to break down into small pieces without overworking the dough. If the fat is softened to room temperature, it breaks down too much, robbing the dough of those pieces of solid fat and the flaky crust they create.

My solution is simple yet effective: I grate the cold butter for my recipe and chill any shortening or lard that I will be using. The resulting small pieces of butter require less mixing to incorporate them into the dry ingredients and the chilled lard or shortening are much easier to mix without blending too much with the flour. Less mixing and therefore larger pieces of fat in the dough help to create a flakier crust.

2. RESIST THE URGE TO OVERMIX OR OVERWORK THE DOUGH

When it comes to mixing dough for a pie crust, less is more. Stop mixing the dough as soon as it forms a ball. Overworking the dough will encourage the gluten in the flour to strengthen and result in a crust that tends to be chewy rather than flaky.

Gluten strands are formed when flour and liquid are combined. Working the dough strengthens those strands and creates more elasticity in the dough. Think about pizza dough being pulled and stretched, tossed to chewy perfection. For pie crust, we want the opposite: a flaky, light crust without much elasticity at all. Therefore, pie crust dough must be worked as little as possible to preserve that flaky texture.



3. PUT DOWN THE ROLLING PIN

So often, the prospect of rolling out a pie crust and transferring it whole to the pie plate is daunting enough to prevent even confident bakers from making their own pie crust. If you have found yourself fearing the rolling pin, I have great news. You can put away the rolling pin and still create a delicious, beautiful pie crust.

If you're making a pie without a top crust, the rolling pin is unnecessary. Simply transfer the freshly made pie crust dough to the bottom of your pie plate and press it into shape using your fingers. Press the dough gently until it covers the bottom and sides of the pan completely and is of a uniform thickness. Flute or decorate the top edge as desired and chill until ready to fill and bake.

4. USE A PIE BIRD

If you are baking a pie with a top crust, call a pie bird into service. A pie bird helps to allow excess steam from the bubbling pie filling to escape while it bakes in the oven. Allowing more steam to escape encourages the top crust to bake more evenly and the filling to thicken. The result is a flaky, tender pie crust and thick, rich filling.

Jennifer spends her days living and writing at 1840 Farm with three generations of her family and their dogs, chickens, ducks, goats, and rabbit. She loves to create homegrown recipes in their farmhouse kitchen and dream up new handmade products for their [Etsy Shop](#). You can follow their daily adventures on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) and enjoy a collection of homemade recipes on their [blog](#).