



Pie Crust 101

How to make it perfect
every time

BY KEN HAEDRICH

THIS MIGHT RUFFLE SOME FEATHERS, but I have a bone to pick with whoever coined the expression “as easy as pie.” As a pie instructor, the author of four pie cookbooks, and the dean of The Pie Academy, an online community of passionate pie makers, I can assure you that a majority of home cooks believe there’s almost nothing easy about pie, especially the crust; confusion and disappointment reign. Boiling water is easy. Making a grilled-cheese sandwich is easy. Making a reliably good pie crust, not so much.

Accurate measurements can solve a lot of the problems that plague a pie crust, but I think the big culprit is how we interpret the language of pie-dough preparation. One cook’s pea-size pie dough mixture might look like lentils, another’s the size of giant butter beans. If I tell you to pulse the food processor to incorporate the fat and flour, will your pulses be ½ second or 3 seconds long? How firm is your cold butter? Almost rock hard, or coolish and yielding to medium thumb pressure? The sum of these seemingly small details can have a real impact on your crust.

My aim here is to nudge us toward a common pie language and understanding so that we shrink the margin of error and achieve a more predictable outcome.

I mentioned the food processor because it’s the tool I use almost exclusively in my day-to-day pie-dough making. I’m an old-school pie maker—I learned how to do everything by hand—so I resisted the processor at first. Over time,

however, I had to admit that it’s just plain easier and faster than the hand method, and the result is every bit as good. Easier and faster means I make more pies.

Think of the food processor as a high-speed pastry blender. What typically takes five or more minutes to do by hand takes a matter of seconds in the food processor. Because the machine is so efficient, a light touch is required. My rule of thumb is to use only short 1-second pulses when I’m preparing dough in the processor. Pulsing is key because the pulsing action keeps tossing particles up from the bottom of the bowl, which promotes even mixing. When you run the machine nonstop, the blade tends to compact the particles in the bowl, resulting in an unevenly mixed dough.

I’ve experimented with different combinations of fats and have decided that a blend of mostly unsalted butter with a small amount of vegetable shortening, such as Crisco, makes the best possible crust. The viscous shortening quickly coats the flour and helps prevent the formation of gluten, which can make a crust too chewy. The shortening also acts like a muscle relaxer, so the dough is easier to roll and less prone to shrinkage. The butter, for its part, contributes to the crust’s flakiness and yields a flavor that everyone adores.

I also add a teaspoon of vinegar and a bit of cornstarch to my dough. Both tenderize the crust. I leave out sugar,

because I've seen too many instances of sugar causing the crust to overbrown.

Incidentally, size matters when it comes to the food processor and pie dough. If your machine has a capacity of 12 cups or more, it will accommodate a double-crust dough recipe. Less than 12 cups, and I suggest making two separate single-crust recipes for best results.

My recipes instruct you to empty the pie-dough mixture from the processor while it is still somewhat crumbly and before it looks like a cohesive dough, a hedge against overmixing. At that point, you can start packing the buttery crumbs together with your bare hands and shape them into a disk (or disks, if you're making the double-crust recipe). But hands are warm, and warm hands will soften the butter, make the dough sticky, and result in a less flaky crust. I prefer the "gather and compress" method described in photo 3 (see p. TK), which keeps your hands off the dough altogether.

I always refrigerate dough before rolling it. This gives me ample time to work on the filling and, more important, allows the butter to firm back up so that the dough isn't sticky when I roll it. One hour in the fridge is usually sufficient, but I sometimes keep it there overnight. I take it out of the refrigerator for about 10 minutes before rolling. Otherwise, the dough will be too firm.

So, as easy as pie? I often tell home cooks that you can be 90 percent pie-crust proficient after just a month or two of regular weekend pie-making, but that last 10 percent is all nuance perfected over a lifetime. You'll find very few friends and family members who'll complain about your mastery process.

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The flaky vs. mealy question

Bakers tend to talk about flaky pie crust like it's the holy grail, but you're not alone if you've ever wondered precisely what that means.

One reason it's hard to pinpoint the definition of flaky is because it's not simply one thing. Rather, it's a textural spectrum that includes everything from very small flakes—sometimes called a mealy crust—to much bigger flakes created by larger pieces of butter in the dough. The more the fat is worked into the flour, the smaller—or shorter—the flakes become.

Everyone seems to have a preference. But the size of the flakes, in my opinion, has little to do with the overall goodness of the pie. Rather, the outcome depends, among other things, on the quality of the fruit, the balance of flavors, the doneness and texture of the filling, and the browning of the crust.



Fats



Dry ingredients



Liquid

Pie Dough

INGREDIENT CHECKLIST

Measuring and chilling ingredients is an important step that helps the mixing process run smoothly and yields consistent results from pie to pie. Here is the three-step ritual I follow when I make pie dough.

1. FATS

Cut cold butter into ½-inch cubes. Spread it on a plate. Break the shortening into several pieces, and put it to one side of the plate. Refrigerate for 30 minutes. (I usually dust the plate with flour first so that the fat doesn't stick to it.)

2. DRY INGREDIENTS

Measure the flour, cornstarch, and salt into a bowl. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

3. LIQUID

Measure the cold water and vinegar into a 1-cup glass measuring cup. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Pie crust, unplugged

Before we had food processors, home cooks made fabulous pies entirely by hand. These tools and techniques make the job easier.



The two-hand rub. Conventional wisdom tells us to keep warm hands off the dough, but this doesn't stop some bakers from rubbing fat into flour by hand. Work quickly if you do, and start with cold fat and flour.



Pastry blender. Nothing more than a handle grip with curved wires or blades. You keep pushing the business end into the fat and flour mixture until you're ready to add the water. Moonlights as a banana masher for banana bread.



Two butter knives. Hold them in crisscross fashion and draw them repeatedly, scissorlike, through the fat and flour. Totally brings out the klutz in me.



Fork. Some bakers swear by a plain kitchen fork to cut fat into flour. Tedious at best. Spring for a pastry blender instead.

food-processor pie dough (single crust)

- 6¾ oz. (1½ cups) bleached all-purpose flour; more for dusting**
- 4 oz. (8 Tbs.) cold unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch cubes**
- 2 Tbs. (24 g) cold vegetable shortening, such as Crisco**
- 1 tsp. cornstarch**
- ½ tsp. salt**
- 1 tsp. white vinegar**
- ¼ cup cold water**

Dust a plate with flour. Put the butter and shortening in a single layer on the plate. Refrigerate for 30 minutes. Combine the flour, cornstarch, and salt in a bowl. Refrigerate. Put the vinegar in a 1-cup glass measuring cup. Add enough cold water to equal ¼ cup liquid. Refrigerate.

1 Transfer the flour mixture to a food processor. Pulse several times to combine. Remove the lid and scatter the butter and shortening over the dry mixture. Give the machine 6 or 7 one-second pulses. The fat should be broken into a random assortment of pieces, from the size of split peas to large gravel.

2 Add the water through the feed tube, in a 6- to 7-second stream, giving the machine a series of 6 or 7 one-second pulses as you pour. When you're done pouring, the mixture will still be crumbly, but if you press a handful of it together in your palm, it should

hold together without falling apart. If it doesn't hold together, pulse for another second.

3 Place two 18-inch-long pieces of plastic wrap on the counter, overlapping them the long way by about a third. Pour the dough mixture in the center of the plastic. Gather up and grasp the plastic on opposite sides. Bring your hands together to bunch up the mixture, then press down on the plastic to compact the dough. Move your hands around the plastic, and press again. Repeat several more times, until the dough is no longer crumbly, and then shape the dough into a ¾-inch-thick disk.

4 Put the disk on a clean sheet of plastic wrap. Seal in the plastic, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour before rolling. You may also freeze the dough for later. Slip the wrapped dough into a plastic freezer bag, and freeze for up to 2 months. Thaw overnight in the refrigerator before using. Makes enough dough for one 9- to 9½-inch pie shell.



food-processor pie dough (double crust)

Read the single-crust recipe above before proceeding. To make enough dough for a double-crust pie or two pie shells, double all of the ingredients, and refrigerate for 30 minutes. After you pulse the dry ingredients in the processor, add slightly more than half of the butter (about half of the total fat). Pulse 6 to 7 times, then add the rest of the fat and pulse 6 or 7 more times. Remove the lid and gently fluff the mixture with a fork to loosen it. Replace the lid, and add the water

in a 6- to 7-second stream while pulsing the processor. Remove the lid and inspect the dough. If it seems overly dry or if it crumbles when you press some of it in your palm, add an additional tablespoon of cold water. Empty a little less than half of the mixture onto plastic wrap, as directed above in step 3. Shape the dough into a ¾-inch-thick disk. Repeat with the remaining dough (the slightly larger second disk will become a bottom crust).