

perfect pie dough

Each November, my family gathers at my sister's house for Thanksgiving dinner. My family is super-sized—I have five brothers, four sisters, twenty-five nieces and nephews and a half-dozen grand babies. With spouses, significant others and family friends added in, most years the crowd swells to well over fifty people.

Everyone brings pie.



Each year, my pies are the only pies made with a homemade crust. I'm not judging here; it's so easy to pick up a pre-made pie crust or dough in the freezer case and add the pumpkin, mincemeat or apple filling—who's got time for homemade? And the pies with the store-bought crusts look perfect and taste fine. But for me, there's nothing like the look and taste of homemade. I get the same sense of satisfaction from making, rolling and baking a perfect pie crust that I do from parallel parking my car in a spot that's 12" longer than my car. Mostly everyone I know would drive past that "too small" spot and head over to the grocery store where the parking is easier and the pie crusts are pre-made.

At last year's Thanksgiving, my sisters and nieces asked me why I went through all the trouble to make a homemade crust, and confessed that they had tried in the past to make a crust, only to have produced a tough or crumbly mess that broke apart or looked "too ugly" to present at Thanksgiving. I invited them to my kitchen for a lesson in Pie Dough 101 and am proud to say they are on their way to becoming accomplished pie dough makers. Here's what they learned:

Pie dough ingredients are truly simple. Flour, fat (butter or shortening; all butter for a more flavorful crust, shortening for a flakier crust) salt, sugar and water. That's it. If you can measure, you can learn to make a great pie dough.

The key is in the handling of the ingredients. You want to work cool and quick. The fat needs to stay solid until the pie hits the oven. When the fat melts, it forms air pockets which make the crust flaky and tender. If you overwork the dough, two things can happen:



1. the water promotes the formation of gluten by proteins in the flour. Glutens are great for bread making, where you want a crunchy crust and chewy interior, but bad for pie crust where the goal is tender flakiness;
2. the fat breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces. Smaller pieces make for smaller air pocket in the oven, producing a decidedly not flaky crust.

You want the fat to be broken into pea-sized or smaller globules. There are several techniques and tools to achieve this. I've tried cutting the butter or shortening into the flour with two knives the way my grandmother did, which is tedious and produces less than stellar results. I've tried the pastry cutter—a special, crescent-shaped tool with a handle and several metal wires or bands that form the crescent and connect to the handle. Decent results, but time consuming. I find the time spent cutting the fat into the flour is inversely proportional



to how tender the pie crust is. The quicker this is done, the more tender is the crust. So, my favorite tool for this task these days is my Ninja blender. I suppose a food processor would work as well, but the Ninja is what I've got. I simply add the flour, chilled butter or shortening, salt and sugar to the batter bowl outfitted with the dough blade and pulse a few times. When I remove the lid, I've got the perfect, rough cornmeal texture I'm looking for, with visible chunks of butter and shortening.

Next I add a few tablespoons of ice water and pulse again. I add more ice water and pulse until a ball of dough forms in the blender bowl. Again, don't overwork this or you'll end up with a tough, chewy crust.

Grab that ball of dough and with your hands and split it in two. Quickly form each ball into a disk roughly 1.5" high and 3" in diameter. Wrap the disks in wax paper and pop it into the refrigerator for about 30 minutes. This chill will stop any of those glutens in their tracks.

Remove a chilled disk from the refrigerator and grab a rolling pin. If you've got a marble top, dust it with flour and get ready to roll. Marble is great because it tends to stay cool, and heat is the flaky crust's enemy during prep stage. If you haven't got marble, you can dust a wooden board or use flour-dusted sheet of baking parchment laid on a tabletop or countertop. Dust your rolling pin with flour. Gently pound on the disk of dough, rotating about an eighth of a turn each time you give it a whack. Keep an eye on the edges and if they start to crack, use the tines of a fork to knit the edges back together.

When your disk is about 8" around, it's time to start rolling. Start with the pin at the center of the disk and roll firmly and evenly to the edge. Turn the dough around and roll from the other edge. I have a tendency to add a little pressure as I get closer to the edge and have to remind myself to resist that urge. The goal is to keep the dough even across the entire surface. You can lay chopsticks on the outside edges of the dough and roll on top of these. This trick will prevent you from rolling too thin.

Keep turning, reducing the degree of turning as you go, so after the first two rolls, you're turning 90 degrees for four turns, then 45 degrees for eight turns.

By now, you should have a disk that's about 12" in diameter, and pretty close to perfectly round. Perfect for lining the bottom of most pie pans. For pies with lots of filling, like a mile-high apple pie, you may want to roll your top crust a little larger; this crust will be a little thinner. ■

For a 2~crust pie

2 1/2 cups all -purpose flour

pinch of salt

bigger pinch of sugar

3/4 cup chilled, unsalted butter, cut into small chunks

1/4 cup chilled shortening

1/2 cup ice water

Halve this recipe for a one-crust pie, or wrap the second disk of dough tightly in plastic wrap in addition to the wax paper and freeze for up to a month.