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APPLE PIE 101

The Lowdown on Heirlooms and Tips for the Perfect Apple Pie

BY LISA ALEXANDER

I wouldn't immediately think of California as apple country, but it definitely is. Our Central Coast has the perfect combination of coldish winters, coastal fog, and hot summer days to grow happy apples. That's why our farmers' markets are about to see a parade of early and late-season heirloom fruit. It's also why I got more than a little bit obsessed with learning about these old apple strains as well as a grail of my own: the perfect apple pie.

First, more about the apples themselves. So much more than just a fruit. An apple pie coming out of the oven—that's childhood, that's home. And it's also hard-wired into the American DNA, if not soul itself. In the 19th century, we grew over 14,000 apple varieties and some of our present-day trees are over 200 years old. Since then, agribusiness has done what it does, narrowing our selection down to around ninety of the heartiest, the easiest, and the most disease-tolerant. Somewhere along the way it was also decided that red was best, and so color won out over texture and taste. Now, thankfully, farmers are once again giving us back the apples of our ancestors. Heirlooms can taste like strawberries or bananas or nutmeg or freshly cut grass—but they're fragile and not commercially sold. You have to know the farmers and

markets and seasons as well, all of which made me want to know more. Which heirlooms are best to bake with or just eat plain? And which farmers are growing the ones we've never tasted, and where can we get them? To find out, I figured LA's master bakers were a good place to start.

Roxana Jullapat is the kind of person who likes a meaty apple with a good snap. She gets excited when they're a little starchy too, because she knows they'll bake up well. Roxana is the pastry chef and co-owner of **Friends & Family** in East Hollywood. A former pastry chef at AMMO and Lucques, she and her husband, Daniel Mattern, were chefs at the much-loved Cooks County as well. Roxana has a whole lot to say about apples, not least because she grew up in Costa Rica, where mangoes and bananas were normal, and apples were the most exotic fruit.

According to her, the apple is the potato of the baking world and an apple rustic, a dessert she learned while working for Nancy Silverton, pretty much takes the cake in terms of perfection.

"You can't outdo a classic because you're fighting all kinds of things... like preconceptions and traditions, tried and true flavors,

techniques, and memories. It's really hard to mess up something that people have such an incredible emotional attachment to."

Though she's realistic about the pitfalls of pie. "I love the idea—we all love the idea—that you can just whip a little something together, throw in a little sugar, encase it in dough, put it in the oven and it's wonderful, but that idea is the mother of a lot of bad pie."

Roxana's four-star version has been fine-tuned over years of trial and error and baking marathons. She tosses the apples with spices and brown sugar, white sugar, a little bit of cider, a small amount of thickening, and roasts halfway. And then she does the same with her own personal curveball: grapes (get the recipe on page 35).

"I like those autumn grapes that are really big and fleshy with that beautiful dark purple skin and a tannic flavor." She also admits to trying a raisin from time to time, like the Red Flames and Sun Goldens from **Peacock Farms** in Arroyo Grande. Drizzling them with sugar and butter, she blisters them in the oven so they release their juices while keeping their integrity.

It's no surprise that Roxana's pies are stellar, flaky and buttery, and graced with a depth of fruit. Roxana was one of the judges, for six years running, at the annual KCRW's Good Food Pie Contest.

"When I first started," she says, "It was amazing how bad the pies were in the beginning. And then, in time, people were getting really good. I feel like collectively LA bakers gained a kind of consciousness that this is a dessert that has to be approached with respect."

Nicole Rucker did pastry at the **Gjelina Group** where she conceived one of my personal favorite desserts of all time: the gorgeously perfect berry galette. She's also owned her pie-famous restaurant, Fiona, and is the author of *Dappled*, an entire cookbook about baking with fruit. I talk heirlooms with her as well, and she tells me that, come a certain time of year, she has a hankering for Strawberry Parfait apples from **Windrose Farm**. She's also into Pink Pearl and her favorite apple of all time, the Japanese Mutsu. In fact, she's so crazy about Mutsu that she made a pilgrimage to the apple-growing region north of Tokyo when she did a bakery pop-up there. In Asian apples, Nicole admires the "watercore" where sugar settles and makes a translucent area of extra deliciousness.

"Watercore in Asia is something kind of special, but in America, it's a blemish," she says.

According to Nicole, apples are often just plain misunderstood, covered up with cinnamon and spice when they're remarkable on their own.

"I didn't grow up eating apple pie. It's not a childhood memory at all. It's something that I came to later in life, so I love the idea of making it something a little more special."

She tells me how she entered the National Pie Championships in 2013 in the Perfect Pie category, which she won, and that's how she came to her own personal philosophy of ditching the cinnamon and spice, par boiling the apples, and adding sour cream, brown sugar, and a lot of salt. And she loads it up with four kinds of apples for different levels of textures and sweetness.

Nicole favors growers like Barbara Spencer at Windrose, Susie Kenny at **See Canyon Fruit Ranch**, and Michael Cirone at **Cirone Farms**. I figure they're my next stop—the folks who actually give us the fruit.

Susie and Paul Kenny, an ornamental horticulturist, got married in 1976 and shortly after took over See Canyon Fruit Ranch. Nestled in a small coastal canyon just outside of San Luis Obispo, the place was opened in 1894, and already it had venerable rows of

heirlooms like Winter Banana, Wine Sap, Greening, Missouri Pippin, Pearmain and Arkansas Black. "Grandma and grandpa trees," as Susie says.

The warmth seeps into her voice as she talks about their lives, how her husband "just put his own magic on this place. Now we make our own cider, have our own bees—over 90 hives—and sell our own ciders and honey and apples."

The Kennys have grown their family as well—eight children, many of whom work on the farm—and Susie's famous for her applesauce. She makes it with cider, four or five different kinds of apples and just a bit of cinnamon. As for Susie's favorite variety, she's democratic in her apple tastes. "I love every season because every season has such a gift to give."

Mike Cirone also grows down the road and is widely considered an expert on heirlooms. He's been dry farming See Ranch since 1984, and now cultivates three-quarters of the cropland in California's central coast. His top quality heirlooms include Akane, Cox's Orange Pippin, Elstar, Empire, Gold Rush, Honeycrisp, Pink Pearl, Spitzenberg, Stayman Winesap, and Winter Pearmain. I catch up with Mike at the Santa Monica Farmers' Market: "Apples like cold winters, so that could be why apples are successful in our area. They just tend to grow. The soils are really nice, very deep. We have a very cool winter because of our canyon configuration...without the blazing hot inland climate. Apples have been growing well here for over a hundred years."

Mike does have a favorite apple, a late-season heirloom called Gold Rush, a yellowish apple that's rock hard and looks "kind of funky." It's got a fan base too in Santa Monica. "The people who know that apple here, they just can't wait to see it."

Going home with my bag of early season apples, I find each of them utterly distinct. I love the idea of baking a pie that would highlight the individuality of each of these fruits and, since all baking is a chemical reaction, I also wonder what science can tell us about pie. To find out, my last stop is a bonafide expert, an integrative biologist and physiologist at **University of California Los Angeles**, Amy Rowat, who teaches the popular Science of Pie.

I find her off a long grey hall with graphs that say things like "sex differences in circadian rhythm of food intake in mice caused

by gonadal hormones and complement of sex chromosomes." Sitting in her office—a joyfully cluttered cubicle—we talk science and food.

First she gives me a rundown on her career, ranging from an obsession with membranes, "nanoscopic and thin, 1,000 times smaller and thinner than a piece of [plastic wrap]," to post-doc

dinners with her fellow scientists, "we informally christened ourselves The Gastrophysical Society," to her collaboration with chef Ferran Adria during her PhD in Emulsions at Harvard University where they created the first annual Harvard Science of Food class. Her subsequent work at UCLA has included founding a Science and Food Organization—hosting talks for the public that have included NASA growing food in space and food waste icon Massimo Bottura. She's also been a judge at KCRW's pie contest and is solely responsible for dozens of students baking pie assignments in toaster ovens in their dorm rooms.

So, I ask Amy, what does the underlying chemistry teach us about making the perfect pie?

A lot, it turns out, and much of it aligns with the intuition and experience that bakers like Nicole and Roxana bring as guests to her class.



Photo by Carolina Korman



First, let's talk about that golden brown color.

Set the oven to at least 375°F and brush the pie with egg wash and cream. Why? Because egg (protein) and cream (protein and lactose) both help with the Maillard reaction between amino acids or, to put it more plainly, to get the crust that just right scrumptious brown.

And what about crust?

Gluten gives the crust structure, but too much can make things tough. That's why adding a little vinegar or alcohol can break up the gluten network that forms when flour meets water.

What about how big and how high?

Best to do wide and about as thin as a pie tin. Make it too lofty, and your pie will brown before the filling is done.

And maximum flakiness?

Fat, of course. Butter consists of tiny drops of water suspended in a matrix of fat. The water steams as the pie cooks, and yet remains trapped in the crust. American butters have more water than European butters. Go with American for your pie. And mix it up with those butter chunks. Bigger means less gluten formation and smaller helps make sure the fat is even throughout your crust.

Don't forget your steam vents, please. You don't want your pie to swell, as apples lose more than a third of their weight as they cook.

And let that sucker cool.

Too hot will be runny with molecules slip sliding around. Cooling allows the fruit pectin to help solidify your perfect slice.

What about cutting your apples into wedges or slices?

Slices, it turns out. Remember how apples lose volume when they bake? Water converts from liquid to gas. You want your apples packed tightly or there will be a gap between the filling and the roof of the pie.

And thickening?

Not all of the water in the apples converts into steam as they cook. The remaining liquid runs into the filling instead so, if you're not careful, you could end up with a runaway interior and a limp, soggy crust. Not good at all. The fix? Add some flour or cornstarch because these molecules are bigger and slower than the ones in water. Thicken properly and your slice will have that perfect ooze.

So, yes, in the end science does go into your pie—but so do craft, courage, heart, and wonderful heirloom apples. As Roxana Jullapat says, there's nothing more rewarding than baking a perfect pie. "But it's not going to be on the fly... you're going to have to play all those tricks. You're going to have to move the oven rack; you're going to have to cover it with foil. There's no easy way to make a pie. This is not for the faint of heart. It's an endeavor. It's a journey," and then she smiles, as if this is what pleases her most of all.

Grapple Pie

Makes one 9-inch pie

For the grapple filling:

3 cups stemmed seedless grapes
¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons melted butter
2 pounds firm apples, peeled, cored, and cut into 1/4-inch wedges
1/3 cup granulated sugar
1/3 cup brown sugar
¼ teaspoon kosher salt
1/3 cup water
1 tablespoon corn starch

For the pie crust:

1 ¼ cups all-purpose flour
½ cup Sonora wheat flour
½ teaspoon kosher salt
6 ounces or ¾ cup unsalted butter, cold, cubed
6 ounces or ¾ cup cream cheese, cold, cubed
2 tablespoons iced water
All-purpose flour for rolling
1 egg, beaten
Granulated sugar for sprinkling

Make the grapple filling a few hours in advance. Preheat the oven to 350°F and position the oven rack in the middle position of the oven. Coat the grapes with 2 tablespoons of melted butter. Place on a baking sheet and roast for 10 minutes or until they just start to burst. Combine the apples, sugars, remaining melted butter, and salt in a mixing bowl. In a separate cup, stir cornstarch and water until there are no lumps. Add to the apple mixture and toss all the ingredients together until well combined. Transfer to a large, non-stick roasting pan and put in the oven. Roast for 15 minutes, remove pan from the oven, toss the filling using a large spoon, put back in the oven, and roast for another 15 minutes for a total of 30 minutes. Transfer to a separate dish, add the roasted grapes, and let cool completely at room temperature.

To make the crust: combine the flours and salt in a medium mixing bowl and toss the cubed butter and cream cheese into the flour. Use a pastry cutter (or your fingertips) to cut the fat into pieces the size of the dime into the flour. Make a well in the center and pour the iced water. Mix gently with your hands until the mixture resembles a raggedy dough; don't worry if bits of butter or cream cheese are still visible. Flatten the dough into a disc and wrap tightly with plastic film. Refrigerate for 30 minutes or up to 48 hours.

Position the oven rack in the middle position, and preheat the oven to 350°F.

Roll out the pie dough on a lightly floured surface to form two rounds about 11 inches in diameter. Pick one of the rounds by rolling it onto the rolling pin, and lay it in a 9-inch pie pan. Gently press the dough onto the bottom of the pan, leaving about one inch of excess dough on the edge. Carefully fill the pie pan with the grapple filling trying to form a mound in the center. Pick the other dough circle just like you did before and lay it on top of the pie. Trim the excess dough with kitchen scissors just to the border of the pie pan. Crimp the edges together or gently press them with a fork. With a paring knife, cut four 2-inch slits on top of the pie to let steam out while baking. Brush the top with the beaten egg and sprinkle it generously with sugar. Place the pie pan on a baking sheet and bake for 50 minutes to 1 hour. The pie is ready when the top is a rich, golden brown, and the filling starts to bubble. Remove from the oven and let it cool for at least one hour before slicing. ♦