

Strawberry-Rhubarb Pie

Crust (Double) for any pie

In a mixing bowl I place 3 cups of all-purpose flour. I prefer to use King Arthur from Vermont. Mix in 1 tablespoon of sugar, 1 teaspoon of salt. Mix thoroughly with a large spoon. Then add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (1 stick) of cold unsalted butter, cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ inch pieces. Blend the butter into the mixture either by hand or using a food processor. Then add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegetable shortening, cut into pieces. I always use unsaturated shortening, which is healthier for your body. Then slowly, I mix in $\frac{1}{2}$ cold water and work the mixture by hand (or using a food processor) until a large dough ball results. It may be necessary to add a few tablespoons of water, or several pinches of flour to achieve the desired consistency. This is a trial and error process and with experience it just gets easier. Making good pie-crust is truly an art rather than a science.

Divide the dough into two pieces, one slightly smaller than the other. Wrap individual in cling film and refrigerate for a minimum of 60 minutes. Place the smaller dough ball on top of the larger dough ball for ease of use later. The larger dough ball will be used as the base of the pie, and the smaller one will form the top crust.

Filling: Strawberry-Rhubarb

If you are going to go to all the trouble to bake a homemade pie from scratch, it should always use the best ingredients possible. In the case of fruit pies, ripe fruit is preferred, and therefore while fresh picked ripe fruit is ideal, frozen ripe fruit is better than so-called fresh fruit that was picked unripe for ease of transport, or fruit that has been sitting around.

I strongly advocate cooking seasonally because you can obtain ripe fruits at the best prices, and Farmers' Markets provide a wealth of choice. Fresh rhubarb and strawberries are not always available, but then they are in the Spring and Summer, then this pie cannot be beat.

Always use organic produce if you can obtain it. There are many reasons for this, but principally because organic fruit and vegetables do not contain poisonous chemicals.

I begin by taking stalks of fresh rhubarb, washing and peeling them. Then chop the stalks into $\frac{1}{2}$ inch pieces. You will need 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups of chopped rhubarb. Note that this is a good time to chop more rhubarb that you need and put the chunks into bags and pop into the freezer for use when fresh is unavailable. Rhubarb freezes well. Set aside. Take a bowl of fresh strawberries, wash them thoroughly, and remove the green tops. Cut in half and place in another bowl.

The best strawberries are not the largest in size. When you cut them they are red throughout, and do not have a hollow white core. Smaller berries are bred for flavor, not weight.

Mix the strawberries and rhubarb together in a large bowl. Add 1 ½ cups of sugar and mix. Then add 2 tablespoons of cornstarch, 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour, ½ teaspoon fresh lemon zest (by scrapping the skin of a lemon), ½ teaspoon lemon juice, ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon, 1 teaspoon of vanilla extract. Stir well and set aside.

Bringing it Together

After an hour, remove the dough balls from the refrigerator and set on the workspace. Start with the larger of the two balls. Remove the plastic cling film and discard. Place the dough ball on a piece of waxed paper. Flatten the ball into a flying-saucer shape and then take a rolling pin and roll out. I prefer rolling pins that have a non-stick coating. If you have a wooden rolling pin, you may sprinkle a small amount of flour on the dough as you work it, so that the dough does not stick to the pin. Roll the dough as thinly as you can, while retaining the integrity of the dough. Bring a pie pan forward and grease the inside lightly with shortening or butter to prevent the crust from sticking once baked. Lift the crust and wax paper, and place it over the pan as centered as you can, with the wax paper facing up. Set the dough into the pan, but do not force it in with you hand. Remove the wax paper and set aside. The rolled dough should extend beyond the edges of the pie pan. Place four small pieces of unsalted butter on top of the filling.

Gently pour the filling into the dough cavity. The weight of the filling will press the dough down into the pan. Spread it out evenly. Trim the crust to about ½ inch over the edge of the pan, and set aside all extra dough. Roll the second, smaller dough ball as before, using wax paper, and place on the top of the pie, wax paper on top and peel it away. Discard the wax paper. The top of the pie should be centered, cut the edges of the dough about ½ inch over the edge of the top of the pan.

Now for the difficult part, until you get the hang of it. Take each of the overhanging pieces of dough and tuck them together underneath, folding towards the pie, and leaving a small space between the edge of the crust and the edge of the pan. Do not allow the dough at the edge to fold over the pan, or you will not be able to remove a piece once it's baked and cut. Fold the edge of the crust under all the way around the pie. Take a fork and press down on the edge of the crust all the way around. Using the fork, puncture the top of the uncooked crust 5-6 times to allow gasses to exit. Paint the top of the crust with either milk or egg white. Sprinkle with sugar, and bake.

Baking

Preheat the oven to 425F and cook the pie for 15 minutes. Decrease temperature to 375F and bake for an additional 45-50 minutes, or until the filling starts to bubble. Place pie pan on a drip tray to catch any contents that bubble over. Place the pie down low on the oven. You may have to turn the pie 180 degrees for even cooking halfway through, depending on your oven. Once or twice, quickly open the oven and inspect for any signs of burning.

Remove from the oven and let the pie cool. Enjoy the fragrance that will fill your kitchen. After about an hour, serve the pie with a small amount of vanilla ice cream. The pie will be warm, but not too hot. The taste, smell and appearance of a freshly baked pie is worth all the bother than you have gone through.

Robert Lee Kilpatrick