

EATING & DRINKING

Good Times, No Rolling

Dispense with applying pin to dough and opt instead for easy press-in pie crusts

By GABRIELLA GERSHENSON

I AM AN enthusiastic baker. But if a recipe calls for rolling out dough, I typically take a hard pass. Come summer, when the greatest fruit of the year begs to be showcased in a pie, you'd think this would prove problematic. But I have a hack: the press-in crust.

It eliminates the need for a rolling pin; instead, you press the dough into the pan with your fingers. And there's no need to keep the butter cold, the key to the flakiness so hard to nail in hot weather. "You're told, 'Don't over handle it, make sure your hands aren't warm and the water is cold.' These things are scary," said cookbook author and pastry guru Alice Medrich.

In her book "Sinfully Easy Delicious Desserts," Ms. Medrich shares a recipe for a crust of flour, sugar, butter, vanilla and a bit of salt—"the most delicious sweet crust I know, and as forgiving as Play-Doh to work with." Iconoclastically, it calls for melted butter. Yet the crust is remarkably crisp and flavorful.

This unfussy style is pre-

baked without pie weights and well suited to unbaked fillings such as fresh fruit, mascarpone and ice cream. The best-known example is the graham cracker crust, a classic for Key lime pies and cheesecake. Chances are you have some cookie or cracker in your kitchen now that can work as a base ingredient.

Jaynelle St. Jean, owner of Pietisserie in Oakland, Calif., sells a chocolate cream pie with a crust of pulverized pretzels. "It goes amazingly well with chocolate—something we all know because of chocolate-covered pretzels," she said. She also makes a salted Nilla wafer crust for her banana chai cream pie, creates ombre effects that go from vanilla into chocolate, and blitzes rainbow sprinkles with cookies for a funfetti look.

Kate McDermott, author of the forthcoming "Pie Camp," ad-libbed a favorite press-in recipe when she had less than an hour to pull a pie together. "I had one cup of oatmeal left, one cup of coconut, one cup of almond meal. I threw it all in the bowl," she said. "I put in 5 or 6 tablespoons of melted butter, a few tablespoons of sugar, and I went for it."

Bake times range from about 6 minutes for a graham crust to 20 for Ms. Medrich's sweet crust. To press the dough into the pan, start with the heel of your hand and your fingers. For an extra-finished look, once the crust is fairly uniform, Ms. Medrich recommends lining it with plastic wrap and then a sheet of paper towel, and gliding a straight-sided cup over the surface. "All of this stuff is super simple," said Ms. Medrich. "The hardest thing will be making up your mind about what you want to put in it."



CREAM TEAM A layer of mascarpone takes this strawberry tart over the top.

Easy No-Roll Tart Crust

This smart recipe from Alice Medrich produces the easiest, most delicious tart crust you will ever make. Press it into a tart pan with a removable bottom for a tidy crust with beautifully fluted sides, or push it into a pie plate for a more homespun look. Either way, this crust is remarkably good for something so simple to prepare: buttery, intensely crunchy and deeply flavorful. This immensely accommodating recipe works with either granulated or brown sugar; the latter just gives the crust slightly more complex caramelized taste.

Total Time 40 minutes
Makes 1 (9 ½-inch) tart crust or (9-inch) pie crust

8 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
½ cup granulated sugar or brown sugar
¼ teaspoon salt
¾ teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour

1. Position a rack in the lower third of the oven and preheat to 350 degrees.
2. In a medium bowl, combine butter, sugar, salt and vanilla. Add flour and mix just until well blended. If the dough seems too soft, let it stand a few minutes to firm up.
3. Press dough evenly over the bottom and up the sides of a 9½-inch tart pan with a removable bottom or a 9-inch pie plate to make a

thin, even layer. Press dough squarely into corners of pan to avoid extra-thick edges. If using a pie plate, press crust up the sides but not over the rim. (Crust can be prepared 2-3 days ahead to this point, wrapped and refrigerated. Bring to room temperature before baking.)

4. Place pan on a baking sheet. Bake until the crust is fully golden brown all over, 20-25 minutes. If the crust puffs up during baking, gently press it down with the back of a fork and prick it a few times. Set pan on a rack to cool. (Once crust is completely cool, it can be kept at room temperature, wrapped airtight, at least 3 days.)

—Adapted from "Sinfully Easy Delicious Desserts" by Alice Medrich

Simplest Strawberry Tart

This is the simplest tart you'll ever make, and it's a stunner. Fill a baked crust with sweetened mascarpone and top with the ripest strawberries you can find. Other berries will work, too; so will halved fresh figs. Sprinkle it with Demerara sugar for seasoning and crunch. That's it.

Total Time 50 minutes
Makes 1 (9 ½-inch) tart

1 Easy No-Roll Tart Crust (recipe at left), baked in a 9½-inch tart pan with a removable bottom and left in pan after baking

1 cup (8 ounces) mascarpone
4 teaspoons granulated sugar
½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract
2 teaspoons unsalted butter, very soft, for sog-proofing (optional)
2 pints ripe strawberries, rinsed, hulled, and halved if large, and patted dry
2 tablespoons Demerara sugar

1. In a small bowl, mix mascarpone with 4 teaspoons sugar and vanilla.
2. If you will not be serving the tart within 3-4 hours, sog-proof the crust by spreading the bottom with the thinnest-possible layer of soft butter. Chill crust to set butter, 10-15 minutes, before adding mascarpone mixture.
3. Spread mascarpone evenly over crust. Begin arranging berries, as close together as possible, around edges of tart and work toward the middle. Remove tart from pan and transfer to a platter. Refrigerate unless serving within 2 hours. Before serving, sprinkle with Demerara sugar. Tart is best on the first day but still very good on day two.

—Adapted from "Sinfully Easy Delicious Desserts" by Alice Medrich



► Find a recipe for milk chocolate pudding pie with halvah whipped cream at wsj.com/food.