

Pumpkin pie and the bigger questions By Erin Dunigan December 6th, 2019



It was Thanksgiving. This year my family could not make it down to La Misión, as has been our custom for years – Thanksgiving in Baja. My mom always makes the mashed potatoes and the green beans. Melissa and Steve, my compadres, are in charge of the turkey (even though Melissa is a vegetarian!). Martha, who is like my second mom, makes the southern style cornbread stuffing and the most important item of the day – the pumpkin pie. Because of this family tradition, I have only once, when I lived in Scotland, actually made any of the Thanksgiving dinner myself. It's not a bad deal, really. Until, of course, your family can't make it to Baja for the holiday. As the holiday approached I didn't really even think about it. That is, until the day before Thanksgiving. That is when it hit me – the undeniable craving for a piece of pumpkin pie. And that was when it also hit me – wait, even though my family isn't coming, the truth is, I could make a pumpkin pie myself. It was as if a chorus began to sing

hallelujah. Yes! I will make the pie – and even better, I won't have to share it!

So, I set about looking for the perfect pumpkin pie recipe. I didn't want to bother Martha by asking for hers, so I let google be my guide. I found one that seemed to be just right. I went to the local market and made sure that my 'manteca' was the vegetable kind, not the pig kind – pork pumpkin pie is an experiment I'd rather leave for someone else. As I began on the crust I realized I had hit an impasse – it called for parchment paper on the raw crust, which then needed to be filled with weight such as uncooked dried beans to keep the crust from ballooning when being precooked. I knew I didn't have parchment paper. Where might one get parchment paper? Perhaps the new Climax in Puerto Nuevo might carry it, but I had just got back from buying a turkey breast there and didn't want to hop back in the car, especially with the rain coming. So, I turned to google again, seeing what I might use as a substitute. No luck – no clear answers. Foil didn't seem to be a good option, nor did wax paper, which I did happen to have, albeit from the 1970's. So, I decided to turn to the expert – Martha. I sent her a text asking her what I could use instead of parchment paper. She had a few follow up questions but then asked, "How long does the recipe say to pre-cook the crust before you put in the pumpkin mixture?" I looked and reported back. That was when she sent me a photo of the recipe from her cookbook – the same one she's been using since 1955.

Prepare pastry.

Chill thoroughly.

Combine ingredients for filling.

Pour filling into chilled pastry and bake in a hot oven until the center is done.

Wait! No parchment paper?! No pre-cooking of the crust?! Just ‘pour the filling into the chilled crust and put in the oven.’ Cue hallelujah chorus a second time.

The thing is, without realizing it, I had been asking the wrong question all along. I was focused on the specifics of what I lacked – “What can I use instead of parchment paper?” In so doing, I neglected the larger question, “How do you cook a pumpkin pie?” I even had an expert in my corner, so to speak. But the 60+ years of experience that my expert provided did me no good as long as I was asking the wrong question. It made me wonder, in life, how many times do we get stuck in the details, or focused on what we lack, and so miss the larger question that might actually lead us to what we wish for? In this case my goal was a humble one – pumpkin pie. But it was also one I almost didn’t realize for my failure to ask the bigger question.

It made me wonder, what are the bigger questions, just waiting to be asked?