

# American Pie

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A food blogger recently set out to Cascade, Idaho in search of Mrs. G's Huckleberry Pie. She'd heard that Mrs. G's pies are the best in the country. One had been rumored to sell for \$7,000 at the Cascade County Fair. So, off she went in search of the famous Mrs. G. She went from diner to gas station, from school to post office, asking all the locals where she can get a piece of Mrs. G's pie. She found a poem written about them by the mayor and she heard stories of their healing powers, but try as she might, she couldn't find Mrs. G or a piece of Huckleberry pie. She went home a failure. Still determined, this blogger continued her search and eventually was able to get Mrs. G on the phone. Now in her late 80s, Mrs. G's personality was bursting with flavor: mostly sweet with a twist of tang. Mrs. G confessed that her best friend actually makes a better crust than she does. "What I've accomplished" she said, "is making people believe I'm the best pie maker."

Mrs. G's pies aren't for sale. She bakes them for fundraisers only. She picks the huckleberries in her backyard. She removes the stems, washes and dries them. She mixes and kneads, rolls and rests her crust. She fills and bakes and cools her pies. It takes her all day. She does it to raise money for the fire department and the police benevolent fund. She does it to help the town raise money for fireworks on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and to help the food bank feed hungry children. In the past, she did it to woo prospective suitors and later to celebrate life's small victories with her children. She declares today that baking pies for her, is a prayer, a way for her to thank God and Mother Earth for the bounty of the harvest and a community with whom to share it.

That food blogger never did get a piece of huckleberry pie.

In 1902, the New York Times declared that "Pie is the American synonym with prosperity." They go on to say "Pie is the food of the heroic. No pie-eating people have ever been vanquished." The article goes on to parallel the rise and fall of Great Britain with the amount of pie they ate. To quote "...Gradually the generous dimensions of the pie were reduced until now it is an insignificant tart. As the pie declined, the high ideals were lowered and the prestige and power of Green Britain were dissipated." The article ultimately declares that the reason British soldiers were failing in South Africa was that they weren't given enough pie. The author declares the United States of America in good stead with a variety of seasonal pies from which to choose, starting with a winter mince meat pie hearty enough to keep the body warm. "With early spring comes the light and joyous custard, lemon and rhubarb pies to quiet the tender yearnings of the undefined. The perfect days of June welcome the lip-painting berry pies which increase in variety through July until August offers the luscious peach. Then as nature paints the forest with her magic brush, comes in the golden glory of the year, the royal pumpkin pie."

As it happens, pie has been around as long as civilization. I don't know that we can chronicle the rise and fall of any particular Empire according to their propensity for pie eating, but it is true that, the art of pie making started with the great and powerful Egyptians. The crust, called a coffyn until fairly recently, was intended as the vehicle in which food could be cooked. In 9,500 BCE, humans were just perfecting the use of stone tools; baking pans were still a thing of the future. Instead, they made what we might call a galette using cereals and water to mold a vessel in which to put meat and vegetables to cook over hot coals. The same method was used by wealthy Greeks and Romans who then fed the coffyns to the servants who joyfully received these crusts soaked in the suppers' juices.

In the Middle Ages there were **animated** pies that **came to life**. Remember the nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of Sixpence?"

Sing a song of sixpence,  
A pocket full of rye.  
Four and twenty blackbirds,  
Baked in a pie.  
When the pie was opened,

The birds began to sing;  
Wasn't that a dainty dish,  
To set before the king?

It was popular during large banquets to entertain guests between courses as the food was being prepared. Large pies would be rolled out and cut open and inside there would be live animals or birds that would fly out to everyone's delight. Occasionally, a **person** would pop through the top of the pie and proceed to dance and sing on the table. I imagine this is where we got the contemporary idea that a scantily clad woman should jump out of a cake during bachelor parties.

Early American women brought pie recipes with them from England, most of which were filled with meat and vegetables like shepherd or cottage pie. Within a few years, though, berries and squashes became popular and making them **round** allowed them to literally cut corners, thereby being a bit more thrifty. Women of the Frontier were known to bake pies daily and soon started the tradition of bringing their pies to county fairs and entering them in contests, a practice that has held strong in the west.

Today, pie-making remains central to American culture. Every season has its favorites; every family has at least one beloved recipe. We even say "As American as apple pie" even though the only apple native to the Americas is the less than perfect **crab** apple. That doesn't stop us from aligning American culture with this dessert.

Mark Twain, that quintessential American writer, was partial to pie. His housekeeper reports that on days when he had gotten too depressed to eat, all she need do was bake a pie for lunch. Inevitably, he'd rise from his bed for a piece of hot pie and a cup of coffee. Pie was important to Twain who, after an unsatisfying trip to Europe, ordered the ingredients for apple, peach, American mince, pumpkin and squash pies so that they could be prepared in advance of his arrival home.

As part of his scathing review of English food he later wrote the following recipe for what he called English Pie:

To make this excellent breakfast dish, proceed as follows:

Take a sufficiency of water and a sufficiency of flour, and construct a bullet-proof dough. Work this into the form of a disk, with the edges turned up some three-fourths of an inch. Toughen and kiln-dry in a couple days in a mild but unvarying temperature. Construct a cover for this redoubt in the same way and of the same material. Fill with stewed dried apples; aggravate with cloves, lemon-peel, and slabs of citron; add **two** portions of New Orleans sugars, then solder on the lid and set in a safe place till it **petrifies**. Serve cold at breakfast and invite your **enemy**.

By now, you're wondering if I'm actually going to spend 20 minutes regaling you with stories about pie. Well, I could, but I'd like to talk just a little more seriously about all those yummy things that make pie, and American culture, so delicious. The truth is, I had this idea for a sermon about pie when I was creating my preaching schedule for the year last August. I was remembering the cold, dark winter before and thought that by the end of January, we'd be ready for some pie baking and eating and maybe a little break from all the seriousness of a New York winter. I was also aware that the holiday season can be intense and I was sure to talk about anti-racism for Martin Luther King day, so it seemed a break was in order. But, this winter has been quite mild, so I think we might have the strength for a side of justice with our pie this morning.

My father's favorite is banana cream pie. I make it with a macadamia, coconut crust, covered in a layer of fresh banana, filled with vanilla custard and freshly whipped cream and topped with more bananas.

I love my father and made this pie for countless birthdays, but this is not a guilt free pie. I'm not talking about calories; I'm talking about labor rights and environmental impact.

The banana trade is problematic with its complex and dark history of social, political, economic and environmental challenges. It is a prime example of corrupt multi-national corporations sacrificing human decency for profit and has its roots in western imperialism.

The cost of the average banana has barely increased in the last 20 years, but it remains the highest profit-bearing product in the American supermarket, solely responsible for nearly 2% of their annual income. It has remained so profitable because the five corporations that own 90% of the banana trade have been entrenched in Central and South America since before the turn of the last century. (Chiquita and Dole are the

two American based companies.) They have been instrumental in the creation of land ownership, import/export, environmental protection and labor laws, designed entirely to their benefit. As a result, only 5 cents from every dollar spent on bananas in the US goes to the plantation where it is grown. The consequence is that workers earn wages keeping them in desperate poverty and this cycle begins **legally** when children are as young as 8 years old.

In addition, conventional bananas are grown using **400** different agrichemicals, most of which have been banned in the US. After being picked, they are then washed in yet more chemicals by workers with bare hands and arms who are often later diagnosed with aggressive cancers for which they have no medical insurance. Those same agrichemicals are also responsible for massive deaths of insects and mammals, leaving behind very little biodiversity. And because banana plants only bloom once, and because they deplete the land on which they are grown, every few years each plantation is abandoned and more land is deforested to start anew. And all that abandoned land erodes and is responsible for as much as 60% of the damage done to the coral reefs off the coasts of many of these countries. A coral reef, in case you don't know, is a full eco-system not unlike a rainforest and equally necessary. The loss of a coral reef has considerable environmental ramifications.

I don't want to depress you too much, but I will tell you that the banana isn't the only worry associated with my dad's favorite pie. Macadamia nuts are linked to child labor and currently there is only one fair trade farm. It's located in Kenya and has recently harvested it's second crop. Many of us are familiar with the agony of chickens on the American chicken farm from whom we get the eggs that make the base of a custard or the distress of the average dairy cow from whom we get our milk and cream, also necessary for any good custard pie. Sometimes I paint the crust with chocolate, but chocolate has a history of being grown and harvested using both child and slave labor. And all those ingredients tax Earth by being shipped hundreds of miles in diesel burning trucks before arriving in our kitchens. Diesel has direct implications for child asthma. Since 2001, new asthma cases among African American children have risen by 50%. Over 3 million Latino children have asthma. The asthma death rate is almost four times higher in African American communities than in white communities and children of color are more likely to have asthma because neighborhoods where people have less power, usually poor and black or Latino neighborhoods, are often designated truck routes.

It makes you want to stop eating pie.

As some of you know, I've been involved in the food justice movement for a long time. I promise to spend more time on this another day, but by introduction, I'll tell you that my work in the food justice movement started after spending some time with migrant workers in Immokalee, Florida. Food justice is concerned with four things: labor rights, organic practices and the poisoning of the planet, animal rights and equal access to food that's good, clean and fair. It follows food from farm to table, providing health and fairness to everyone along the way.

I made a banana cream pie for all of you today. I also made an apple pie and a lime pie. When I made the plan to bring pie last August, it seemed fun and could be a way of providing comfort and warmth in the middle of winter. But, it's also a good way to model the possibilities of living gently. I used fair trade bananas, vanilla and nuts. The eggs came from the chicken co-op I helped found at John Jay Homestead. The milk comes from another local co-op. The wheat for the flour used in the crusts was grown by a small farmer in Pennsylvania who is a friend of a friend. In fact, some of you met Doug DeCandia who was here two weeks ago to talk about the Food Bank. Doug is my source for local grains.

I allow myself the luxury of foods sourced from outside our region from January to May. I also preserve, freeze, dry and can food during the most bountiful months and use that during the winter and early spring. By June, I'm growing it myself, buying at local markets or trading with friends. It's not the simplest way to live. One stop at A+P is much quicker. But, it's the simplest way for me to live a values-based life. It's the simplest way for me to model my principles for my son and it's the simplest way for me to live gently on a planet taxed by over population and industry.

I do what I can. Today, I baked pie using the most wholesome ingredients I could get. I did it so that I could provide some fun and some comfort in this community without aggravating our fragile environmental position.

There are others like me. People who want to bake pie to build community and provide comfort. In

learning about National Pie Day which was actually on Monday, I discovered a new American tradition that started after 9-11 called Peace Pie. (Monday, by the way, is January 23<sup>rd</sup>. The date is 1-2-3. The day was chosen because pie is as easy as 1-2-3.) The idea for Peace Pie is that, here in this new age, we need to find ways to feed each other. Pie, that quintessential American food, has become a symbol of peace, a way to bring consolation and healing, to build community and promote unity. Pie is food for both the body and soul. It's meant to be shared and is often found at pot lucks and picnics and county fairs. It brings families together at holiday dinner and neighborhoods together at block parties. It's made from the bounty of Earth and is meant to feed the hungry. And, of course, we're all hungry. Hungry for food, occasionally. But, hungry for acceptance and friendship, hungry for a life with dignity, hungry for meaning, hungry for relevance, hungry for community and hungry for justice, always. Peace Pie is made with intentionality. It's prepared for a reason and is eaten with gratitude and in remembrance. Unlike a cobbler which is thrown together with whatever is available, Peace Pie is made when we have the time and the freedom and the money to bake a pie with intent and love. Maybe made with ingredients we've foraged from our own property like Mrs. G's huckleberries or made with wheat grown by a small independent farm like the one where I got the flour for the crusts I baked for you today.

So, I've baked an apple and a lime and a banana cream pie, but this morning, in the spirit of Munson Manor and in the spirit of Mrs. G, I'm calling them Peace Pie. I hope very much that you enjoy.