From the Kitchens of the Lamorinda Weekly

At the End of the Day, It's All About the Pumpkin Pie!

Your helper can scoop out the baked pumpkin

It's one of my holiday weaknesses, right up there with eggnog and gingerbread. I tell myself that pumpkin is loaded with beta carotene, an important antioxidant, as I guiltily eat the last piece for breakfast the morning after Thanksgiving, long before anyone else is even awake. Thus ends my ambition to see what the 5:00AM Christmas shopping rush at the mall is all about; there's not enough coffee in the world…at least, not by the time I've finished the pile of dishes I couldn't face the night before and tried to vacuum the mashed potatoes out of the carpet. Even though my kids won't touch pumpkin pie, they love to smell it baking. Then of course there was the study that came out earlier this year claiming the smell of pumpkin pie is, well, unusually pleasing to men. I wonder if the test subjects were allowed to watch football during the experiment?

The Pumpkin:

There's nothing wrong with canned pumpkin; it makes a fine pumpkin pie. But if you've never tried the mild, fresh taste of the real thing, you're missing out! Using fresh pumpkin is not hard, and only adds a little extra active preparation time. You can cook the pumpkin a day ahead and refrigerate it if needed (in a covered container), but bring it to room temperature before mixing your pie filling.

You'll need about two cups of pumpkin puree, so find a nice medium-large Sugar Pie or other baking pumpkin (it should feel heavy for its size). Cut the pumpkin in half (scoop out the seeds and the slimy stuff that kids like to throw at each other AFTER it's baked; much easier). Bake cut side down in a shallow baking dish in a 350F oven for about an hour – poke it with a fork to make sure it's soft. When it's cool enough to handle, use a large spoon to scoop the flesh into a blender or food processor and puree briefly. You can throw in a small cooked (steamed or boiled) and peeled garnet yam as well; it will add natural sweetness and beautiful color to your pie. Let the puree stand in a fine-mesh strainer for about 30 minutes to drain excess liquid before using or refrigerating.

The Crust:

Let's face it, without that cornucopia of trans-fat, vegetable shortening, the pie crust will never be as tender and flaky again. But it can still taste good. Use your own, or try this simple butter crust:

1 cup flour
¼ teaspoon salt
6 tablespoons very cold unsalted butter
3-4 tablespoons ice water

Cut the butter into small pieces and put it in the freezer briefly while you ice some water and mix the flour and salt together in a bowl. Working quickly using your fingertips, mix the flour and butter together. When the butter starts to break up and the flour picks up some color, add the water in small amounts (1 tablespoon at first, then by ½ tablespoon; you may not need all of it), mixing until the dough comes together. Knead briefly on a floured surface, then wrap in plastic and refrigerate for half an hour before rolling out, placing in a pie dish with beans or pie beads and pre-baking for about 10 minutes at 375F.

The Filling:

2 extra large (or 3 small) eggs
2 cups pureed pumpkin (or pumpkin/yam)
1 cup whipping cream
2/3 cup light brown sugar (packed)
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon ginger
¼ teaspoon nutmeg
pinch of allspice and/or cloves (to taste)

Whisk the eggs in a large bowl until foamy, then add pumpkin and remaining ingredients, whisking until smooth. Pour into pie shell and bake at 375F until filling is set, 50-60 minutes. If you want to add texture and decoration, try sprinkling toasted, chopped pecans, mixed with a bit of finely chopped candied ginger, around the edge of the filling to make a border immediately after removing the pie from the oven.

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