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A Flavorful Crostata for the Season!

By Susie Iventosch



Pear-Cranberry Pistachio Crostata Photo
Susie Iventosch

My husband and I spend one four-day weekend each year going away with some of our very dearest friends and it is always a serious food-athon! Each couple takes a turn at making dinner, and we have had some very memorable meals over the years.

The meals begin with appetizers and end with dessert and there is plenty of wine to go around. This year, we had two pies for dessert, and both were scrumptious! One of them, a strawberry-rhubarb, was specially made to order for our getaway by Susie Gilleran of Might Fine Pies.

An Orinda resident since 1998, she was introduced to the art and business of pie making when the ad agency she worked for shut down. You know the saying, when one door closes, another one opens! She always had an interest in food, and, in fact, was a food writer for the Chicago Sun Times before moving to California. And, as a

creative director for the advertising firm, she always had a flair for the creative side of things.

But, the main problem Gilleran had was that she didn't really know how to bake when she left the ad agency, even though she really wanted to tackle the frontier of baking. So she enrolled in the baking program at City College of San Francisco and earned her certificate from Chef Betsy (Elizabeth Riehle) who, Gilleran says, was an amazing and inspirational instructor.

"She really got us to work together and we'd bake for the café and the restaurant at the school, The Educated Palate," Gilleran said. "To get us into the mode of the early world of bakers, we'd start at 6 a.m. and go until noon, Monday through Friday."

She learned baker's math, like how to scale recipes, and she found the science of baking fascinating, too.

When she finished the program, her entire mission was to be able to make her daughter's wedding cake. Not only did she make the cake, but all sorts of other goodies for the event, too, like cookies and individual tarts. With a newfound confidence, she began taking pies to friends' houses when invited for dinner.

"My friends told me I should start selling them, and so I began the business just a year ago around Thanksgiving," she said. "Since then, I've probably baked more than 100 pies!"

Gilleran doesn't have a sweet tooth herself, but she just loves making pies.

"They are so labor-intensive that I think people have just stopped making them, but pies remind you of your mom and they always seem to make occasions special," she pointed out. "For me, the next best thing to pie making, is pie sharing."

The combinations of fruits and nuts in Mighty Fine Pies are uniquely delicious. This pear-cranberry crostata with pistachio paste is not only unusual, but the colors are very pretty together, especially this time of year.

"I like to get the most out of a season, by using the flavors as well as the colors of the season," Gilleran noted.

I think you will love the flavors of her Pear-Cranberry Pistachio Crostata. We made it for dinner guests last night, and they left requesting the recipe! It also inspired me to try an apple crostata with a maple-toasted pecan paste. Will keep you posted on the outcome!

Mighty Fine Pies

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Please give ample notice, as pies are made to order.

Pear-Cranberry Pistachio Crostata

Makes one 9-inch crostata, serves 8-10, great for dessert and especially great warmed up for breakfast the day after!

Crostata Dough

INGREDIENTS

1 stick (1/2 cup) unsalted butter, chilled

1 1/4 cup all-purpose flour

1 tablespoon sugar

1 teaspoon salt

1 egg yolk

2-3 tablespoons cold milk or iced water

DIRECTIONS

Cut butter into 1/2-inch pieces; wrap and chill thoroughly. Combine flour, sugar and salt in bowl of food processor fitted with a steel blade and pulse just to combine. Add the butter and pulse 6-8 times until the butter is about the size of small peas. Add the egg yolk and water and pulse a few times more, just until the dough begins to form a ball. Turn out dough onto a floured surface and gently knead to finish combining. Press dough into a round, flattened disk, wrap in plastic and chill at least 1 hour or up to 4 days in the refrigerator.

Note: It's also possible to make the dough by hand or in a bowl of a mixer with a paddle attachment. If going the mixer route, mix dry ingredients on low, just to combine. Drop butter into bowl and mix on low until butter is incorporated, about the size of small peas. Add egg yolk and milk or water together; continue mixing just until dough holds together.

Filling

INGREDIENTS

1 1/4 pounds (about 4, depending on size) Bosc pears, peeled, halved, cored

1/4 cup, plus 1/4 cup, plus 1 tablespoon sugar (for different parts of crostata)

4 tablespoons butter (for pears), plus 4 tablespoons butter (for paste)

1/4 cup unsalted pistachios for paste, plus 20 pistachios, roughly chopped for topping

1 egg, plus 1 egg yolk

1/2 teaspoon vanilla

2 teaspoon all-purpose flour

Pinch of salt

1 cup dried cranberries

DIRECTIONS

Roasting pears

Preheat oven to 350 F. Prepare pears, making sure when coring to also remove the fibrous portion that usually runs up the middle of the fruit. Place each pear half in roasting pan, cored side down, then sprinkle with 1/4 cup sugar and dot with 4 tablespoons butter. Roast until pears begin to caramelize, turning golden brown (about 30 minutes, depending on oven), then flip, drizzling the

caramel that is formed on the pan bottom over the pears. Continue roasting until pears are fork tender, another 5-10 minutes. Cool in pan. Reserve.

Note: This step may be done up to 4 days before preparing crostata. Wrap pears and keep chilled in the refrigerator. Bring to room temperature when ready to assemble.

Author's Note: I used green D'Anjou pears and though they also hold up to cooking, this step took only about 20 minutes total in my oven, so just be aware not to overcook pears, which may depend upon what kind you use!

Pistachio Paste

Preheat oven to 350 F. Spread pistachios on parchment paper-lined baking sheet and roast for 8 minutes. When cool, chop pistachios in food processor or blender until fine. In mixer using paddle attachment, cream remaining 1/4 cup sugar with remaining 4 tablespoons butter until light, about 2 minutes. Add ground pistachios and mix until combined. On low, beat in egg and vanilla, beating 1 minute more, scraping bowl after each addition. Add flour and salt until combined. Reserve.

Note: This step may be done up to 4 days before preparing crostata. Wrap and keep refrigerated. Bring to room temperature when ready to assemble.

Author's Note: Though I've found them before, I couldn't find unsalted pistachios this week, so I used "lightly salted" already roasted pistachios, and the paste turned out delicious! I also omitted the egg in this part, because I wanted to eat this yummy paste right out of the bowl!

Assembling

Slice each pear half into a fan, starting at the thicker end, making 4-5 slices, each one stopping just short of the stem end.

Preheat oven to 400 F. Roll out dough into a 12- to 14-inch round. Transfer onto a lightly buttered or parchment-lined baking sheet. Spread pistachio paste over dough, leaving about a 1-inch border around edge of dough. Place pears over the paste, then top with cranberries. Fold over dough, leaving a 4- to 5-inch window in the middle. Brush entire dough surface with remaining egg yolk wash, sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon sugar and remaining roughly chopped pistachios. Bake for 15 minutes, rotate pan in oven, and turn down heat to 350 F. Bake another 40-45 minutes.

Author's Note: Again, in my oven, the entire baking time was probably only about 30-35 minutes. It's really just a matter of getting the crust nice and golden brown.

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