

Foolproof Pie Dough 101

The trouble with most pie dough is that it never seems to behave. Here's how to create a consistently tender, flaky dough—and, smooth, even piece. BY KEITH DRESSER

It's easy to make pie dough—just mix flour, water, and fat. But it's even easier to get it wrong. Usually, the process is a series of Catch-22s: Flaky pastry requires well-chilled dough that keeps the butter firm, but cold, hard dough tends to crack and roll out unevenly; fixing cracks in the rolled dough inevitably means more rolling and handling, but the more you manipulate dough, the tougher it gets. Our solution? A recipe specifically engineered to eliminate these issues, for tender, flaky results every time.

KEYS TO FOOLPROOF PIE DOUGH

Perfect pie dough has just the right balance of tenderness to structure. The former comes from fat, the latter from long protein chains called gluten that form when flour mixes with water. Too little gluten and the dough won't stick together—but too much and the crust turns tough. We've developed an approach that keeps gluten in check but also allows for an unusually supple dough that's easy to handle and reduces the chance of overworking.

➤ Use Two Fats

Butter contributes rich taste—but also water, which encourages gluten development. For a crust that's both flavorful and tender, we use a 3:2 ratio of butter to shortening, a pure fat with no water.

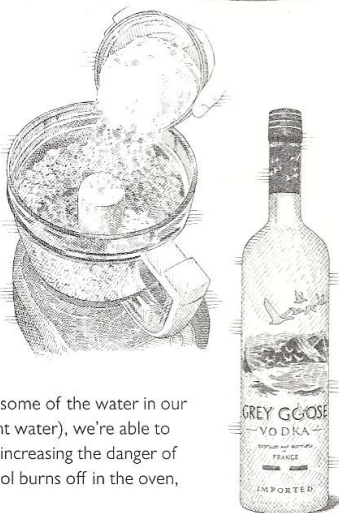


➤ Use More of Them

We incorporate roughly a third more total fat in our dough than the typical recipe, which coats the flour more thoroughly so less of it can mix with water to form gluten.

➤ Create Layers for Flakiness

Traditional recipes process all the flour and fat at once, but we add the flour in two batches. We first process the fat with part of the flour for a good 15 seconds to thoroughly coat it, then give the mixture just a few quick pulses once the remaining flour is added, so less of it gets coated. Besides providing protection against toughness, this approach aids in flakiness by creating two distinct layers of dough—one with gluten and one without.



➤ Swap Water for Vodka

Gluten forms readily in water, but it won't form in alcohol. By replacing some of the water in our recipe with vodka (which contains 40 percent ethanol but just 60 percent water), we're able to add more liquid to the dough so it stays soft and malleable, but without increasing the danger of the crust turning tough. (Note: Any 80-proof spirit will work. The alcohol burns off in the oven, along with any flavor.)

FOOLPROOF PIE DOUGH

FOR ONE 9-INCH DOUBLE-CRUST PIE

- 2½ cups (12½ ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 12 tablespoons (1½ sticks) cold unsalted butter, cut into ¼-inch slices
- ½ cup chilled solid vegetable shortening, cut into 4 pieces
- ¼ cup vodka, cold
- ¼ cup cold water

1. Process 1½ cups flour, salt, and sugar in food processor until combined, about two 1-second pulses. Add butter and shortening and process until homogeneous dough just starts to collect in uneven clumps, about 15 seconds (dough will resemble cottage cheese curds and there should be no uncoated flour). Scrape bowl with rubber spatula and redistribute dough evenly around processor blade.

2. Add remaining cup flour and pulse until mixture is evenly distributed around bowl and mass of dough has been broken up, 4 to 6 quick pulses. Empty mixture into medium bowl.

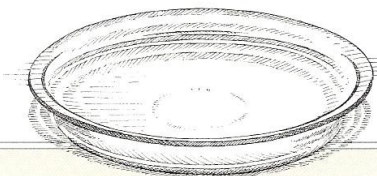
3. Sprinkle vodka and water over mixture. With rubber spatula, use folding motion to mix, pressing down on dough until dough is slightly tacky and sticks together. Divide dough into 2 even balls and flatten each into 4-inch disk. Wrap each in plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 45 minutes or up to 2 days.

PIE BAKER'S ESSENTIAL TOOLS

PYREX 9-Inch Pie Plate

Price: \$3.99

Comments: Tempered glass, rather than metal or ceramic, makes it easier to track browning results; plus, this no-frills plate sports shallow-angled sides that prevent the crust from slumping, wide rims for easy fluting—and a rock-bottom price point.

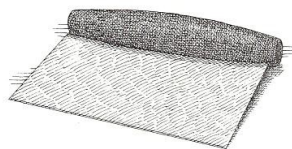


OXO GOOD GRIPS Stainless Steel

Multi-Purpose Scraper & Chopper

Price: \$8.99

Comments: This thin, sharp blade portions bread and biscuit dough just as easily as it shimmies under pie pastry and is ruler-marked for easy measuring.



FANTE'S French Rolling Pin with Tapered Ends

Price: \$6.99

Comments: This long, thin tapered rolling pin is gentler on delicate dough than standard rolling pins.



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VIDEO TIP

- How to roll out pie dough

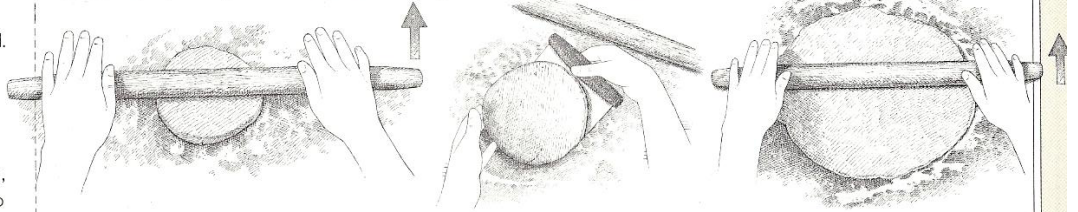
TROUBLESHOOTING

PROBLEM: Dough is not round.
AVOIDING IT: Start with dough formed into a flat, even disk and check often as you roll.
SOLVING IT: Use your hands or bench scraper to push in dough and round out circle.

PROBLEM: Dough sticks to counter.
AVOIDING IT: Start with very cold dough, work as quickly as possible, and make sure to lift and turn dough as you roll.
SOLVING IT: Add more flour to counter each time you lift dough to turn it; add more to top of dough as necessary. If dough still sticks, transfer to rimmed baking sheet and refrigerate until firm, about 15 minutes.

THE RIGHT WAY TO ROLL OUT

Two key pointers to keep in mind when rolling dough: First, always work with well-chilled pastry; otherwise, the dough will stick to the counter and tear. Second, never roll out dough by rolling back and forth over the same section; each time you press on the same spot, more gluten develops that can toughen the dough. Here's our method:



1. Place well-chilled dough on floured counter and sprinkle lightly with flour. Place tapered rolling pin in center of dough with ends at 9 o'clock and 3 o'clock and roll dough outward from center to edge, applying even, gentle pressure.

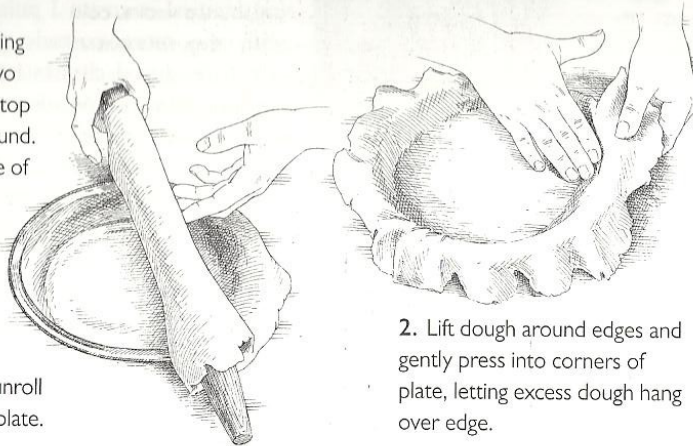
2. Using dough scraper, lift and turn dough 90 degrees. Roll outward again from center, making sure to keep hands at 9 and 3 positions. Lightly flour underneath dough as necessary to prevent sticking.

3. Repeat rolling and turning steps (keeping hands at 9 and 3) until dough is wide enough to overhang pie plate by 4 inches.

MAKING A DECORATIVE EDGE

TRANSFERRING AND FITTING THE DOUGH

1. Place rolling pin about two inches from top of dough round. Flip top edge of round over rolling pin and turn once to loosely roll around pin. Gently unroll dough over plate.

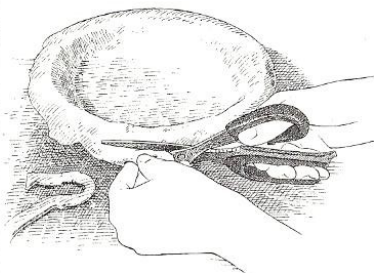


2. Lift dough around edges and gently press into corners of plate, letting excess dough hang over edge.

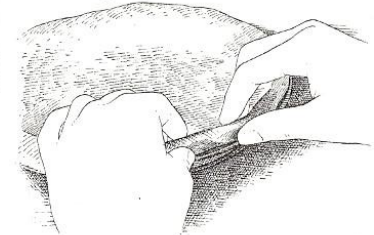
TROUBLESHOOTING

PROBLEM: Dough rips or tears.
AVOIDING IT: Handle dough gently and drape—don't stretch—in pan.
SOLVING IT: Roll or flatten small piece of leftover dough over hole to patch it. With our soft Foolproof Pie Dough, no moistening is necessary.

FOR A SINGLE-CRUST PIE



1. Trim dough, leaving 1/2-inch overhang.



2. Roll overhang under to make flush with lip of pan. Crimp as shown in "Making a Decorative Edge" at right.

FOR A DOUBLE-CRUST PIE

1. Unroll untrimmed top piece of dough over filled pie, taking care not to stretch it and create thin spots. Trim overhanging edges of both crusts to about 1/2 inch.

2. Press edges of top and bottom crusts together well to prevent leaking, then fold edges underneath to make flush with lip of pan. Crimp as shown in "Making a Decorative Edge" at right.

3. Use a sharp knife or biscuit cutter to cut vents in top.
• For drier fruit fillings like apple, cut four 1-inch slits.
• For juicier fillings such as blueberry (which need more ventilation to encourage evaporation), cut more slits. Alternatively, punch wider holes with a biscuit cutter before transferring top crust to pie plate.

