



MOM AND RED HOT APPLE PIE

SATISFY YOUR
VALENTINE'S
SWEET TOOTH
WITH FIREBALL-
SPIKED APPLE
OR CANDY-HEART
SPRINKLED
CHOCOLATE PIE

LEFT: Fireball and Red-Hot candies give the apple pie, at left, its zing. Confetti candy hearts make the Chocolate Brownie Pecan Pie a Valentine's favorite.

BY JANICE SCHINDELER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SYLVESTER GARZA

Thinking of baking a pie for your sweetheart this month, but afraid of the numerous pitfalls, like soggy crusts, runny fillings and weeping meringues? No worries. Pie baker extraordinaire Marlene Stubler, who during the height of the season for her Humble-based Pie in the Sky Co. bakes 500 pies an hour, has a few tips for you.

A self-confessed pie lover, Stubler learned from the best — her mom and grandmother. “As far back as I can remember, we had a family lunch every Sunday and the dessert was always pie. I would be in the kitchen with Mom and Grandma as they turned the fresh picked dewberries into pie,” she says. To this day dewberry remains her favorite.

Stubler believes the very best pie crust recipe she has ever used is the Martha Stewart butter pie crust. “But at a commercial level the cost is prohibitive. Instead, I use a high-quality shortening and the results are delicious.”

Of course the shortening (or butter) needs to be cold, as does the water. And minimum handling of the crust helps to keep the end results light and flaky after baking.

Stubler has discovered that fruit pies, like the Red Hot Apple Pie recipe that follows, need to be baked hot and fast so they brown before they

bubble out and all over your oven. Liquid pies, like pumpkin or buttermilk, present a different problem — that of soggy bottom crusts.

“Even though I have baked thousands of pies, I still struggle with this issue,” she admits. Her most recent solution: parbaking the crust empty, or in baking terms, blind. “Weight the crust down with dried beans, then half bake it. Remove the beans, then add the filling and bake until the filling is set. Baking in a convection oven and in a metal pie pan versus a glass or ceramic one also helps to keep the crusts crisp.”

As for meringues, Stubler has learned to avoid the messy weeping and unsightly shrinkage of the meringues by “totally covering the pie filling with the meringue all the way to the crust and maybe even down the side of the pie pan just a little bit. Then in a hot 400 oven (350 if a convection), brown it really fast, then get it out. Works every time,” says Stubler.

Still not convinced that baking pie is, well, as easy as pie? Stubler will rescue you. If you are too pressed for time to stop by her shop and cozy café in Conroe to pick up a fresh pie, you can mail order one from her company’s Web site, www.pieintheskyco.com. In Houston, Rice Epicurean Markets carry Pie in the Sky Co. pies.

Pie in the Sky Co. & Eats, 3600 North Loop 336 West, Conroe, 936.760.3301, www.pieintheskyco.com



Red Hot Apple Pie

Makes one 9-inch pie

Double Crust Pastry

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2/3 cup + 2 tablespoons shortening
- 4-5 tablespoons cold water
- 1/4 cup crushed Fireball candies

Filling

- 2 large baking apples (peeled, cored, thinly sliced), such as Golden Delicious or Granny Smith
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons butter/margarine (melted)
- 1 small box Red Hot candies

Topping

- Grated double crust pastry
- 3 tablespoons crushed Fireball candies
- Coarse clear decorator's sugar

Roll half of pastry onto a lightly floured surface to 1/8-inch thickness; roll crushed Fireball candies into pastry with rolling pin. Fit into a 9-inch pie plate. Chill remaining pastry. Arrange apple slices in pastry shell.

Combine flour, sugar and cinnamon; sprinkle mixture over apples with 1/2 box Red Hot candies. Pour lemon juice and melted butter over pie.

Form remaining pastry into a ball and grate. Place over filling. Sprinkle clear decorator's sugar and crushed Fireball candies atop pie. Bake pie at 375 degrees for 45 to 50 minutes.

RIGHT: Pie maker Marlene Stubler accepts help in the kitchen from her favorite Valentines: husband Scott, a Houston-area builder and remodeler, son Jackson, 4, and daughter Maggie, 6.





Chocolate Brownie Pecan Pie

Makes one 9-inch pie

Single Crust Pastry

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/3 cup + 1 tablespoon shortening
- 2-3 tablespoons cold water
- 1/4 cup crushed pecans

Filling

- 2/3 cup light corn syrup
- 2/3 cup firmly packed brown sugar
- 1/4 cup unsalted butter
- 4 ounces semi-sweet chocolate, coarsely chopped
- 3 large eggs
- 1 large egg yolk
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 1/2 cups coarsely chopped pecans

Heat the corn syrup, brown sugar and butter together in a medium-sized saucepan until the butter melts. Turn off the heat and add the chocolate. Let stand for 5 minutes and whisk until smooth. Let cool for 10 minutes.

In another medium-sized bowl, whisk eggs and egg yolk together until frothy. Blend in the vanilla.

Add about half of the slightly cooled chocolate mixture and whisk until smooth. Add the pecans and stir well.

Pour the filling into the prepared pie shell and bake for 40 minutes. The filling will rise and the edges will crack a little. If your oven does not bake evenly, rotate the pie in the middle of the baking time.

Optional Toppings

Tint white chocolate pink. Melt it in and drizzle the top of the pie for a Valentine motif. Sprinkle it with edible red and pink confetti.

Make little tarts and share them with all your Valentines.