

# The Zen of Pie Dough

by Dody Williams



How do we define the passages in our lives? What collected experiences become the file tabs of our memories? How do we know we have crossed the threshold from one stage of our life to another? For me, it was creating pie dough. For others it is probably something more noteworthy—a graduation, mastering a craft—something noticeable and outstanding to those in your sphere of influence: your family, your church, your community. Making pie dough is not generally one of those achievements that people care about. Not to the extent that the local newspaper will lead the Life section with the headline “Local Woman Perfects Pie Dough—Rite of Passage Complete.” It’s not something you put in a Christmas letter (although I contemplated it): “Dear Friends, this year I finally understand the proper consistency of pie dough and am able to report that I can now knock out a two-crust pie in fifteen minutes!” No, not many people are that impressed or un-

derstand the implications of such a statement. But for me perfecting pie dough announced to my most inner soul that I was finally a grown-up. I was as old emotionally as my mother and on the road to being as sage as my

grandmother. I had linked cosmic arms with all of my female forbearers. The circle was complete.

When did I first realize the implications of making a truly great pie? I think I was as young as four. Pies were a regular seasonal indicator in our house. You knew it was September because apples were in season, hence apple pie on Sunday. November was Thanksgiving, hence pumpkin and pecan. In the winter months, cherry pie was a favorite and made regularly because my older sister loved it so much.

Spring came and with it lemon meringue and then, June. Ah, June, the time in the upper Midwest for strawberry rhubarb pie, that irresistible tangy, sticky treat that only happened once a year when the rhubarb, that elusive vegetable, was available. My mother even took to growing it in her flower garden amongst the delphinium and coral bells, it was such an important delicacy. High summer meant blueberry pies

Hazel's Kitchen by Julie Gruber

and when my mother married a Georgia college professor, moving us from Chicago to the South in the cultural adventure of a lifetime, we celebrated his June birthday with a peach pie instead of a birthday cake.

So pies marked the seasons of our life much the same way an almanac marks the phases of the moon. Making pie dough became my epiphany. The road to this epiphany was a long one. When I was little, my mother had a large wooden board, two feet by two feet, that she would place on our kitchen table surrounded by the flour canister and the rolling pin—my great grandmother’s bird’s-eye-maple rolling pin. This was the Excalibur of all rolling pins. It was a lovely mellow honey color with russet flecks. The handles were assembled on a ball-bearing system that took all of the work out of rolling the dough.

My mother and her mother before her made their pie dough with lard before guilt was introduced into the family food preparation process; back then you were doing the right thing to make

dessert with every meal and load your family up on meals laden with animal fat. I remember the lard box well: it was kelly green and the wax paper crackled when the spoon was dipped in to grab a dollop of the opaque white shortening. A perfect pie had three heaping scoops of lard and then four heaping scoops of flour added on top with a quick shake from the saltshaker before crumbling all of these ingredients together by hand. Even as a tiny girl, I watched carefully. When the whole mixture resembled cornmeal, my mother would take the water she had prepared with an ice cube and sprinkle it strategically over the dry mixture. And then, as if there was only a brief window of opportunity she would dive into the mixture and bring it all together in a ball. She made it look as easy as, well, pie. Finally after forming it rapidly into a round inch-thick patty, she would lay it on the floured board and whip out Excalibur and zip-zap roll it into a perfect twelve-inch circle.

Once the dough was rolled flat and placed in the pie pan, my mother would

add the filling and then the top crust was rolled out in a blink. Before the rolled dough was placed on top of the filling, it was folded in half and my mom would cut a semicircle with a paring knife and make five sunshine slashes for air vents. Affixing the top crust, she would expertly pinch the top and bottom together before adding the final flourish. Taking her thumb and index finger she would expertly form a perfect ruffle around the edge of the pie, pausing only to turn the pie pan for a better angle. Voila! Pie in fifteen minutes.

It wasn't until I was newly married that I attempted pie. Surely, I reasoned to myself, after years of watching I could mimic the process. I decided on lemon meringue. A one-crust pie seemed like a good place to start. I tried to replicate the proper setting. Wooden board, flour canister, and while I didn't own Excalibur, I had a brand-new rolling pin that worked the same way, on ball bearings. And so I began: three blobs of lard, four heaping scoops of flour. Shake, shake the salt. I dove in. I started crumbling, but it just didn't seem right. So, plop, a little more lard couldn't hurt. But yuck, it was so gooey! And it was sticking to my fingers. Scoop—add some more flour, another scoop—that seems better . . .

The mixture didn't seem as crumbly as it should have been, but after I added the ice water it helped pull it all together. I began rolling. Goodness, it was sticky. Better add more flour. I couldn't seem to bring it down beyond a half-inch thick. I applied more pressure, working far into my shoulders. Finally, it seemed okay, maybe still a little thick. Lifting it to place in the pan, it broke in half. I rolled it again. It broke again. After many attempts I placed each half in the pie plate and closed the seam with my thumb. I had been at this for two hours, so I tossed the piecrust in the oven and started the filling.

Bling! The timer went off, telling me the crust was done. I ran to the oven, swung the door open, and was horrified to be greeted by something that should have had a part in *The Return of Swamp Thing*. A bubbling, oozy-

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ing mass of undulating white dough had melted into a blob in the center of the pie plate. Panicked, I called my mother, describing the swamp thing to her.

“Oh,” she said knowledgeably, “too short.”

“Too short?” I said, confused, watching the death throes of my blob.

“Too much shortening, not enough flour,” she explained.

I tried again. I was determined to make this pie. When it came time to roll the dough out, it cracked like mud in a drought. Exhausted, I patched the jigsaw pieces of pie dough into the pan and slung it angrily into the oven. When the timer went off again I cautiously opened the door. It had held! It was a piecrust, sort of. Later when we finally ate the pie it was tasty but the fluted crusts were left on our plates like fossilized relics from the Stone Age. They were too hard to bite into. I was dispirited and dazed. I thought pie making was my birthright, a mark on gene number 27 or something.

Over the next fifteen years I sporadically attempted one pie after another. Each time I felt like I was going into battle, and each time I lost. I became the master of jerry-rigged pie shells. I could pull off a pie, but in my heart of hearts I knew they were imposters. I ached to have the touch to master the maddeningly elusive art of piecrust.

Finally confessing my inadequacies to my mother, she suggested a pie workshop on our next trip to our family cottage in Wisconsin. This was the perfect solution—the mecca of family pie making! It was a well-known story in our family that the apple tree in the backyard had sprung from apple peelings thrown down by my great great grandmother after baking a pie. Surely, in the place where the time/space continuum bonds of familial unity were the strongest, the pie dough gods would shine down and favor me.

Once we arrived and settled in, we opened the kitchen window overlooking the legendary apple tree and let the soft Wisconsin lake breeze blow in while we worked away on a double-

crust blueberry pie. Watching carefully, I observed my mom as I had during every season of my childhood. When the ingredients had been crumbled together, she took my hand so that I could feel the consistency. Closing my eyes I tried to memorize the texture. After the ice water was added, my mother admonished, “Cold water is critical.” Once the dough had been drawn into its lump I again handled it, carefully noting the texture and weight. We repeated the lesson every day and had pie for every evening meal that vacation either as dessert or as a quiche.

But in spite of this major effort, pie dough continued to elude me. When I pulled out the wooden board and rolling pin, a heaviness descended on me. I felt like I was the Sherlock Holmes of piecrust, relentlessly pursuing my Moriarty. The perfect crust was lurking just around the corner, mocking me. Sure, I had progressed enough to assemble a tasty, flaky crust. Sure, everyone enjoyed themselves and had seconds, but I knew the truth. Each pie took an hour or more. I always patched. There was always breakage. I was a pie fraud.

It was May of the year that I turned forty when my breakthrough occurred. Thinner and the years lard had become harder and harder to obtain. The food police had successfully eradicated it from most supermarkets. When I tired of tracking it down, I decided to make my Memorial Day cherry pie with butter. Not quite sure how sticks translated into blobs, I checked my ancient 1950 edition of Betty Crocker. Two-thirds of a cup of shortening was

listed as the official measurement. I carefully sliced two-thirds of a cup off the butter sticks. I crumbled—it never went smoother! Adding the water to the finished product made it look and feel exactly like it was supposed to. The pie dough flew together like iron filings to a magnet. The lump of dough glistened with the sheen of the perfectly proportioned pie dough of my ancestors. But I didn't get excited, not yet. I checked the clock, seven minutes and I was already at the rolling stage, but a lot could go wrong. Taking a deep breath, I floured the board and rolling pin carefully, like a pool shark chalking the cue: I began to roll out the dough. The elasticity was incredible! It increased into a perfect twelve-inch circle. I held my breath as I folded it in half. It didn't break! I poured the filling in the shell. I rolled out the top crust, folded it, made the sunshine vents, and finally picked it up and placed it on the pie. Perfect! The fluting never crumbled. I didn't patch a single piece! I looked up at the clock—fifteen minutes! I did all of this in fifteen minutes! I had arrived.

Just like algebra or riding a bike, once you know in your soul the correct combination of steps, you will never fail again. After my epiphany I went on a yearlong pie spree and made pies all the time. Now I make pies according to the changes of the season in the time-honored way. I am a confident piemaker and my only worry is that my daughter who just turned eighteen doesn't seem to be in a hurry to learn the art, but I know that someday she too will feel the need to come of age and bake a pie. ☛

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