

Be a better baker

Each month one of our expert panel of bakers answers a question posed by you. This month, Eric Lanlard reveals how to prevent the baking blunder made infamous on the Great British Bake Off – the soggy bottom



Q READER JAMES WATKINS ASKS...

I've always loved savoury tarts, but I've never managed to make one with a properly cooked pastry base, even if I've blind

baked it before adding the filling. Where am I going wrong?

A ERIC ANSWERS...

To prevent wet fillings turning pastry soggy, I blind bake my pastry case, brush it with egg yolk, then bake it for 5 minutes more to give a golden, almost waterproof seal (the process is known as gilding). I also make sure the pastry is properly cooked and crisp by using ceramic baking beans when blind baking: they transfer the heat evenly, giving consistent results – and last forever.

Eric's golden rules

- Rest the pastry in the fridge before baking to relax the gluten in the flour, which will make the tart case less inclined to shrink
- Blind bake the pastry case, lined with baking paper (it's easier if you scrunch it up first) and filled to the top with baking beans.
- Brush the case with beaten egg yolk, then bake briefly again to seal the pastry

Eric's pear and roquefort tart

SERVES 8. HANDS-ON TIME 20 MINUTES, OVEN TIME 1 HOUR, PLUS CHILLING

"Give your pastry va-va-voom and flavour by adding dried herbs, spices or finely chopped nuts."



You can make the pastry case a day before. Keep it in its tin, covered, somewhere cool. The finished tart will keep, covered, overnight in the fridge (although it's better on the day it's baked). Bring it to room temperature to serve.

FOOD TEAM'S TIPS Walnuts work well with pears and blue cheese – you could add 50g walnut pieces to the filling. Or, for a more subtle addition, chop 50g walnuts very finely, then lightly knead into the pastry.

If you don't want to be left with 2 egg whites, separate 1 egg and use the yolk to make the pastry, then beat the white and use it for brushing over the pastry before baking – it'll seal the pastry in a similar way.

FOR THE PASTRY

- 225g plain flour, plus extra for dusting
- 110g chilled unsalted butter, cut into pieces, plus extra for greasing

- 1 free-range egg yolk, plus an extra yolk, beaten, to seal (see tips)
- 2-3 tbsp chilled water

FOR THE FILLING

- 3 ripe pears, quartered and cored (we used conference pears)
- 2 tsp olive oil
- 100g British free-range smoked bacon lardons
- 150g mascarpone
- 2 medium free-range eggs, beaten
- 50ml whole milk
- 2 tsp chopped fresh thyme, plus extra sprigs to garnish
- 150g roquefort cheese, crumbled

YOU WILL ALSO NEED

- 23cm fluted tart tin with a removable base

1. To make the pastry, put the flour and a pinch of salt in a bowl, then add the chilled butter and rub in, using your fingers, until the mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs. Stir in the egg yolk, then gradually add just enough chilled water to bring the mixture together into a firm dough – don't add too much water or the dough may become sticky. (Alternatively, whizz the flour, salt and butter in a food processor until it resembles fine breadcrumbs, then add the egg yolk and the water. Pulse to bring the dough together.)

2. Roll out the dough into a circle on a lightly floured surface to the thickness of a £1 coin, then loosely roll the pastry around the rolling pin. Unroll it over a lightly greased 23cm fluted tart tin with a removable base, then gently push the pastry into the tin using a little ball of floured pastry to help you ease it into the tin's edges and flutes. Roll the rolling pin over the top to trim the edges. Prick the base all over with a fork, line the case with baking paper and fill with baking beans. Chill for 30 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, heat the oven to 200°C/fan180°C/gas 6. Blind bake the pastry case for 20 minutes, then remove the paper and beans and bake for 10 minutes more until the pastry begins to turn golden. Remove from the oven, brush the pastry with beaten egg yolk (see tips), then return to the oven for 5 minutes.

4. Arrange the pears in neat circles to cover the base of the case. Bake for 10-12 minutes until the pears begin to soften. Heat the oil in a frying pan and fry the lardons until golden, then set aside. Turn down the oven to 180°C/fan160°C/gas 4.

5. Put the mascarpone in a bowl and stir briefly to soften, then add the beaten eggs and milk. Stir until smooth and combined. Season with a little salt and lots of black pepper (the bacon and roquefort are salty), then stir in the chopped thyme.

6. Scatter the cooked lardons and the roquefort over the softened pears, then pour over the mascarpone mix. Sprinkle over some small thyme sprigs and bake for 25 minutes or until the filling is set and golden. Once cooked, leave to cool in its tin before removing.

7. Serve at room temperature with lightly dressed salad leaves.

PER SERVING 444kcal, 31.8g fat (18.1g saturated), 12.3g protein, 27.5g carbs (6.1g sugars), 1.3g salt, 2.8g fibre

NEXT MONTH

Edd Kimber on the tricks of the trade for a beautifully burnished Easter simnel cake



“A crisp pastry case is harder to achieve than many good cooks let on. It needs to be blind baked for longer than you'd expect. And if you're using a wet filling, you need to take extra precautions to avoid the dreaded soggy bottom.”

Do you have a question to ask or a baking tip to share? Contact us via readers@deliciousmagazine.co.uk, twitter.com/deliciousmag or facebook.com/deliciousmagazine or write to us at delicious_magazine@eye-media.com, Eye to Eye Media, Axe & Bottle Court, 70 Newcomen St, London SE1 1YT

MEET OUR OTHER BAKING EXPERTS >>>>



Richard Bertinet



Phil Vickery



John Whaite



Edd Kimber



Juliet Sear



Peter Sidwell

FOOD PHOTOGRAPH: MIKE ENGLISH. FOOD STYLING: LOTTIE COVELL. STYLING: WEI TANG