

# Pie-Making Tips From The Pie-Making Expert

BY LOU ANN GOOD

LEBANON (Lebanon Co.) — Three years ago, Pauline Strack thought she'd try to sell a few of her pies on the roadside along with some of her garden produce. That first week, she sold only three. From those humble beginnings, the demand for Pauline's pie grew to as many as 389 pies a week.

This 71-year-old rises at 3 a.m. and sometimes works until 10 p.m. to fill the orders for "Pauline's Pies."

As she pulled a wet-bottom shoo fly pie from the oven, she remarked, "They say my shoo fly pies are better than those in Lancaster County."

She gave a pleased smile and added, "Some of my regular customers come from as far away as York County because they say they can't find a better pie."

Pauline estimates that 75 percent of her customers are men. She said, "A lot of women don't bake pies today. They're either too busy or they say they can't."

She modestly remarks, "I don't have any special secrets. I don't think it's hard to make a good pie."

To help out with business demand, Pauline enticed her sister Mildred Early to help with the pie making.

The sisters laugh heartily as they recount the pleasures and hazards of pie baking.

Mildred recalls, "When I first came to help, Pauline had to teach me how to bake a pie and I never got so yelled at in my life as I did those first two weeks."

While many cooks search for a perfect pie crust recipe, Pauline maintains that it doesn't take a special recipe to make a good, flaky crust. She said, "The secret is to not work the dough more than you must after you add the water."

Although she gladly shared her recipe for crust, others may find it difficult to copy since she adds "just enough water until the dough feels right."

Mildred, who always rolls out the dough because Pauline's hands swell from arthritis, rolls out the dough on a cloth-covered table. The rolling pin is also cloth covered.

"You don't need to use as much flour when you roll on cloth," Pauline explained, "and the dough doesn't stick to the counter or the rolling pin."

When the dough is placed on the pie plate, the dough should not be stretched but rather relaxed. "If you stretch the dough, it shrinks when you bake it," Pauline said.

She cuts the dough that overlaps the edges with a scissors about one-inch from the edge so that pie shell edges can be kept high.

Filled pies can be baked immediately, but if the pie crust needs to be baked before filling, Pauline lets it set for an hour before baking to reduce shrinkage.

She bakes all her pies in a 385 degree oven on the bottom shelf of her electric oven.

Although the sisters bake many pies for customers who drop by without ordering, they prefer filling orders. Fruit pies available with crumbs, lattice or lid crusts cost \$3 to \$4 in the following flavors: apple, cherry, apricot, peach, raspberry, raisin, rhubarb, and blueberry. Custard pies cost from \$2.75 to \$3.50 and include the following flavors: coconut, molasses coconut, lemon sponge, wet-bottom shoo fly, and egg custard with or without fruit. For \$3.50, customers can buy a meringue pie in the following flavors: coconut, lemon, chocolate cream, peanut butter cream, and banana cream. Holiday favorites include pumpkin, pecan, mince, grasshopper and key lime pie.

Many of their customers procrastinate and call only hours before wanting to pick up a pie.

Pauline said, "I told my sister we aren't going to bake after 12 o'clock on a Saturday anymore."

"But," Mildred revealed, "That only lasted one week."

It seems the good-natured Pauline just can't turn a customer's request down even when she is tired.

Like all good cooks, Pauline believes the ingredients of every pie, should be tasted.

One time, sugar was inadvertently missed in the ingredients of a pumpkin custard.

"It doesn't happen too often, but it has happened," Pauline said. "That's why we should taste test the ingredients."

Even seasoned pie makers like the two sisters experience occasional disasters. Recently, Pauline pulled a banana meringue pie from the oven and remarked, "Doesn't this look pretty?"

Unfortunately, while admiring her creation, she dropped it in the oven.

With all the rolling, mixing and baking going on in the Strack household, other family members get involved in the baking business.

Pauline's husband, Franklin, buys supplies from a local grocery. Flour is purchased in 10-pound bags because they are easier to handle than larger-sized bags.

Pauline's son Charlie, who does the dairy farm work, helps peel apples and pumpkins. Daughter Louise, who lives in an apartment adjoining the Strack farmhouse, bakes Christmas cookies and homemade bread to sell.

The week before Thanksgiving, it took 200 pounds of flour, 20 gallons of milk, 56 dozen eggs, and 20 three-pound cans of shortening to fill the pie orders.

Although the Stracks live on a dairy farm, she purchases her milk to allay any fears customers may have of unpasteurized milk.

This is the second marriage for both Pauline and her husband who were widowed. When they mar-



Pauline's sister Mildred Early helps with the pie making. She rolls out the dough on a pastry cloth and uses a cloth-covered pie roller.



Customers who stop by find a variety of pies setting on a table at the Strack's enclosed porch.

ried nine years ago, Franklin moved on Pauline's dairy farm. His son maintains Franklin's Century farm on which the Strack named appeared on the sheepskin document.

Although some recipes have been handed down through the generations, Pauline said many have been clipped from *Lancaster Farming*. After so much pie making, Pauline said, "Most of the recipes are in my head."

While it gives Pauline great pleasure to see others enjoy her pies, she said, that one customer in particular has made her feel proud.

That is Letie Schadler, the Lebanon County home economist. The first time, Letie bought a pie, Pauline said to her sister, "I'm scared. I know what Letie does to a pie. She shakes it, turns it upside down and examines it bite by bite."

When Letie appeared sometime later, she said, "I have a few questions for you. How do you brown the bottoms of your pie because pie crust baked in tin foil pans doesn't brown?"

Pauline shrugged. "It does for me. I just bake pies on the bottom oven shelf at 385 degrees."

"You make good pies," the home economist assessed. She occasionally stops by for more of Pauline's pies.

Pauline said, "That made me

feel good, coming from Lettie, because everyone knows how particular she is."

Out of curiosity, Pauline's sister often buys pies from others. Whether it's loyalty or fact, Mildred maintains her sister's pies are hard to beat. She reports that many of the pies she purchased tasted terrible. She said, "I felt awfully sick on one that I bought at a restaurant. Some crusts you can't even cut."

Regardless of the amount of pies Pauline makes, she mixes one pie at a time. "When you mix too many batches, the ingredients separate, and I think it doesn't get as good," she said.

In the past two years, Pauline has not taken a vacation. "Give me a day or two at traveling and home really looks good to me. I'm always satisfied to be here," she said.

But this year she plans to close for two weeks after Christmas so she can clean the house.

While the two sisters stir the ingredients for pies and measure out the flour, laughter rings throughout the kitchen.

One customer told the two sisters, "You act like you don't have a care in the world."

Pauline answered, "People don't want to hear our troubles.

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"We may be retirement age, but we're not old," said Pauline Strack. She and her husband Franklin don't even think of getting old; instead, they said, "We keep ourselves as busy and are never bored."

This is the second marriage for both whose spouses had died. Now Franklin and Pauline combine their efforts to make pies that have grown in popularity in Lebanon County.



Even when Pauline bakes 389 pies in a week, she still mixes the ingredients one pie at a time.