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How to make perfect pumpkin pie

An American classic we really should import, or something best left on the other side of the ocean?



Carved pumpkins gathered around a pumpkin pie. Photograph: Jim Corwin/Alamy

The British have never really got pumpkin pie, although cookbook writers have been trying hard to make us like it for over 300 years – long before the first recipe appeared in Cucubita pepo's native America. Jill Dupleix quotes a 1932 letter to the Times in which a gentleman marvels at the prodigious growth of the pumpkin in his garden – but adds doubtfully, "Whether it is a food worth eating remains to be seen."

The idea of having something so vegetal for pudding freaks us Brits out slightly, as anyone who's ever baked a courgette cake for the bring and buy sale will no doubt attest – even carrot cake took a while to catch on this side of the Atlantic. This makes pumpkin pie perfect for Halloween parties, but I reckon, with a little love and attention, this Thanksgiving classic could be a genuine seasonal hit: autumnal, colourful, and packed with the sweet spices long beloved of British cooks, it's really nothing to be scared of.

Yes we can



Libby's tinned pumpkin Photograph: Felicity Cloake

To make a pumpkin pie, you need a big orange Halloween-themed vegetable fruit, right? Well, not necessarily – America's most popular pumpkin comes straight from a tin, for the very good reason that most fresh pumpkins are watery, stringy, and best left to jack o'lanterns, or whatever we call them here. The ubiquitous Libby's pumpkin purée is actually made from something called a Dickinson's Select, which most of us would recognise as a squash, rather than a pumpkin, although the distinction between the two is somewhat hazy.

The Famous Pumpkin Pie pushed on the Libby's label calls for a can of the purée mixed with 225g sugar, ½ tsp salt, 1 tsp ground cinnamon, ½ tsp ground ginger, ¼ tsp ground cloves, 2 large eggs and 410ml evaporated milk, then poured into a 9 inch unbaked deep dish pie shell.

The latter is even harder to come across than the pumpkin purée itself, so I make my own, using the Leiths Baking Bible recipe for shortcrust pastry, then try the recipe, baking the pie at 220C for 15 minutes, then 180C for another 40. It's exactly how I remember pumpkin pie: deep orange, sweetly spiced and slightly custardy – and a wee bit dull. Surely there has to be more to America's signature dish than this?

Fresh flesh



Libby's pie recipe made with fresh pumpkin. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

When I was about 12, I cajoled my Halloween-hating mother into buying me a pumpkin – and then eating a crumble made with the extra flesh: sorry mum. It was an early culinary disaster: waterlogged lumps of dough swimming in a blandly sweet lake of juice, but given the difficulty of getting hold of tinned pumpkin over here, and the glut of fresh ones littering greengrocers at this time of year, I decide to retest the idea. This time, however, I'm able to seek advice online, urging me to steer clear of the carrot-coloured monstrosities on display, in favour of smaller, less vivid varieties – I find some in Tesco labelled as "culinary pumpkins". Instead of just whizzing the thing up in a food processor, I roast it, skin it, purée it, then – and this is the real secret – leave the flesh to drain in a sieve for a couple of hours. The resulting puree is still wetter than the canned stuff, but, after adjusting the amount of evaporated milk, I'm surprised to discover the flavour is more than a match for it – slightly less sweet, perhaps, but richer and more assertive.

The imposter



Butternut squash pie. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Though a welcome newcomer to the vegetable scene, culinary pumpkins probably aren't much easier to come by in many parts of the UK than the tinned variety. Flicking through a plethora of Thanksgiving-themed cookery magazines from the United States, however, I discover a young pretender to the pumpkin's crown – "the shapely butternut squash" as Jill Dupleix terms it, whose flavour and texture are frequently deemed superior to those of its more bulbous cousin. Helpfully they're also widely available. I give my squash the same treatment as the two

varieties of pumpkin, and am pleased to find that, although the yellowish results aren't quite so Martha Stewart-esque, the flavour is up to scratch – slightly sweeter than the fresh pumpkin, perhaps, but not quite so complex. Definitely an acceptable substitute.

Sugar and spice



Martha Stewart recipe pumpkin pie. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Having decided on fresh pumpkin purée, it's time to break free from the tyranny of the Libby's recipe too. It would be remiss to address such an American classic, I decide, without consulting another fine national institution, the aforementioned Ms Stewart. [M. Diddy](#), as she was apparently known during her short spell in prison earlier this decade, gives a rather [unusual recipe](#), which substitutes vanilla extract for the dish's characteristic spices, and maple syrup for sugar.



Cook's Illustrated recipe pumpkin pie. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

The pie has a fabulous colour, but proves to be more style than substance – it's bland without the warm ginger and cinnamon, although I do like the subtle hint of maple syrup, which adds a taste of New England to this Thanksgiving favourite. A Cook's Illustrated [Best Pumpkin Pie](#), using dark brown sugar, is equally flawed – not only is the filling an unattractive burnt ochre, but the freshness of the pumpkin is overwhelmed by the rich flavour of the sugar.

Dairy debate



James Beard recipe pumpkin pie. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Most pie recipes I come across call for evaporated milk, but I can't help wondering whether this could be something to do with the fact that both Carnation and Libby's are owned by Nestle. Would [cream](#), as used by "the [dean of American cookery](#)", James Beard, not give a superior result, I wondered. But no – the pie seemed heavy, and slightly claggy, in comparison, a rare case of the lower-fat alternative winning the day with my tastebuds.

Liquor

I do take some inspiration from the godfather of modern American cuisine, however – Beard uses a generous slug of Cognac in his recipe. French brandy seems all wrong here though, so I substitute it for golden rum, which works well with the spices, while still allowing the pumpkin to take centre stage. Further than this, I'm wary of messing with another country's classic – but I will include a hint that his slivers of candied ginger are also rather tasty, and a few pecans never went amiss on anything from across the pond.

Method

Most pumpkin pie recipes call for the filling to be poured into raw pastry, but I dislike the soggy base that inevitably results, so I blind bake my shortcrust instead, and find the crisper finish is a good counterpoint to the soft pumpkin custard inside. I'm also slightly disappointed by the complicated Cook's Illustrated method, which demands endless simmering and processing of the pumpkin purée. This is supposed to give a particularly smooth filling, but I can't say I notice the difference, except in the washing up.

A proper pumpkin pie requires a proper cooking pumpkin – if you can't find one, use a butternut squash instead – crisp, flaky pastry, and the light creaminess of evaporated milk. All other flavours are up to you, as long as you remember to give thanks as you tuck in.

Perfect pumpkin pie



Felicity's perfect pumpkin pie.

Photograph: Felicity Cloake
For a 20cm tart tin

For the pastry:

170g plain flour
Pinch of salt
100g cold butter
2tbsp caster sugar
1 egg yolk

For the pie filling:

1 small culinary pumpkin or medium butternut squash
145g maple syrup
1 tsp cinnamon
½ tsp ground ginger
½ tsp ground cloves
3 tbsp golden rum (optional)
2 large eggs, beaten
150ml evaporated milk

1. Pre-heat the oven to 200C. Cut pumpkin or squash in half or quarters depending on the size, and scoop out the seeds and fibres inside. Place skin-side up in a roasting dish with a couple of tablespoons of water. Roast for about half an hour, until tender.

2. Keeping the oven on, take the pumpkin out and leave to cool slightly, then peel off the skin, and scoop the flesh into a food processor. Whizz until smooth, then put into a fine sieve or piece of muslin suspended over a bowl and drain for at least an hour.

3. Meanwhile, make your pastry. Sift the flour into a mixing bowl, stir in the salt, then grate in the butter. Rub in using your fingertips until it resembles breadcrumbs, then stir through the sugar. Mix the egg yolk with 2 tbsp iced water, and sprinkle half over the mixture, then stir together with a knife until it comes together in a paste – add a little more liquid if necessary.

4. Bring the mixture together with your fingertips, and then roll out on a floured surface to the thickness of a £1 coin. Use it to line a 20cm tart tin. Cover with clingfilm and chill for 30 minutes.

5. Line the pastry case with greaseproof paper and fill with baking beans. Put in the oven for 15 minutes, then remove the paper and beans, and bake for another 5-10 minutes until the base is pale golden. Remove from the oven. Turn the oven down to 180C.

6. Meanwhile, put 250g pumpkin purée in a large bowl, discarding the excess liquid, and stir in the maple syrup, rum if using, and spices. Taste for sweetness, then mix in the eggs. Gradually stir in the evaporated milk until you have a thick, creamy consistency – you may not need it all. Pour into the pastry case.

7. Bake for about 40 minutes, checking from half an hour onwards, until the filling is set, but still slightly wobbly in the centre. Allow to cool on a wire rack for at least an hour before serving.

Is pumpkin pie an American classic we really should import, or something best left on the other side of the ocean? If so, what do you like to eat it with? If not, which squash do you think is the best for cooking?

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