

# Easy Pat-in-the-Pan Pie Dough

Lose your rolling pin, your pie weights, and your fear—forever.

## At a Glance NO-FEAR PIE CRUST



1. Hold the pie plate up to the light to check the thickness of the dough; it should be translucent, not opaque. Pay attention to the curved edges.
2. Roll the reserved dough into three 8-inch ropes. Arrange the ropes around the perimeter of the pie plate, leaving small (about 1-inch) gaps between them.
3. Squeeze the ropes together.
4. Create a fluted edge, dipping your fingers in flour if the dough is sticky.

**W**hen it comes to frustration, few tasks can rival that of making pie dough. The rules are both precise (for optimal flakiness the fat must be very cold and cut into the flour just so) and maddeningly vague (recipes typically call for 4 to 6 tablespoons of ice water, or more as needed—whatever that means). I can barely draw a circle, much less roll one from raw, cold pie dough. And moving a floppy disk of pastry off the counter and into a waiting pie plate is easier said than done. A pie shell that shrinks in the oven (despite being covered with weights) is the final indignity. There are so many places that pie dough can go wrong, no wonder most cooks throw in the pastry cloth and buy a pre-baked pie shell.

The problem with this solution is flavor. Most store-bought crusts are made with shortening, not butter, and offer nothing other than flaky texture. I wanted a totally reliable recipe for a pie shell that baked up flaky and full of buttery flavor.

Of course, I'm not the first baker in search of pie-pastry nirvana. Many recipes call for a pat-in-the-pan crust (the dough is shaped right in the pan, like a graham cracker crust), and I decided to give it a try.

After making more than 20 pat-in-the-pan crusts, I was discouraged. Without exception, my tests yielded dough that was either too sticky or too stiff to press into a pie plate thinly and evenly, and none baked up flaky enough to replace the store-bought standby. You can imagine my surprise when my 23rd test—a crust with cream



With the heel of your hand, press our easy-to-handle dough into a pie plate. Use a glass pie plate so you can easily judge the thickness of the dough.

cheese—fooled several pie snobs in the kitchen. They had assumed this good-looking, flaky crust was made with a rolling pin, not my humble fingers.

Why was cream cheese so successful? It turns out that acidity promotes tenderness. But not any old acidic ingredient will work. Vinegar made a sour crust, and sour cream and buttermilk made the dough too sticky. Dense cream cheese made the dough easier to manipulate. I found this dough could handle a whopping 12 tablespoons of fat, almost twice as much as a standard pie dough, and it didn't require ice water. It was easy, it was flaky, and it tasted great.

This dough also relies on an unusual mixing method. Softened butter and cream cheese are beaten together and then mixed with flour, sugar, and salt. The fat in the cream cheese coats the particles of flour and prevents toughness, a problem in many crusts. This recipe has one more unexpected benefit: There's no need to hold the crust in place with foil and pie weights. As long as the dough is chilled when it goes into the oven, it won't shrink.

—Stephanie Alleyne

## NO-FEAR PIE CRUST

### MAKES ONE 9-INCH PIE SHELL

The pastry can be pressed into the pie plate and refrigerated for up to 2 days or double-wrapped in plastic and frozen for up to 1 month. Once baked and cooled, the shell can be wrapped tightly in plastic and stored at room temperature for up to 1 day.

- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened but still cool
- 2 ounces cream cheese, softened but still cool

1. Lightly coat 9-inch Pyrex pie plate with cooking spray. Whisk flour, sugar, and salt together in bowl.

2. With electric mixer at medium-high speed, beat butter and cream cheese in large bowl, stopping once or twice to scrape down beater and sides of bowl, until completely homogenous, about 2 minutes. Add flour mixture and combine on medium-low until mixture resembles coarse cornmeal, about 20 seconds. Scrape down sides of bowl. Increase mixer

speed to medium-high and beat until dough begins to form large clumps, about 30 seconds. Reserve 3 tablespoons of dough. Turn remaining dough onto lightly floured surface, gather into ball, and flatten into 6-inch disk. Transfer disk to greased pie plate.

3. Press dough evenly over bottom of pie plate toward sides, using heel of your hand. Hold plate up to light to ensure that dough is evenly distributed (see photo 1 at left). With your fingertips, continue to work dough over bottom of plate and up sides until evenly distributed.

4. On floured surface, roll reserved dough into 12-inch rope. Divide into three pieces, roll each piece into 8-inch rope, and form fluted edge (photos 2 through 4). Wrap in plastic and refrigerate at least 1 hour.

5. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Lightly prick bottom of crust with fork. Bake until golden brown, 35 to 40 minutes. Cool on wire rack. (If large bubbles form, wait until crust is fully baked, then gently press on bubbles with kitchen towel. Bubbles will settle as crust cools.)