

# *The Life of Pie*

By Leslie Forsberg

*A comfort  
food gains  
gourmet cachet*





*“We’re going to make strawberry-rhubarb pie today,”* master pie baker Kate McDermott announces cheerily. Brandishing a ruby red 18-inch rhubarb stalk like a baton, she proclaims, “Now *this* is rhubarb. Some of the best in the world. It’s from my friend Melissa’s farm, near Port Angeles.” And the strawberries? “They’re from Graysmarsh Farm—I picked them yesterday,” she reports, her dark curls springing forth exuberantly from beneath a purple bandana.

“My goal is that you’ll walk out of here knowing how to make a really good dough without having to use a recipe, and you’ll be able to measure fruit and make a pie without a recipe,” says McDermott.

The students in McDermott’s Seattle-area Art of the Pie class shift in their chairs, eager but exhibiting a dash of trepidation. Encouragement is supplied by highly scented, freshly made “little tasties,” cinnamon-and-sugar pie-crust roll-ups for nibbling. The half-dozen students in their 20s and early 30s include a trio of young men who explain that they like to cook, but baking a pie is something entirely different, somewhat intimidating.

“I know how to put canned biscuit dough into a pie pan,” announces Dave jocularly, to laughter. “I know that, too!” Janet chimes in.



STEPHEN GROSS

Kate McDermott, pie artisan and teacher.

Once upon a time almost anyone interested in cooking had some rudimentary knowledge of how to make a pie—many, like me, grew up helping our grandmothers bake and learning at their elbows (also rewarded by pie-crust roll-ups). Then a generational shift put that sort of knowledge on the cultural shelf, until a recent resurgence of interest in this quintessential American food brought pie back into newfound prominence. Pie bakeries, pie classes, pie cookbooks, pies on dessert menus, from Florida to Fairbanks: The second decade of the new millennium is a pie renaissance. Search “pies” on Amazon Books and you get more than 17,000 results. *Restaurant News* declared 2011 “year of the pie,” and restaurateurs took the idea to heart: An online guide to pie bakeries and restaurants shows almost three dozen such purveyors in Portland; Seattle has at least a dozen more.



And according to pie experts such as McDermott, the trend and the dish deserve both culinary and philosophical attention.

“When I make the dough I put intention into the bowl,” McDermott continues. “It’s like a secret message,” she says. “What is important to you right now? Put that element into your dough today.”

## Leslie’s Apple Pie

### *Crust:*

2 cups flour  
1/2 tsp salt  
1/4+ cup water  
1 tsp sugar (optional)  
1 egg yolk  
10 tbsp chilled butter

### *Filling:*

4 Granny Smith apples  
2 Pink Lady or other sweet apples  
1 lemon, juiced  
1/2 cup sugar  
1/4 cup light brown sugar  
1/3 cup flour  
1 tsp cinnamon  
dash of freshly grated nutmeg (optional)  
1 tbsp butter

★ **Crust:** Preheat oven to 425°F.

Blend flour and salt in large bowl. Add water and sugar, if using, to egg yolk and blend. Slice butter into 1/2-inch chunks and add to flour mixture. Using pastry blender or fingers, blend butter into flour until butter is like coarse meal with pea-sized bits. Sprinkle yolk/water mixture on top and toss with hands or a fork until dough holds together. If too dry, sprinkle with a bit more water. Divide dough in half and form into two disks; wrap in waxed paper and refrigerate for 30 minutes. Remove first disk from refrigerator and roll out on floured surface until 12 inches, then place in 9-inch pie pan. Refrigerate.

★ **Filling:** Peel, core and slice apples and place in large bowl. Sprinkle with lemon juice. Add sugars, flour, cinnamon and nutmeg, if desired, and toss. Place apple mixture in pie pan and dot with bits of butter. Roll out second disk to 12" diameter. Place atop apples and trim crusts to 1" beyond rim. Roll crusts tightly under, then crimp. Cut vent holes in top crust with paring knife. Bake 15 minutes. Turn oven down to 350°F and bake 35–40 minutes or until the filling is bubbling. Cool and serve with vanilla ice cream. —Leslie Forsberg

- ★ Pumpkin pie was served at the second Thanksgiving—not the first—in 1623.
- ★ British dictator Oliver Cromwell banned pie in 1644, declaring it pagan.
- ★ Key lime is the official “state pie” in Florida; in Vermont, it’s apple pie.
- ★ Pie pastry originated in ancient Greece.

For most people, intention in this case is to fashion a serviceable example of this delicious tradition. Within minutes all of us are elbows-deep in bowls of flour, crumbling leaf lard (the highest grade) and butter into the mixture and sprinkling it with ice water, as McDermott dispenses gentle encouragement and practical tips: “Keep everything chilled, especially yourself.” “Faster, faster, faster! Imagine you have four little kids pulling on your apron strings and saying ‘Mom!’ You have to move fast.” “Don’t get caught up in what you have or don’t. Did our great-grandmothers have digital scales? They would say, ‘What?’ Just bake the pie.”

Though it has now gained high culinary status, baking pies is a folk art, passed down through generations. My Grandma Nessie taught me pie baking at our 120-year-old Elwha River farm on Washington state’s Olympic Peninsula. We had a production line of pies every year during haying season, when the slightest breeze sent dry, waist-high pasture grass swirling in golden waves like rubbing a hand over corduroy. Sunburned, hungry farm workers seated around the oak table downed pot roast and potatoes, followed by pie.

Each morning, freshly made pie dough rested in the refrigerator as we peeled Yellow Transparent apples from the orchard outside. “You don’t have to get all the peel off,” she suggested, as I struggled to duplicate her ease with a paring knife; I was envious of her ability to peel each apple in one continuous ribbon. When I hadn’t floured the surface adequately, and my dough stuck to the wood top of her 1920s baking cabinet—the kind with tin drawers big enough to hold 50 pounds of flour and sugar—she said, “No problem, we’ll just patch it together with a bit of water.” By the time the dew had dried on the orchard grass, the kitchen had filled with the aroma of caramelized apples and the nose-tickling scent of cinnamon as we pulled two pies out of the oven, each top crust decorated with tiny slits in the pattern of a sheaf of wheat, like embroidery stitches on cotton dish towels. She knew they were done by smell, sight and even sound. Putting my ear close to a pie, I

heard the thick steam bubbles chirping a sweet, high-pitched song similar to the one goldfinches sang as they darted over the fields.

Even though most of us didn’t grow up on a farm or with a pie-baking grandma, the sensations in this sepia-toned memory—the warmth, the comfort, the nostalgic feeling and the expectation of sublime taste—are still what spring to mind when a freshly baked pie perfumes the air. Fortunately, this quintessentially American experience is becoming available to more and more people, home bakers or not: There are now hundreds of pie shops in cities and towns big and small.

## FILLED WITH HISTORY

“As American as apple pie.” It’s a saying we all know, but how many of us know how apple pie became synonymous with America? According to food historian and author Ken Albala, at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, the American tradition of pie making came over with English and Dutch settlers. Pies were a part of the diet of medieval Europeans; often made with rye flour and suet, they were merely a way to preserve meat.

“Pie crusts were just a container to keep air from the contents, keeping them from spoiling. It used to be you’d break the crust open and scoop out the contents, but you didn’t eat the

crust,” says Albala. “By around Shakespeare’s time they started to put butter into the crust and to use wheat flour; pie plates became commonplace, so you would actually cut a slice.”

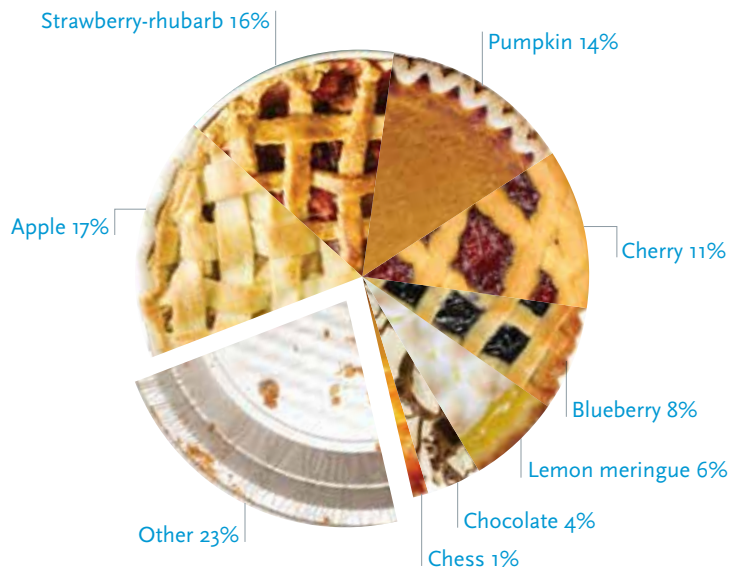
Fast-forward to the American colonies, where apples were the easiest fruits to ferment and distill; hard cider and apple jack were popular beverages. Pie was a great way to make use of these affordable, plentiful fruits, and it became a breakfast food for colonists. In the 19th century, nurseryman Johnny Appleseed created apple orchards across broad swaths of the frontier, and over time pie “became a kind of obsession with American cook-

book authors,” according to Albala, who notes that “pie culture” flourished in New York and the Atlantic states at first, spreading eventually to state fairs in the Midwest. Pie-eating competitions added to the U.S. cultural scene.

As for the cliché about apple pie and America? No one really knows where it came from. But it’s an apt metaphor for our centuries-long fascination with this pastry of humble origins that elevates thriftiness and homey traditions to a delicious art form.

—Leslie Forsberg





**PIE CHART**  
In 2012 NPR surveyed listeners on their favorite flavors.

In Portland, artisan pie baker Kate McMillen, who created the recipes used at one of the city's top-drawer pie places, Random Order Coffeehouse & Bakery, has achieved near cult status since going out on her own. Like so many of her peers, McMillen learned to bake alongside her

grandma, after whom she named her shop. Lauretta Jean's offers homey, thick-crust pies using all butter for the crusts and whatever fruit is in season. On display in a 9-foot-long, glass-fronted vintage jewelry case, the pies glisten with jewel-tone fillings that peek out from the confines of their golden crusts. Rhubarb pies glisten next to plump peach pies, and peach-raspberry pies gleam.

Farmers markets are often a small-business cultivator, and this was the case for McMillen. She started modestly, in 2011, baking pies for a stand at the Saturday Portland Farmers Market, on the Portland State University campus. When customers started forming lines for her pies she knew she was on to something. That fall she opened a shop downtown, and she expanded again just a year later when she opened a larger shop on Division Street. Despite her brick-and-mortar locations, "We still love being at the farmers market," says McMillen. "It's a great way for us to maintain connections with

## SEE SEATTLE ON A WHOLE NEW LEVEL

ENRICH YOUR PERSPECTIVE—WHETHER YOU'VE BEEN HERE FOR AN HOUR OR MORE THAN A DECADE.



**VIEW 360° | HEIGHT 902' | FLOOR 73**

THE HIGHEST PUBLIC OBSERVATORY ON THE WEST COAST

**SKY VIEW**  
OBSERVATORY

**NAMED ONE OF CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER'S FAVORITE OBSERVATION DECKS IN THE WORLD**

LOCATED IN COLUMBIA CENTER, 701 FIFTH AVE | OPEN DAILY\* 9AM-10PM | SKYVIEWOBSERVATORY.COM | AVAILABLE FOR PRIVATE EVENTS! PLEASE CALL 206.860.7449

\*EXCLUDING SOME HOLIDAYS AND PRIVATE EVENTS. SEE WEBSITE FOR DETAILS. PHOTO: MIKE REID

## ASSEMBLY HALL

Downtown Seattle's newest destination for the hungry, the thirsty, and the food-obsessed modern eater. Tom Douglas, a well-known and long-established restaurateur has opened a visually stunning new marketplace called Assembly Hall.



### HOME REMEDY

A delicious deli with prepared food and intriguing specialty items.



### TANAKASAN

A modern Asian American restaurant with high ceilings & high spirits.



### ASSEMBLY HALL JUICE & COFFEE

Fresh juices, hot coffee, great breakfast.

Stop by for a visit,  
6th + Lenora, Seattle

WWW.ASSEMBLYHALLSEATTLE.COM

## "Outstanding"

Wine Press Northwest Magazine  
Spring 2014



"Outstanding wines have superior characteristics and should be highly sought after."



HORSE RANCH  
VINEYARDS™  
EAGLE, IDAHO

TASTING ROOM OPEN WEDNESDAY-SUNDAY

5900 PEARL RD, EAGLE, ID  
208-863-6561

3horseranchvineyards.com



S. RUBENSTEIN, COURTESY: MISSION PIE

Peach-raspberry exemplifies the California focus at Mission Pie.

farmers. We buy a ton of produce there. Last week we brought home 10 or 12 flats of strawberries from Groundworks Organic, and we get all our peaches and nectarines from Baird Orchards."

A top customer pick? "Our tart cherry pie is a big favorite," says McMillen. "The pie cherries come from Salem, and we use Grandma Lauretta Jean's classic recipe." Her grandma's secret? A touch of almond extract in the filling, giving it a rich, multilayered flavor.

Fresh ingredients prepared by artisan bakers typify Mission Pie, in San Francisco's Mission District. On a visit to this baked-goods shrine known for its rustic, whole-wheat crust pies and simple, hearty foods, I swiftly learn that the name "Mission" covers more than the restaurant's locale.

Among the pies in their glass-fronted case, my husband, Eric, spots a nubbly-topped walnut pie. "I presume this is the California version of a southern pecan pie?" he asks the counter clerk.

"I'm glad you noticed," she answers, walking around the end of the display case and leading us over to a map of California painted on one wall, showing the locations of farms they buy from. "The walnuts for this pie are from only 90 miles away, instead of 2,000 miles away, for pecans. That's why we serve walnut pie." Gesturing to the map, she indicates Dixon Ridge Farm, which is a grower and processor of organic walnuts and uses an energy-efficient facility to



# TED LAMBERT

1905-1960



"STORM BREWING" (1944) 18 X 27 OIL/MASONITE

*Braarud Fine Art*

P.O. BOX 717 LA CONNER, WASHINGTON 98257 360/466-4416  
 BUYING • SELLING • BY APPOINTMENT  
 FINE OLD AMERICAN PAINTINGS  
 len@braarudfineart.com



sort, package and ship the nuts it grows and buys from other local producers.

It's no surprise that the cafe takes its sourcing seriously. While co-owner Krystin Rubin is a baker by training, her partner and co-owner Karen Heisler comes from a background in sustainable agriculture policy making. The duo focuses on purchasing from partners whose values align with theirs, in everything from ecological considerations to economic and social values.

Even the flour that goes into their nutty-flavored and surprisingly tender 2/3 whole-wheat, 1/3 white flour, all-butter crust comes from a local source—Community Grains—which packages heritage varieties of wheat in an effort to avoid loss of genetic diversity. "We're very interested in the healthfulness of

*"When you put  
 intention and love  
 into a pie you can  
 taste those two  
 ingredients."*

whole grain, and excited to be part of an effort in California to strengthen our grain economy," notes Heisler.

The result is easy to see and smell in their homey, tall-windowed space. The scent of butter pervades the air, and after one bite of my luxuriously silky pear-raspberry slice, I find that I'm pulling my plate a little closer and playfully guarding it against fork attacks from Eric, who has already devoured his walnut pie.

Eric and I don't have to covet each other's plates at Leoda's Kitchen and Pie Shop, in a 1940s farmhouse-style cottage in the roadside village of Olowalu, near Lahaina on Maui's west shore; Leoda's features individually sized mini-pies alongside standard sizes. The pie crusts are made of a combination of butter (for flavor) and lard (for flakiness), and the ethereally creamy fillings include



**ANNOUNCING  
 THE NEW CROWNE PLAZA  
 SEATTLE AIRPORT**

Located adjacent to Seattle Tacoma International Airport, the NEW Crowne Plaza Seattle Airport combines comfort and convenience with a luxurious modern stay.

- 260 fully renovated guest rooms
- 12,000 square feet of flexible meeting space
- Easy access to light rail

17338 INTERNATIONAL BLVD  
 SEATAC WA 98188  
 877-2-CROWNE  
 206-248-1000  
 WWW.CROWNEPLAZA.COM



LINDSAY STRANNIGAN

Kate McMillen's blueberry-rhubarb pie blends two popular ingredients.

chocolate-macadamia nut, banana cream, coconut cream and key lime.

Our challenge is deciding which two each of us will order. Yes, *two* each; we don't get to stop here all that often.

Certainly a big part of their "goodness" stems from their top-quality ingredients, some of them from the cafe's own farm, Hoaloha. Situated in upcountry Wailuku, Hoaloha is renowned for bringing back nearly lost species of taro, as well as for its trials with many types of fruits and vegetables, such as the intensely sweet-tart apple bananas that executive pastry chef Shelly Taylor transforms into rich, flavorful banana cream pies. Leoda's also buys from local farmers; some pies in the case are the result of chance bumper crops brought to Leoda's back door by farmers. When one Olowalu farmer was overwhelmed with an abundance of limes, Taylor whipped up the now-regular key lime pie; and when another knocked on the kitchen door with a mysterious object—a long, brown cassava (also known as tapioca root)—Taylor improvised, using the starchy tuber for thickening custard pies.

The simple promise of pie has been bringing people together for generations, for everything from pie-and-coffee chats to pie socials to celebrations. "Pie is a social food," notes poet, food writer and teacher Kate Lebo, of Seattle. "There are eight to 10 slices in a pie, perfect for a gathering," she observes. "Pie catalyzes a conversation that's easy to have, and then it warms up to deeper conversation. It's a ritual, and

*continued on page 176*



**MasterPark**  
AIRPORT VALET PARKING

## Take the hassle out of airport parking.

We know that air travel can be a trying experience. MasterPark's 4 Valet Parking locations and MPark Self-Parking, provide SeaTac Airport's premier parking service. 24-hour shuttles, provide the shortest time from your vehicle to airline departure gates. Avoid the high cost of airport terminal parking, MasterPark is the fast, easy, safe and reliable choice. Please visit [masterparking.com](http://masterparking.com)



## SUMMER SIZZLER!

Valid at all MasterPark Valet Parking Locations. Must present coupon to receive discounted rate. Offer not valid in conjunction with any other offer.

- LOT A 18220 International Blvd.
- LOT B 2907 South 170th St.
- LOT C 16025 International Blvd.
- Garage 16826 International Blvd.

**20%\***  
**OFF**  
Valid thru  
October  
31, 2014

**MasterPark**

\* 20% Off With Saturday Night Stay, 10% Off Without Saturday Night Stay. Code #2141

Try MasterPark's New **MPark** Self Park Location. \$9.99 per day for long term and discount parking. For more information visit [mparkseatac.com](http://mparkseatac.com)





## Fueling the Trident Cannery in Akutan, the City of King Cove and warming the home of Tom and Annie Hume.



As Alaska residents, we know what it takes to keep the home fires burning, no matter how far away they are. So we developed a barge distribution network that allows us to provide reliable, cost-effective fuel and freight delivery to homes and businesses even when rivers are running low. Now folks like the Humes can count on having the fuel they need, when they need it. And knowing that Delta Western will do whatever it takes to keep Fueling Alaska Safely.



For all of your quality fuel needs, call us toll-free at 800.478.2688  
www.deltawestern.com



from page 45 deeper communion with ones we love.”

Lebo's exposure to pie baking started while baking holiday pies with her mother. A couple of years later, Lebo tried making double-crust fruit pies, and after combining two recipes, she decided on a whim to enter her peach-ginger pie in a “Cake vs. Pie” competition for the popular website CakeSpy.

“The place was full of people standing around the most gorgeous cakes and pies I'd ever seen. I dropped off my pie, registered ... and ran away. I was sure there was no way I could place,” she said. Hours later she got an email: “You won best in show!” Lebo was hooked.

The tactile and sensory aspects of pie baking hold great appeal for Lebo. “Baking a pie is a metaphor for following your senses,” says Lebo, whose kitchen creativity spurred writing creativity in a wit- and whimsy-filled poetry book, *A Commonplace Book of Pie*, with wry observations such as: “Some people believe in hot pie. They don't care if the filling sets up, so they cut a piece right away. The rest of us wait for an hour or two—an ingenious way to force family time—before cutting the first slice.”

Pie making is certainly a sensory experience in Kate McDermott's Art of the Pie class, as ovens are opened and her students' projects, bubbling, amber-crust strawberry-rhubarb pies, fill the kitchen with fragrance when they're lifted out and set aside to cool. Tasting them is a revelation; buttery flakes yield to succulent strawberry-rhubarb filling in every forkful.

Passing on the mantle of pie maker to her students, McDermott gives shape to intangible sensations: “You can't put your finger on why something tastes better, but when you put intention and love into a pie you can taste those two ingredients.” That may sound exotic, but it's true. As I shape my dough and cut up ripe fruit, I participate in an age-old sensory and meditative ritual that's a treat for the palate and the heart. ▲

Leslie Forsberg lives (and bakes) in Seattle.

Motivate. Inspire. Succeed



## SOME ATHLETES WIN WHEN THEY CROSS THE STARTING LINE.

Volunteer or Donate to



**Special Olympics**  
Washington

sowa.org