

FOOD FACT: Although both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson grew pecans on their Virginia estates, pecan pie is a relatively recent invention, dating back just 70 years. Most sources credit the makers of Karo Corn Syrup with popularizing this recipe. In fact, pecan pie is still referred to as Karo pie in some older cookbooks.

Southern Pecan Praline Pie

Last Thanksgiving, I made my grandma's pecan praline pie, but it turned out gritty, taffy-like, and boozy. Her pies were perfect. Can you help?

—Virginia Cole, Macon, Ga.

Having spent much of my life in the South, I found the notion of a pecan praline pie (with a nip of bourbon) right up my alley. This pie should turn out buttery, dark, and rich, nothing like chewy taffy.

I knew a plain old pie crust wouldn't do for a pie like this, so I began to build the praline flavor there. Instead of using the granulated white sugar and butter/shortening mix typical of American pie crusts, I used dark brown sugar and all butter. The pie was off to a good start.

Next came the filling. I uncovered two approaches to it in my research. One was inspired by the praline part of the recipe and followed traditional candy-making technique, cooking brown sugar, pecans, butter, and cream. The other was modeled on pecan pie fillings, cooking brown sugar, pecans, butter, corn syrup, and eggs.

As I soon learned, praline may be a great candy, but it's a lousy recipe for pie filling; it's much too hard. And no matter how I cooked the core ingredients on the stovetop, the filling was gritty.

I had better luck with recipes that followed the pecan pie approach. Using corn syrup rather than cream made the filling less likely to seize or become gritty. And the eggs ensured that the filling set up in the oven while still remaining soft enough to slice. Now all I had to do was tweak the flavors. I wanted something darker and richer than the test kitchen's favorite pecan pie filling.

My first thought was to use dark corn syrup rather than the light corn syrup called for in most pecan pie recipes. The candy-like flavor of dark corn

syrup was perfect, if a bit sweet. An extra dose of salt kept the filling from being too cloying. For more richness, I increased the amount of butter. With 2 tablespoons of bourbon (or 4 if you want a more potent pie), the filling was perfect.

—Bridget Lancaster

SOUTHERN PECAN PRALINE PIE SERVES 8 TO 10

Chopping the pecans with a knife will produce a fine dust that can cloud the resulting pie. Instead, use a rolling pin to gently break the pecans into small, 1/2-inch pieces. Be sure to remove the pie from the oven when the center is set but still wobbly; residual heat will finish the job.

Dough

- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour, plus extra for dusting
- 2 tablespoons dark brown sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into 1/4-inch pieces and chilled
- 3–4 tablespoons ice water

Filling

- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 3/4 cup packed dark brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 large eggs
- 3/4 cup dark corn syrup
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons bourbon
- 2 cups whole pecans, toasted, cooled, and broken into small pieces (see note)

1. For the dough: Pulse flour, brown sugar, and salt in food processor until blended. Add butter and pulse until flour is pale yellow and resembles coarse cornmeal, ten to fifteen



For extra-neat slices, chill the pie thoroughly, cut slices, and then let the pieces come back to room temperature before serving.

How to FORM A SINGLE CRUST

Sure, it will taste good no matter how it looks, but an attractively crimped or edged pie crust will showcase all of your hard work.



1. Lift up the edges of the dough and ease it down into the pie plate. Press lightly to adhere the dough to the sides of the pie plate. **2.** Use a pair of scissors to trim the dough overhang to within 1/2 inch of the outer lip of the pie plate. Roll the trimmed overhang under so that it is even with the lip of the pie plate. **3.** Use fingers to create fluted edges.

Easier Than You Think: Bread Pudding

Bread pudding should be simple, but does it have to be plain?

Bread pudding should be a simple affair. After all, this recipe was intended as nothing more than a quick and easy way to use stale leftover bread. But somewhere along the way, things got complicated—at least if you follow the recipes printed in most modern cookbooks. First, there is a trip to a bakery for specialty breads such as brioche or challah. After that, the crusts are removed and the bread is cubed and left overnight to stale. Then there is the two-hour soaking of the bread in the custard. Finally, many recipes insist on baking the pudding in a roasting pan filled with steaming hot water. All this left me wondering if bread pudding might be simplified—greatly.

Here is the good news. Bread pudding can indeed be as simple as it was first intended. Firm, hearty sliced white bread from the supermarket, such as Arnold or Pepperidge Farm, works perfectly well. (Squishy sliced bread doesn't.) There's no need to cut off the crusts or to wait for the bread to stale. Soaking the bread in the custard for 20 minutes is sufficient, and a water bath is definitely not necessary—the pudding will bake up nice and creamy as long as you keep the oven temperature low.

Having made this recipe so simple, I wondered if I might spend some of the time I'd saved jazzing up the bread and egg custard. Inspired by the oversized cappuccinos served in big white porcelain cups at my local coffee shop, I decided to flavor the custard with coffee, add chopped bittersweet chocolate to the pudding, and then bake individual portions in large coffee cups. Just before serving, I topped the baked puddings with whipped cream to create something that looks fancy enough to serve at a dinner party but is in reality easy enough to prepare when you get home from work. —Eva Katz

INDIVIDUAL MOCHACINO BREAD PUDDINGS SERVES 4

Use a wide, hearty loaf of sandwich bread—a smaller loaf may not provide enough bread. Top with whipped cream just before serving.

- Butter for greasing coffee cups
- 2 large eggs
- 1/3 cup sugar, plus 1 1/2 tablespoons for topping
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup heavy cream, plus 3/4 cup for topping
- 1 1/2 tablespoons instant espresso or coffee powder
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 4-5 slices firm white bread, cut into 1 1/2-inch squares (5 cups)
- 3/4 cup chopped bittersweet chocolate (4 ounces)
- Cocoa powder for dusting tops

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat to 325 degrees. Butter four 1-cup, oven-safe coffee cups or ramekins.
2. Whisk eggs and 1/3 cup sugar together in large bowl. Whisk in milk, 1 cup heavy

cream, instant espresso, and vanilla. Transfer custard to large measuring cup.

3. Arrange 4 bread squares in bottom of each coffee cup, overlapping pieces so they fit snugly. Sprinkle 1 heaping tablespoon chocolate on top of bread in each cup. Make second layer using 4 bread pieces, then top with remaining chocolate. Pour custard over bread and chocolate. Transfer coffee cups to rimmed baking sheet and set aside for 20 minutes.

4. Bake until puddings are set but still a bit wobbly when shaken, 25 to 30 minutes. Cool for at least 30 minutes (we like to serve these warm) or to room temperature. (Puddings can be refrigerated overnight; bring to room temperature, then warm in microwave, checking progress every 30 seconds.)

5. With electric mixer, beat remaining 3/4 cup cream and 1 1/2 tablespoons sugar to soft peaks. Spoon whipped cream over each pudding. Sprinkle with cocoa and serve immediately.



Bake and serve these mocha-flavored bread puddings in large coffee cups.

-second pulses. (To do this by hand, grate frozen butter into flour using large holes of box grater, then rub flour-coated pieces between your fingers until flour turns pale yellow and coarse.) Turn mixture into medium bowl.

2. Using rubber spatula, add 3 tablespoons water into flour mixture, then press against side of bowl (if mixture doesn't hold together, add up to 1 more tablespoon water). Squeeze dough together and flatten into disk. Dust with flour, wrap in plastic, and refrigerate at least 30 minutes or up to 2 days before rolling.

3. Remove dough from refrigerator and let stand until dough is malleable enough to roll out but still cool, 10 to 20 minutes. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Roll dough on lightly floured surface into 9-inch circle. Roll dough over pin and unroll it evenly into 9-inch Pyrex pie plate. Fit dough into pie plate and flute edges (see photos on page 24). Refrigerate for 40 minutes, then freeze for 10 minutes.

4. Line pie shell with two 2-inch pieces aluminum foil, stretching foil so that it hangs over edges of crust. Distribute 10 cups pie weights over foil, then bake until dough under foil dries out, 20 to 25 minutes. Carefully remove foil and weights, then continue to bake until crust is firmly set and lightly browned, 10 to 15 minutes. Remove pie shell

from oven and set aside. (Shell can be cooled, wrapped tightly in plastic, and stored at room temperature for 1 day.)

5. For the filling: Lower oven temperature to 275 degrees. Place pie shell in oven if not still warm.

6. Cook butter, brown sugar, and salt together in medium saucepan over medium heat until sugar is melted and butter is absorbed, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat and whisk in eggs, one at a time; whisk in corn syrup, vanilla, and bourbon. Return pan to medium heat and stir constantly until mixture is glossy and warm to touch, about 4 minutes. (Do not overheat; remove pan from heat if mixture starts to steam or bubble. Temperature should be about 130 degrees.) Remove pan from heat and stir in pecans.

7. Pour mixture into warm shell and bake until center feels set yet soft, like gelatin, when gently pressed, 45 to 60 minutes. Cool pie completely on rack, at least 4 hours. (Pie can be refrigerated for up to 1 day.) Serve pie at room temperature (or warm it briefly in oven), topped with whipped cream or vanilla ice cream.

AFTER-HOURS SOUTHERN PECAN PRALINE PIE

The extra bourbon in this pie will please the adults at the table.

Add 2 more tablespoons bourbon to pie along with pecans in step 6. Proceed with recipe as directed.

The American Table: A Slice of Humble Pie

We've all been forced to eat humble pie at some point upon suffering embarrassment. Chances are you couldn't want to eat the real thing. Early American cookbooks contain recipes for humble pie made from deer innards, or "humbles." The term "humble pie" entered the vernacular as a bite of humiliation in the 19th century. So how does humble pie taste? Just like crow. —Keri Fisher

