

BIG IDEAS



THE GASTRONAUT FILES

The Neo-Traditional Pecan Pie

Using old-fashioned, less-refined sweeteners, a baker adds flavor complexity to a Thanksgiving classic.

Of the three essential Thanksgiving pies—pumpkin, apple and pecan—pecan is the most polarizing. Some people look forward to it all year, while others find it way too sweet. But Cheryl Day of Savannah, Georgia's Back in the Day Bakery makes a pecan pie to convert the naysayers. It tastes like dark caramel, toasted nuts and a little bit of bourbon—not just sweetness. Her fix: She doesn't use the traditional light corn syrup. Instead, she turns to less-refined alternatives that used to be common in the South, like sorghum, sugarcane and dark corn. These syrups (and honey, too) transform pecan pie into a dessert of deep flavor complexity. Day's recipe, on the next page, works with any one of them. —SARAH DIGREGORIO

PHOTOGRAPHS: CON POULOS;
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Bourbon-Pecan Pie

Active 25 min; Total 1 hr 25 min plus 4 hr cooling
Makes one 9-inch pie

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| PIECRUST | 1½ tsp. all-purpose flour |
| 2 cups all-purpose flour | ½ tsp. fine sea salt |
| ⅓ cup packed light brown sugar | 4 large eggs |
| ¾ tsp. fine sea salt | 1½ cups cane, sorghum or dark corn syrup, or honey |
| 1 stick plus 7 Tbsp. unsalted butter, melted and cooled | 2 Tbsp. bourbon |
| FILLING | 1½ Tbsp. unsalted butter, melted |
| | 1½ tsp. pure vanilla extract |
| ½ cup granulated sugar | 1¾ cups unsalted pecan halves (½ lb.) |
| ¼ cup packed light brown sugar | |

Step 1 Make the Piecrust

1. In a bowl, whisk the flour with the brown sugar and salt. Stir in the butter until the dough comes together into a ball. Transfer the dough to a deep 9-inch glass or ceramic pie plate. Using your fingers, press the dough over the bottom and up the side of the plate to the rim. Crimp the edge with your fingers or a fork. Refrigerate for at least 20 minutes or up to 3 days.

Step 2 Make the Filling

2. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 350°. In a bowl, whisk both sugars with the flour, salt and eggs until smooth, then mix in the syrup or honey. Add the bourbon, butter and vanilla and fold in the pecans.

3. Pour the filling into the chilled crust and transfer the pie to a foil-lined baking sheet. Cover loosely with foil and bake for 1 hour, until the filling is nearly set. Transfer the pie to a rack and let cool completely, about 4 hours, before serving.

WINE Orange-and-nutmeg-scented Italian dessert wine: 2012 Pellegrino Passito di Pantelleria.

You can give a traditional look to this cheater press-in piecrust by crimping the top edge with your fingertips.



The Alt Sweeteners

Old-fashioned sweeteners like the ones Day uses for her pecan pie are having a revival as bakers look beyond white sugar. The versions below offer not just sweetness but also complex flavor.

- 1. SORGHUM SYRUP** Made from sorghum-grass juice; fruity, tangy and almost leathery, with the highest ratio of overall flavor to pure sweetness.
- 2. CANE SYRUP** Made by boiling sugarcane juice in open kettles until it thickens and begins to taste a bit like caramel; has a long history in the South.
- 3. DARK CORN SYRUP** Has much more character than light corn syrup, evoking brown sugar, though it's still relatively neutral in flavor compared to syrups like sorghum.
- 4. HONEY** Intensely floral as well as more sugary-sweet than the syrups above.

