

Achieve flaky pie crust: Butter vs. shortening for best flavor?

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The quest for the perfect pie begins and often ends with its crust. A truly exceptional pie crust is the foundation, a golden, tender, and most importantly, flaky marvel that cradles delicious fillings. But what's the secret ingredient for achieving this coveted texture and the best flavor? The baking community remains passionately divided between butter and shortening.

The Quest for Flakiness and Flavor

Flakiness in pie crust comes from layers of fat melting in the oven, creating steam that separates the dough into delicate, ethereal strata. Flavor, on the other hand, is subjective but universally appreciated. Both butter and shortening play distinct roles in delivering these desirable qualities, often making the choice a personal one, or perhaps, a strategic blend.

Before diving into the specifics of each fat, it's crucial to understand that technique plays as vital a role as the ingredients themselves. Regardless of your chosen fat, keeping ingredients cold, working the dough minimally, and using the right amount of liquid are universal tenets for a successful crust.



Butter: The Flavor Champion

Butter is often the darling of professional bakers and home cooks alike, primarily for its unparalleled flavor. Made from churned cream, butter contributes a rich, nutty, and slightly sweet taste that is simply irreplaceable. This depth of flavor elevates any pie, adding a gourmet touch that shortening cannot replicate. Furthermore, butter's milk solids brown beautifully in the oven, giving the crust a desirable golden hue and an enticing aroma.

When it comes to texture, butter provides a tender, melt-in-your-mouth quality. Its relatively low melting point means it melts quickly in the oven, releasing steam that helps create those coveted pockets of air for flakiness. However, its lower melting point can also be a challenge; the dough can become warm and difficult to work with quickly, requiring diligent chilling to maintain its structure.

Shortening: The Flakiness King

Vegetable shortening, a solid fat made from hydrogenated vegetable oils, is the traditional choice for maximizing flakiness. Shortening is 100% fat (unlike butter, which is about 80% fat and 20% water), allowing for a higher fat-to-flour ratio without adding extra moisture. Its higher melting point compared to butter means it stays solid longer in the oven, creating larger pockets of steam and thus more dramatic, lofty flakes.

Another advantage of shortening is its workability. It's softer than cold butter but holds its shape well, making the dough easier to handle and roll out, especially for novice bakers. It also results in a very tender crust that is less prone to shrinking. The main drawback? Shortening is flavorless. While it provides an exceptional texture, it contributes little to the overall taste profile of the pie, often relying heavily on the filling for its appeal.



The Best of Both Worlds: A Blended Approach

For many bakers, the ultimate pie crust lies in a strategic combination of butter and shortening. This hybrid approach aims to harness the best qualities of both fats: the unparalleled flavor and beautiful browning of butter, with the superior flakiness and ease of handling provided by shortening. A common ratio might involve using two-thirds butter to one-third shortening, or even a 50/50 split, depending on

personal preference and the desired outcome.

By blending, you achieve a crust that offers a complex flavor profile while retaining excellent flakiness and a more forgiving dough texture. The butter adds richness, while the shortening ensures those distinct layers of crisp pastry that are the hallmark of a truly great pie.



Beyond the Fat: Essential Flakiness Techniques

No matter your fat choice, mastering a few core techniques will dramatically improve your pie crust:

- **Keep it Cold:** All ingredients, especially the fat and water, should be as cold as possible. Cold fat creates distinct pockets that steam in the oven, leading to flakiness.
- **Minimal Handling:** Overworking the dough develops gluten, resulting in a tough crust. Mix just until combined and handle gently.
- **The Right Amount of Water:** Too little water makes a crumbly dough; too much makes it tough. Add ice-cold water gradually, just until the dough comes together.
- **Chill the Dough:** Resting the dough in the refrigerator allows the gluten to relax and the fat to firm up, making it easier to roll and preventing shrinkage.



Conclusion: Your Flaky Pie Crust Journey

Ultimately, the choice between butter, shortening, or a combination comes down to personal preference and the specific qualities you prioritize in your pie crust. For robust flavor, butter is king. For maximum flakiness and ease of handling, shortening excels. For a harmonious balance of both, a blend is often the winning strategy.

Experiment with different ratios and techniques to discover your signature pie crust. Armed with knowledge of both fats and proper baking methods, you're well on your way to achieving flaky, flavorful pie crusts that will impress every time.

