

Secret to super flaky pie crust, even with lard or shortening?

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Mastering the Art of the Super Flaky Pie Crust

For many home bakers, the quest for a truly super flaky pie crust can feel like an elusive dream, especially when venturing beyond all-butter recipes. Often, lard and shortening get a bad rap, associated with less flavor or a tougher texture. However, with the right techniques, these fats can actually be your secret weapons for achieving an unparalleled, melt-in-your-mouth flakiness that will elevate your pies to new heights.

The key lies not just in the ingredients themselves, but in understanding the science behind the lamination and steam that create those ethereal layers. Forget what you thought you knew; let's dive into the core principles that guarantee success.



The Unsung Heroes: Lard and Shortening

While butter provides incredible flavor, lard and shortening offer distinct advantages when it comes to flakiness. Lard, rendered pork fat, has a higher melting point than butter and contains less water, resulting in a tenderer crust that's less prone to developing gluten. Shortening, a hydrogenated vegetable oil, also boasts a high melting point and zero water content, making it incredibly stable and conducive to flaky layers.

The higher melting point means these fats remain solid longer in the oven, creating more steam pockets as they eventually melt, which pushes apart the gluten strands in the dough, forming those coveted flakes. But simply using them isn't enough; it's how you handle them.

Principle 1: Cold, Colder, Coldest!

This is arguably the most critical rule for a flaky crust, regardless of the fat you use. Every ingredient—the fat, the flour, and especially the water—must be as cold as possible. Chilled fat ensures that it doesn't fully incorporate into the flour, but rather breaks down into distinct pieces. These pieces, when baked, create steam and separate the layers. Ice water prevents the fat from melting prematurely and helps to hydrate the flour without overworking the dough.

Technique for Cold Fat Incorporation:

- Cut your lard or shortening into small cubes and chill them thoroughly in the freezer for at least 15-20 minutes.
- For even better results, chill your mixing bowl and even the flour.
- Use a pastry blender, two knives, or your fingertips to cut the cold fat into the flour. The goal is a mixture of pea-sized pieces and some larger, almond-sized chunks. These larger pieces are essential for super flakiness!



Principle 2: The Gentle Touch (Minimal Handling)

Overworking pie dough is the nemesis of flakiness. When flour and water combine, gluten begins to develop. The more you mix and knead, the more gluten forms, leading to a tough, brittle crust instead of a tender, flaky one. Your goal is to just bring the dough together.

Adding Ice Water & Forming the Dough:

Gradually add ice-cold water, a tablespoon at a time, mixing lightly with a fork or your hands until the dough just barely comes together. It should still look shaggy and slightly dry in places. If you squeeze a piece and it holds its shape, it's ready. Do not add more water than necessary. Too much water also promotes gluten development.



Principle 3: Chill, Roll, Chill Again

After forming the dough into a disc (or two, for a double crust), wrap it tightly in plastic wrap and chill it in the refrigerator for at least 30 minutes, or up to 2 days. This resting period allows the gluten to relax and the fat to firm up, making the dough easier to roll and preventing shrinkage.

Rolling Technique for Maximum Flake:

- Work on a lightly floured surface, using as little extra flour as possible.
- Roll from the center outwards, rotating the dough frequently to prevent sticking and to ensure an even thickness.
- Avoid pressing down too hard or over-rolling. Lift the dough occasionally to check for sticking and to prevent it from bonding to the surface.
- If the dough becomes too warm or sticky, pop it back in the fridge for 10-15 minutes.



Baking for Brilliance

Once your pie is assembled, consider baking it in a preheated oven at a higher temperature (e.g., 400-425°F or 200-220°C) for the first 15-20 minutes. This initial high heat helps to set the crust quickly and encourages the rapid creation of steam, leading to maximum puff and flakiness. Then, reduce the temperature to finish baking. If needed, use an oven thermometer to ensure accuracy.



The Flaky Revelation

With these techniques—prioritizing cold ingredients, minimal handling, and strategic chilling—you’ll discover that lard and shortening are not just substitutes but stellar choices for achieving a pie crust that is not only tender and flavorful but boasts an impressive, ethereal flakiness that will delight anyone who takes a bite. Embrace these age-old fats and techniques, and prepare to be amazed by your own baking prowess!