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Pie crust lesson: Ease up, calm down, have fun

Thanksgiving means it's time for pie. There's no getting around it. We will have pie, and even more important, I will make it. From scratch. When you grow up with a baking virtuoso for a mother, store-bought crusts are not an option.

Years of listening to friends and relatives wax poetic about the stream of delectables that came from our kitchen taught me early on that feeding people was a very satisfying undertaking. Although my mother never would have made me feel guilty about not following in her culinary footsteps, I decided long ago that baking was a skill that I wanted to develop. And surely, having a special knack for it was hereditary.

Cookies and cakes came easily — recipes that were carefully followed produced exactly what they promised. I



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didn't realize that pies were another matter altogether. In the 20-something years since I left home, pie crusts have caused more long-distance tears than boyfriend break-ups, bad job interviews and all other personal traumas combined.

You may think that weeping over an uncooperative glob of flour and shortening is immature, overreactive or just plain silly. Keep in mind that I am an easily frustrated perfectionist prone to driving myself crazy trying to meet standards that don't matter to anyone but me. I couldn't stand not being able to do

something I wanted to do.

In those early years of solo pie attempts, my mother was endlessly patient and instructive in response to my agitation.

"Don't overmix." I didn't. "Be sure the water's cold." It was. "Refrigerate the dough." I did. Nothing helped. With every surface (including me) covered with flour, it didn't matter if I attacked the crust with studied, surgical precision or with the quick, sure strokes my mother used. I always ended up with a ragged, uneven patchwork of bits and pieces scraped off the counter and the rolling pin.

My pies tasted fine, but I wanted results that pleased the eye as well as the palate. I wasn't striving for crusts that looked machine-made perfect, but it bothered me to no end that mine showed clear signs of being ripped and wrestled into submission.

At the age of thirtysomething, I flew home for a long weekend with the express purpose of mastering The Art of the Pie Crust. Under my mother's watchful eye, I assembled the ingredients on the kitchen table and approached the project with typical tension and distrust.

As I tried to measure the flour down to the nearest millionth of a teaspoon, she said gently, "You don't need to be so exact. Just throw it in." That was pretty much her advice the whole way through. "Throw it. Toss it. Add a little more. Just roll it. Don't press so hard ... Relax."

The pie was such a masterpiece we took a picture of it.

The lesson that day was simple but significant, and my mother's advice has applied to many more things in my life than just making pies. "Ease up. Calm down. Have fun."

As soon as I stopped looking at the experience as an enemy I needed to conquer, things improved. The less I fussed, the easier it became.

My mother loves to bake, and it shows in every dessert that comes out of her oven. I finally realized that when you enjoy the act of preparing food for people you care about, a crust with a piece patched in simply doesn't matter.

I still call home every time I produce a pie, but now I can relate my successes rather than bemoaning my failures.

This Thanksgiving morning, I know my hands will be mirroring my mother's, 2,000 miles away. And my kitchen will smell just like home.

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