



Nashville Chess Tartlets

Makes 18 tartlets

Prep: 40 to 45 minutes Bake: 12 to 15 minutes

1 (9-inch) piecrust rolled to a 12-inch diameter
4 tablespoons (1/2 stick/57 grams) unsalted butter
1 cup (200 grams) granulated sugar 1/4 cup (48 grams) lightly packed light brown sugar
3 large eggs, lightly beaten
1 tablespoon white cornmeal
1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons whole milk or buttermilk

1. Heat the oven to 425 degrees F, with a rack in the lower middle.
2. Cut the piecrust into 12 (2 3/4- to 3-inch) rounds, and reroll the dough to cut 6 more rounds. Press each round into the bottom of a shallow muffin pan, prick with a fork a few times in the bottom, and place in the fridge while you make the filling.
3. Place the butter in a small saucepan over low heat until it has melted, 2 to 3 minutes. Turn off the heat.
4. Place both sugars in a large mixing bowl and pour in the melted butter. Stir with a wooden spoon until creamy and combined, about 1 minute. Add the eggs, cornmeal, flour, vinegar, salt, and milk or buttermilk. Mix until well combined, 1 minute more.
5. Remove the muffin pans from the refrigerator. Spoon about 1 1/2 tablespoons filling into each tartlet crust, and bake until golden, 12 to 15 minutes. Leave in the pan for 10

minutes, then run a small, thin metal spatula around the edges and carefully lift the tartlets out onto a wire rack to cool completely.

To Bake a Whole Pie

Pour the filling in a 9-inch pie crust and bake at 425 degrees F for 10 minutes. Reduce heat to 350 degrees F and bake until golden and set, 25 to 30 minutes more.

About the Recipe:

Found in farm journals and church cookbooks, chess pie recipes were the easy, everyday pies baked by people who did their own baking. They needed no fresh fruit or refrigeration, and that was fortuitous, because before the 1930s, home refrigerators as we know them didn't exist. Having spent a lifetime baking chess pie and eating other people's variations on chess pie, I can confidently say this recipe is the best. What makes middle Tennessee chess pie different from that in other parts of the South is the cornmeal and apple cider vinegar. I grew up with little chess tarts at summer barbecues, packed in box lunches, and on the table at holiday parties. Because those premade tartlet shells aren't so easy to find anymore, I make my own by cutting a piecrust into rounds, pressing them into muffin pans, then filling and baking. So good!

Recipe Story:

HOW CHESS PIE GOT ITS NAME

The words *chess pie* have prompted much head-scratching among food historians. Katharine Shilcutt of East Texas was told her ancestors baked chess pie and stored it in a chest of drawers, which calls to mind a variation on the name "chest" pie. Most experts, though, think "chess" is a corruption of the word "cheese," because the baked filling has a creamy consistency like cheese curds. The late Bill Neal, chef of Crook's Corner, pointed us to the last part of the *Oxford English Dictionary's* second definition of a cheesecake: "A cake or tort of light pastry, originally containing cheese; now filled with a yellow buttermilk compound of milk-curd, sugar and butter, or a preparation of whipped egg and sugar."

Virginia historian Katharine E. Harbury wrote in *Colonial Virginia's Cooking Dynasty* (2004) that the Virginia chess pie, cheesecake, and lemon cheese didn't contain cheese at all, and the name simply describes their texture. In 1891 in *The People's Press* newspaper of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, "cheese pie" is the name given to a pie in which eggs are beaten with butter and sugar, poured into pans of pastry, and baked with a meringue in a hot oven, while a similar recipe in nearby Greensboro was called "chess pie." The Piedmont of North Carolina had been settled by English Quakers, Scottish Highlanders, Moravians, and Germans who came down the Great Wagon Road from Pennsylvania.

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