

FROM CRAZY SWEET DESSERTS BY ANN READON

SHOW-OFF PASTRIES



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Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans are credited with inventing the earliest pastries, although they were very different from what we know today. The Romans made a paste from flour, water, and oil to encase meat while cooking and prevent moisture loss. The cooked paste was then discarded. It wasn't until much later, when European cooks swapped the oil for butter, that the pastry was eaten.

There are four basic types of pastry:

FILO PASTRY

Filo or phyllo pastry is made with very little fat. It comes in paper-thin sheets that are quite fragile and can rip easily. Several sheets of filo are often used together to create a flaky casing for fillings. Or it can be layered up with butter, cinnamon, and nuts before being drizzled in sweet honey syrup to make baklava.

SWEET SHORT CRUST PASTRY

This is the most common dessert pastry. It is crumbly, or "short," similar to shortbread. It's made by rubbing butter into flour before adding sugar and enough liquid to bind it together. It resists soaking up fluids, making it perfect for fruit pies, custard tarts, or other dishes.

It is important not to overwork the pastry once you have added the liquid, as this causes the gluten in the flour to develop, making the dough elastic and stretchy. You want elasticity in bread, but not in pastry,

as it will shrink and become tough when baked. This can also happen if you have a high ratio of liquid to fat in your pastry recipe.

You can experiment with altering the recipe for short crust pastry. For example, substituting an equal volume of egg for some of the water in a recipe provides a richer flavor and more protein for structure. Swapping out some of the flour for ground nuts increases flavor and reduces the amount of gluten, making the pastry slightly more crumbly when baked. You can also decrease the sugar, or leave it out altogether, to offset a sweet filling.

CHOUX PASTRY

Choux pastry is made from flour, water, butter, and eggs. As batter, it is thick, gooey, and can be piped. When it is baked, the water evaporates to create steam, which is trapped inside the dough. This causes the dough to puff into a hollow centered pillow with a crisp exterior. The middle is typically filled with custard or cream. You will be familiar with choux pastry in a chocolate éclair, profiterole, or croquembouche (see page 138).

PUFF PASTRY

Claude Gelee invented puff pastry in 1645 while trying to make a rolled butter cake for his ill father. Today, it is made by laminating fat (usually butter) and pastry dough into very thin layers. When baked, the steam is trapped between the dough layers, causing the dough to puff up into thin crispy layers. You can make your own puff pastry at home, but it is time-consuming as the dough needs to chill in the fridge between stages of rolling. Store-bought versions are convenient; and, unless you are an experienced pastry chef, they usually have superior lamination than can be achieved at home.