

Pastry Chefs, Bakers Put New Twist On Hand Pies



MARK DUFRENE/CONTRA COSTA TIMES/MCT
Put a homemade spin on pop-tarts while satisfying our grown-up palates. Here, sauteed apple with dried cranberries and cinnamon-sugar pop-tart.

BY JACKIE BURRELL

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Remember Pop-Tarts? If you recall those ubiquitous, jam-filled, cardboard-textured relics of childhood, they’ve likely left a bad taste in your mouth.

But while the execution of the preservative-filled treats was lacking, the idea remains a good one. And that has not escaped the attention of some chefs, who are reinventing the classic little hand pies as haute-tarts, encasing organic artisanal jams and savory pumpkin-sage mixtures between squares of flaky, tender pastry and serving them up in swanky hotels, luxe patisseries and casual cafes alike.

At Trace in San Francisco’s W Hotel, the breakfast menu includes a Kadota fig-filled tart with lemon glaze. Ham and cheese is the filling of choice at Tout Sweet, “Top Chef: Just Desserts” winner Yigit Pura’s trendsetting patisserie in San Francisco. And at Tender Greens, the fresh, seasonal cafe that opened in downtown Walnut Creek, Calif., last year, the haute-tarts range from savory to sweet, including a s’mores tart and one filled with fresh blueberries and finished with an eye-popping violet glaze.

The trend is easy to understand, pastry chefs and bakers say. These riffs on Pop-Tarts tap into our deepest, most nostalgic longings for childhood — while satisfying our grown-up palates. Besides, they’re adorable.

“There’s something intensely magical about homemade pop tarts,” says Alana Chernila, the Massachusetts author of “The Homemade Pantry Cookbook” (Clarkson Potter, \$24.99, 288 pages). “They appeal to the kid in everyone.”

Chernila’s cookbook boasts more than 100 enticing recipes, but the one that generates the most mail is the pop tart. Everyone loves them, she says. They love making them and they love talking about them afterward — and the nostalgia factor is a potent one.

The only problem is, the commercial Pop-Tarts of our youth were made to withstand travel by lunchbox and backpack, not to mention trips through the toaster. They are Sturdy, with a capital S — and sturdy is not a word you ever want to associate with pastry.

So when Kim Laidlaw, the San Francisco author of “Williams-Sonoma Home Baked Comfort” (Weldon Owen, \$34.95, 224 pages) took a trip down memory lane and bit into the cherry Pop-Tart that had been her childhood fave, her taste-memory collided with reality. Badly. There was just one thing to do: Make her own toaster-style tart using really good buttery homemade pastry and high-quality sour cherry jam.

Good ingredients and stellar pastry are key. Some bakers, such as Sarah Billingsley and Rachel Wharton, authors of “Handheld Pies” (Chronicle Books, \$19.95, 144 pages), go the classic pate brisee — the classic, butter-rich pie dough — route, and fill them with orange marmalade and mascarpone, or tomatoes, mozzarella and prosciutto.

Others opt for the puff pastry direction. Executive chef Sean Canavan, who left San Francisco’s Bluestem Brasserie last spring to take over the top slot at Tender Greens, calls his dough “an in-between, a blitz puff pastry where you intentionally leave streaks of butter in your dough,

which later on form your layers.” And just because the childhood classic calls for rectangles covered in nonpareil sprinkles, doesn’t make the parallelogram a requirement. The little tarts are every bit as delicious when they’re cut into circles, hearts or triangles, drizzled with glaze or dusted with powdered sugar.

The Pop-Tarts of our youth may have come in a Kellogg’s box, but the genre is “an ancient one,” Canavan says. “People have always made hand pies.” And the small size has an added advantage: One pastry, many different flavors. A single batch can result in half a dozen flavors.

Annette Picha, the pastry chef at Los Angeles’ Tender Greens outpost, does variations on seasonal fruit, as well as a s’mores riff, mixing graham cracker crumbs into the pastry dough before filling it with chocolate ganache and homemade marshmallow. Canavan enjoys filling the little hand pies with organic, heirloom apples — his favorite is a Cox’s Orange Pippin, a baking apple that is particularly popular in his native Germany — or chopped pumpkin or squash, sauteed in browned butter and lightened with mascarpone. The beauty of it, he says, is “you don’t commit to a big pie.”

Also key: exerting a little self-control as you fill them. “It’s a balance. You want a good crust-to-filling ratio, but don’t get overzealous,” Chernila says. “You want it to goo out in the right way. Put too much filling in there and you can’t get them sealed.”

Seal them patiently, using a fork to crimp the edges securely, and don’t worry too much about appearance.

“Don’t try to make them look perfect. They’re already awesome,” Chernila says. “It’s not worth the fuss to get every one the same size. It’s part of their charm to be very clearly homemade.”

But beware the toaster — a really lovely pastry crust lacks the structural integrity of a tough, sturdy one. And have fun with the filling.

“You’re making pie, and everything is good in pie,” Chernila says. “That’s a rule.”

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

A classic pop tart is filled with jam or chocolate, but there’s no limit to the sweet or savory fillings you can use to fill this variation on a turnover. Here are just a few ideas:

- Rhubarb compote
- Cinnamon and sugar
- Orange marmalade and mascarpone
- Peanut butter and jelly
- Nutella and bananas
- Pumpkin and fresh sage
- Pesto with fresh ricotta
- Spinach and feta cheese
- Ham and Gruyere
- Sauteed mushrooms
- Cheese, tomatoes and basil
- Mashed potatoes with sauteed onions

SOUR CHERRY “TOASTER” TARTS

Makes 12
Dough:
2 cups flour
1/4 cup confectioners’ sugar
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
10 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut in chunks
1/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons whole milk
Filling:
3/4 cup sour cherry jam
2 teaspoons cornstarch mixed with 1 teaspoon cold water
1 large egg beaten with 1 teaspoon warm water
Glaze:
1 cup confectioners’ sugar, sifted
2 teaspoons whole milk
2 teaspoons corn syrup
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
Sprinkles (optional)

1. For dough: In a food processor, combine flour, sugar and salt. Add butter and process until it looks like coarse crumbs. Add yolk and milk; process until dough just comes together. Dump dough onto 2 large sheets of overlapping plastic wrap. Press into a disk, wrap and chill 30 minutes or overnight.

2. In a saucepan, cook jam and cornstarch mixture over medium heat, stirring, until slightly thickened and bubbly.

3. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment. On a lightly floured surface, divide dough in half; form into rectangles. Roll one out to 16 by 9 inches. Using a ruler and pizza cutter, cut dough into 12 3-by-4-inch rectangles. Set on a baking sheet and chill while you repeat with remaining dough.

4. Lightly brush half the rectangles with beaten egg. Dollop a tablespoon of cooled filling into the center of each. Spread it, leaving a 1/2-inch border. Top with a plain dough rectangle, pressing edges together with your fingertips. Don’t let the filling ooze out. Crimp edges with a fork. Put 6 tarts on each baking sheet, and prick the centers all over with the fork. Refrigerate.

5. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Bake tarts, rotating halfway through, until golden brown, 15-18 minutes. Let cool on a wire rack.

6. Whisk glaze ingredients until smooth. Spread on the tarts and decorate with sprinkles, if you’d like.

—Kim Laidlaw, “Williams-Sonoma Home Baked Comfort” (Weldon Owen, \$34.95, 224 pages)

BLUEBERRY POP TARTS & BLUEBERRY GLAZE

Makes 6-8
Pastry dough:
8 1/2 ounces flour
1 tablespoon plus 2 teaspoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
8 ounces cold butter, cut in cubes
2 egg yolks
1 1/2 ounces whole milk
Filling:
1 pint fresh blueberries
3 tablespoons granulated sugar, or to taste
1/8 teaspoon salt
Zest, juice of 1/2 a lemon
Glaze:
10 ounces powdered sugar
3-5 tablespoons blueberries

1. In a mixer fitted with a paddle, combine flour, sugar, salt and butter, mixing until butter is the size of marbles. Combine yolks and milk; add to flour mixture all at once. Mix until dough barely comes together. Wrap in plastic wrap and chill for at least an hour.

2. Dust work surface with flour and roll dough out about 1/8-inch thick. Cut into 4- to 5-inch circles. Cover and chill.

3. For the filling: Combine the blueberries, sugar, salt and



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lemon zest in a saucepan over medium heat. Stirring frequently, cook until thick and bubbly, 10-15 minutes. Add lemon juice. Let cool.

4. For the glaze, puree 3 to 5 tablespoons blueberries until smooth. Strain through a sieve. Mix puree, a tablespoon at a time, into the powdered sugar until the glaze is thick but spreadable.

5. Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Place half the pastry rounds on parchment-lined baking sheets. Place a heaping tablespoon of filling onto each round; wet edges with a little water. Top with remaining rounds, pressing edges to seal. Bake until golden brown, 15-20 minutes. Let cool.

6. Spread glaze over each tart. Let set, then serve.

—Annette Picha, pastry chef, Tender Greens

SAVORY PUMPKIN POP-TART

Pastry dough:
8 1/2 ounces flour, sifted
1 tablespoon plus 2 teaspoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
8 ounces cold butter, cut in cubes
2 egg yolks
1/4 cup milk
Pumpkin filling:
1/2 pound Fairytale or Cinderella pumpkin
2 ounces butter
1 tablespoon brown sugar
Pinch nutmeg
Salt, pepper to taste
2 ounces pecans, coarsely chopped
1/2 tablespoon chopped sage
1 tablespoon mascarpone cheese, optional
Egg wash: 1 egg beaten with 1 tablespoon water

1. Combine flour, sugar and salt in an electric mixer. Add butter to the dry ingredients. Using the paddle attachment, carefully knead dough until butter is the size of marbles. Mix yolks and milk; add to flour mixture and mix until dough barely comes together. It should look shaggy.

2. Transfer dough to work surface and with your hands, press dough until it just comes together. There should be visible streaks of butter throughout. Form into a disk and chill for 4 hours.

3. Dice pumpkin into 1/2-inch pieces. In a heavy saute pan, heat the butter until it starts to brown slightly. Add pumpkin, brown sugar, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Saute until nicely browned and tender.

4. Add chopped pecans and sage. Transfer to a bowl and cool completely. Mix in mascarpone.

5. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Divide dough in half and roll out 1/8 inch thick. Cut into 3-by-4-inch rectangles. Repeat with other half.

6. Lay half the pastry rectan-

gles on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Place a dollop of filling in the center of each, leaving enough space to crimp the sides. Brush the edges with egg wash; top with another pastry rectangle. Crimp edges with a fork and cut a small incision in the top to vent the steam. Bake for about 12 minutes or until golden brown.

—Sean Canavan, executive chef, Tender Greens



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Put a homemade spin on pop-tarts while satisfying our grown-up palates. Here, pesto with Ricotta pop-tart.



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Put a homemade spin on pop-tarts while satisfying our grown-up palates. Here, sauteed pumpkin, onion and sage pop-tart.

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