



Sylvia's Rhubarb Custard Pie

"Easy as Pie": What Mother communicated from her place in the kitchen was that there was great pleasure to be had in preparing simple food and feeding people from an abundant garden. She was one of those women who did not use recipes and so there are very few that were passed down. Here is one.

CRUST: 2 1/2 cups all purpose flour
1 tbs. sugar
1/2 tbs. salt
10 tbs. (1 1/4 sticks) chilled butter cut into small pieces
1/3 cup vegetable solid shortening
6 tbs. (or more) ice water

Blend flour, sugar and salt, add butter and shortening and cut in with pastry knife until it resembles coarse meal. Add 6 tablespoons ice water and process until moist clumps form, adding more ice water if necessary. Gather into a ball and divide into 2 pieces. Flatten each into a disk, wrap and chill for 2 hours. Can be made ahead. Put rack in lower third of oven and preheat to 400 degrees.

FILLING: 2 eggs, well beaten
2 tbs. butter, melted
4 cups fresh picked, finely diced rhubarb (approximately. 1 1/2 lbs)
1 3/4 cups sugar (more or less)
1/2 tsp. cinnamon
1/2 tsp. salt
7 tbs. flour

Combine eggs, butter and rhubarb. Mix and sift sugar, cinnamon, salt and flour. Add to rhubarb mix and blend well. Roll out one dough disk on a floured surface about 3 inches more than the shape of your pie plate, fold edges over leaving a high rim, crimp edge with your fingers. Add rhubarb filling. Roll out second dough disk and cut 12 one inch strips to make a lattice top: recrimp edge. Brush lattice with milk and sprinkle with a little sugar. Bake pie 10 minutes at 400 degrees. Reduce oven temperature to 375 and continue baking until crust is deep golden, about an hour. Cool on rack.

My postscript: Rhubarb has been used for centuries for medicinal purposes and folk healing. The edible stalks of the rhubarb plant are high in vitamins A and C, calcium and fiber. A single cup of diced rhubarb contains only about 26 calories. The picking season for rhubarb usually extends from late May through late June or even early July. The stalks can be harvested when they are about 12 to 18 inches long. Twist the stalk at the soil line while tugging gently so that it pulls away from the center of the plant. Do not cut the stalks as they are not ripe if they do not pull away from the base easily. Take only about a third of the stalks at any one picking. More will quickly grow to replace them.

On

September 22, 1954, my mother walked up the cul de sac road to the edge of our driveway. I met her there with the two youngest kids in tow: Doug, a year and a half, on my hip, and three year old Biz at my leg; my younger brothers, J.T. and Billy, were busy playing in the back yard. Mother stood in front of me with a rake over her shoulder and a basket of the last garden tomatoes in her hand. She was short of breath and very pregnant; her round belly protruded from under what my father famously called her "hatching jacket." She had spent the morning working in the community gardens.

We lived in Crestwood, a pioneering cooperative community, on the western outskirts of Madison, Wisconsin. This cooperative was laid out along Bordner Drive, a long street named after the community's founder. Six west-facing cul de sacs, each named after a tree, each with twenty house lots, ran off it. Swathes of open greensward commons separated these streets, giving everything a pleasant verdant feeling. Acres of community gardens ran the length of Bordner Drive and were divided into patches for those residents interested in growing vegetable gardens.

In 1948 my father had purchased four lots on Dogwood Place. He eventually built four houses on our street, each one larger than the next to accommodate our growing family. Our neighbors were mostly University people, professors of Asian studies, agronomy, and entomology, and their wives were stay at home moms having five, six, or seven children helping to create what we now call the baby boom. Because of the cooperative nature of the community's governance structure and the climate of the McCarthy era we were called "Reds" or the "commie block." Nothing could have been further from the truth. Nor were my parents proto-hippies. They were just solid, hardworking, productive citizens.

When my mother finally caught her breath she said in a rather matter of fact tone, "Call Mary G. It's time for me to go to the hospital. And when he gets home, tell Daddy I'm at Saint Mary's." Mary G. was our neighbor and one of the few women on the street who had a car and knew how to drive it. St. Mary's was the hospital in Madison. A few hours later my mother gave birth to my youngest sister, Ginny. Mother had turned forty one that summer and I was about to turn fourteen. There were now six children in our family to feed. "Easy as pie," she said.

It took many years to realize how forward thinking my parent's values were, not only in their choice of a place to raise their family, but also how to feed them. We were usually short on cash, our cars were old and unreliable, Mother sewed our clothes, but we always had plenty of homegrown food on the table. The gardens were an essential part of our life, as was Mother's ability to bake, cook, can, and make food that nourished us. Each Saturday she baked our bread for the week. She

owned one large sky blue ceramic bowl with little pink roses around the inside rim that had attained the status of a religious icon. At any one time it held cookie dough, a rising bread loaf, German potato salad, cake batter, sour kraut, turkey stuffing, pie filling and myriad other culinary delights. My sister still has it in her keep.



Patricia

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