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Freezing pies and pie fillings saves time during holiday rush

The holidays just aren’t the same without Great-grandma Mary’s famous fruit pies. But as we all know, the holiday season is hectic and sometimes there just isn’t time to make some of our favorite family recipes.

Fortunately, you can make those favorite pies in advance and freeze them. This will save valuable time when you’re in a holiday rush, but still get that long-time family favorite pie on the table, said Barbara Brown, Oklahoma State University Extension food specialist.

“You have a couple of options when it comes to freezing fruit pies. First, you can make the pie and freeze it. It’s best to freeze an unbaked pie to help ensure it has a fresher fruit flavor,” Brown said. “Another option is to freeze the filling and crust separately to prevent fruit juice from penetrating and softening the lower crust during freezing. Freezing the unbaked pie will take up more space in your freezer and ties up that pie pan.”

When freezing the filling and crust separately, put the pre-measured fruit filling for one pie in a large freezer bag and squeeze out all of the air. Cooks also can put the bag of cooled filling into a foil-lined pie pan, shaping it to fit the pan. When it’s frozen, simply remove the filling and the pan is ready for other uses in the kitchen. When the holidays arrive, simply put the frozen filling in a fresh crust. Allow an extra 20 or so minutes for cooking.

Brown said freezing pie dough also can be a time saver during the holiday season. Roll the dough into circles and freeze on lined cardboard separated with pieces of parchment paper. You also can freeze unbaked dough in pie pans by stacking the pastry-filled pans with two layers of freezer paper between them. Place in a freezer bag to help ensure freshness.

“Go ahead and prick pastry that will be baked unfilled, but don’t prick dough that will be filled before baking,” she said. “Dough shaped in pans before freezing doesn’t need to be thawed before baking.”

Some bakers choose to freeze the whole pie first, whether baked or unbaked, then wrap them after they are frozen solid. If you choose this option, do not cut vents in the top crust of an unbaked pie before freezing. This can be done just before baking. A baked pie that has been frozen can be served without reheating. Keep in mind food safety and thaw a baked pie in the refrigerator.

Bake frozen pies in the lower third of the oven at 425 degrees Fahrenheit for 25 minutes, then reduce heat to 350 degrees and move the pie to the center of the oven to finish baking. Be sure to place the pies on a cookie sheet or drip pan to help catch juices that may overflow.

To help maintain color in frozen pies, add one-half teaspoon of ascorbic acid or commercial color preserver with the sugar when preparing peach, pear or apple pies. Also, consider adding an extra tablespoon of flour or tapioca or one-half tablespoon of cornstarch or modified food starch to unbaked fruit pies. This will help keep them from bubbling over when baking.

Freezing causes liquids thickened with flour or cornstarch to separate a bit, so fillings thickened with tapioca or modified food starch will maintain their consistency better.

“The holiday season can be extremely hectic, and you don’t want to be stuck in the kitchen cooking the whole time,” Brown said. “Preparing your favorite family fruit pies ahead of schedule will help ensure you get to spend more time with your family.”