

Apples and honey

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Two of nature's most wonderful ingredients are available in peak-of-season quality and quantity right now: apples and honey. Nothing like this duo speaks to me more persuasively of approaching autumn: crisp, sweet-tart apples; and deep golden honey with its rich, floral spicy sweetness. It isn't surprising, then, that apples and honey feature in so many harvest celebrations - and that, this very evening, Jews everywhere traditionally celebrate Rosh Hashanah, their New Year's, by dipping apples in honey to symbolize their hopes for a sweet year ahead.

I love how honey and apples taste together. Anyone can enjoy them on their own as an easy dessert. Cut the fruit into wedges and sprinkle with lemon juice to keep it from oxidizing. Give each person a small bowl of honey, and let everyone dip and eat.

To enjoy the combination in a more elaborate dessert, try my Apple-Honey Pie. The recipe takes a little time, but every step is straightforward, and the results are well worth the effort.

I like to use Pippin or Granny Smith apples, which retain their shape well during the cooking process. But, being firmer than other apple varieties, they do need to be sauteed first so they'll be perfectly tender by the end of baking.

I also toss in some dried apricots, figs and prunes, an Eastern European twist that adds wonderful variety to the texture and flavor. To plump up the dried fruit, I presoak it in a little Calvados, French apple brandy, found in well-stocked liquor stores. Most of the brandy's alcohol will evaporate during baking. If you prefer, substitute apple juice.

In the following recipe, I give instructions for a conventional top crust in which you cut several slits to vent steam during baking, ensuring crispness. For an even more spectacular effect, try topping the pie with a pastry lattice.

Roll out the dough into a 12-inch (30-cm) square about 1/4 inch (6 mm) thick, then cut it into 20 strips about 1/2 inch (12 mm) wide with a sharp knife or pastry cutter. On the back of a baking pan, lay 10 strips vertically, leaving small spaces between them. Then, weave a lattice: turn back every other vertical strip (1, 3, 5, etc.), lay a horizontal strip across, and return the turned-back strips to their original positions; then, turn back the other vertical strips (2, 4, 6, etc.) and place another horizontal strip; continue until the lattice is done, then refrigerate it until firm. Use a 9-inch (23-cm) plate or pot cover as a guide to cut a circle of lattice; then, with a wide spatula, carefully transfer it to the filled pie, pinching together the edges of the top and bottom crust to seal them.

Either way, the result will be a spectacular pie filled with promise for a sweet autumn and new-year.

Apple-honey pie

Serves 8 to 10

SUGAR DOUGH

2 1/3 cups (580 ml) cake or pastry flour

2/3 cup (160 ml) sugar

1/2 pound (250 g) unsalted butter, chilled, cut into small pieces

2 egg yolks

1 to 2 tablespoons heavy cream

FILLING AND TOPPING

5 pounds (2.5 kg) Pippin or Granny Smith apples (about 10 large apples)

6 tablespoons unsalted butter

1/4 cup (60 ml) Calvados

1/4 cup (60 ml) chopped dried pitted prunes

1/4 cup (60 ml) chopped dried apricots

1/4 cup (60 ml) chopped dried figs

3/4 cup (180 ml) honey

1 tablespoon lemon juice

2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon grated lemon zest

1 teaspoon grated orange zest

1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg

1 egg white, very lightly whisked

1-1/2 tablespoons sugar

First, make the Sugar Dough: In a food processor fitted with the metal blade, combine the flour and sugar. Add the butter and process until the mixture resembles fine meal. In a small bowl, whisk the egg yolks with 1 tablespoon of the cream. Scrape into the processor and process until a ball begins to form, adding more cream if necessary to bring the dough together. Remove the dough and, on a lightly floured surface, press it down into a circle. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.

To form the crust, divide the pastry into two parts. Wrap one in plastic wrap and set aside. On a lightly floured surface, roll the other piece into a round large enough to line and overlap a 10-by-2-inch (25-by-5-cm) pie plate. Transfer to the pie plate and, leaving a 1/2-inch (12-mm) overhang, trim the edge with a sharp knife. Tuck the overhang under itself to make a thicker rim. Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes. (If using a glass pie plate, remove 15 minutes before filling.)

To prepare the filling, peel, core, and quarter the apples, then cut into 1/4-inch (6-mm) slices. Divide the butter among 2 or 3 large skillet and melt it over medium heat until it just begins to brown and smell nutty. Divide the apples among the skillets and stir gently to coat with butter. Saute over medium heat until lightly browned and tender, 15 to 20 minutes, stirring often. Transfer the apples to a large baking sheet and spread out evenly to cool.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees (200 C).

In a small saucepan, warm the Calvados over medium-low heat. Combine the prunes, apricots and figs in a small bowl and pour the Calvados over. Leave to plump for 15 minutes, then drain off any excess liquid.

In a large bowl, stir together the apples, dried fruit, honey, lemon juice, cinnamon, zests and nutmeg. Spoon the filling into the prepared pie plate. On a lightly floured surface, roll out the remaining dough to a 9-inch (23-cm) circle and transfer to the pie. Pinch the edges together. With the tip of a sharp knife, cut several evenly spaced 1-inch (2.5-cm) vents in the top pastry. Brush with egg white and sprinkle with sugar.

Bake the pie for 30 minutes. Turn down the oven to 350 degrees (180 C) and bake until the crust is golden brown, 35 to 40 minutes more. Transfer to a wire rack to cool before cutting into wedges and serving.