

chess pie

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Chess Pie

Sugar, eggs, butter and a spoonful of cornmeal, baked in a shell until the top cracks and the inside sets to something between a custard and a caramel. It is one of a family of Southern "desperation pies" — chess, [buttermilk pie](#), [sugar cream pie](#), vinegar pie — made from pantry staples when there was no fruit.

Nobody knows where the name comes from. The three usual stories — *chest* pie, *cheese* pie, and "it's jes' pie" — are all folk etymology.

What makes it work

- **The cornmeal is structural.** A tablespoon or two of fine cornmeal absorbs water and gives the pie its faintly sandy, distinctive texture. Without it, it is a plain sugar custard. See [corn](#).
- **Vinegar or lemon juice** cuts the sweetness and keeps the sugar from crystallising. This is not optional; a chess pie without acid is unbearable.
- **The crackled top is the sign of a finished pie.** Sugar rises to the surface and forms a thin crust that splits. Aim for it.
- **Bake at 175 °C and stop while it wobbles.** Like every custard pie here.
- **Blind bake the shell**, or the bottom will be raw.

Ingredients

One 23 cm pie. Serves 10.

- 1 blind-baked shell — [all-butter pie crust](#)
- 400 g granulated sugar
- 115 g unsalted butter, melted
- 4 [eggs](#)
- 20 g fine cornmeal
- 15 g all-purpose flour
- 4 g fine salt
- 2 tbsp cider vinegar, or juice of 1 [lemon](#)
- 120 ml buttermilk or double cream — see [buttermilk recipes](#)
- 2 tsp vanilla — see [Pure vanilla extract](#)

Method

Blind bake the shell. Set the oven to **175 °C / 350 °F**.

Whisk the sugar, cornmeal, flour and salt together — mixing the dry ingredients first prevents lumps in a filling this sweet.

Whisk in the melted butter, then the eggs one at a time, then the vinegar, buttermilk and vanilla. Do not aerate.

Pour into the shell and bake **40–50 minutes**, until puffed and cracked at the edges with a slight wobble at the centre.

Cool completely, three hours minimum. It firms as it cools.

Notes

- **Lemon chess** adds the zest of two lemons and doubles the juice; **chocolate chess** adds 40 g of cocoa. Both are standard and both are older than a century.
- If the top browns before the middle sets, tent it with foil.
- **Keeps four days** at room temperature — the sugar content makes it effectively self-preserving.

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