

Apple trip is worth the drive

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Heading for the hills to gather apples strikes George Geary as smart business, even for busy home cooks.

Back during his days as pastry chef for the Disneyland Theme Park, Geary would have ordered oversized plastic drums filled with sliced apples or hundreds of boxes of whole fruit. These days, as a cooking teacher, he works with a modest bowl or two of Baldwins or Gravensteins and he leads apple-picking tours to the mountains around Yucaipa.

"It's a nice outing, but it's more than a little day trip," Geary says confidently. There are lots of good reasons, he adds.

"The apples don't have wax on them, you can get smaller apples _ they call them 'restaurant-size,' which you can't usually get in supermarkets _ and they usually don't use pesticides," Geary begins, rattling off reasons.

"You get them practically off the vine, without having gone all the way to L.A.'s central produce markets then back out to the markets _ so you save about a week, week-and-a-half and get them really fresh."

It's also a valuable opportunity to try what you'll buy. Unseasoned cooks often meander through a large market unsure of which apple to buy for a given purpose _ frequently with

disappointing results. Going to a fruit stand can provide a useful lesson in the attributes of various varieties.

"A lot of the places have apple-tasting bars," Geary says. "When my students ask 'What's the difference between a Jonathan and a Golden Delicious?' well, go to a place that allows you to actually taste the difference, taste them all."

If you're just beginning to cook with apples, or spread your wings, Geary offers some advice:

Don't be afraid to mix apples in recipes.

"A lot of people think they can only use Pippins for cooking, but I like to take a variety of apples to make a pie," Geary says. Taste and overall appearance is the advantage.

Work with the various characteristics of apples. "Varying textures _ grainy, crunchy,

crisp, melty _ and degrees of sweetness, mellowness, tartness, yield a better `mouth feel' and interesting variations."

Grainy cooking apples such as Granny Smiths lend better texture to pies along with Romes and Golden Delicious, which provide mellow sweetness.

Add a little spice to your topping or crust.

"When making a two-crust pie, take some of the same spices and add them into the (dough for the) crust, so when you're taking a bite into the pie you get the overall sensation of cinnamon and spice throughout," Geary says.

Get the right equipment.

A comfortable and well-sharpened paring knife, or a stout flexible peeler is the minimal tool when preparing quantities of apples.

"But if you're going to the apple areas and buy a lug of apples, a whole crate, whatever, purchase one of those apple slicer-peeler machines," Geary advises. "Take it from me: You might think they're not going to work, that it's one of those handy-dandy things you see at the fair and think `Yeah, right . . .' _ but they do work well."

For better baking results, cut uniformly sized pieces of apple.

If great apples are the hallmark of a perfect pie, a perfect crust plays a central role. George Geary's recipes for Double Crust Apple Pie with Spice Crust produce a perfect dessert.

Double Crust Apple Pie with Spice Crust

1/4 cup fresh lemon juice	1-1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
6 cups sliced and peeled baking apples	1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1 cup granulated sugar	1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour	2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

Cook's notes: Although you'll place the apples into lemon juice-laced water to prevent browning, to minimize sogginess and loss of flavor do not leave apples in the water for long periods of time. (If you are out of lemon juice, crush a couple of Vitamin C tablets and dissolve in water.)

To minimize the risk of overflowing pie juices dripping and burning onto your oven floor, you may wish to place the whole pie on a small cookie sheet or pizza pan to catch splashes.

Preliminaries: Prepare the recipe for Spice Pie Crust. Roll half to fit a 9-inch pie pan.

The other half should be rolled, at the appropriate moment, to approximately 1/4-inch thickness to cover the pie.

Position the rack in the center of your oven. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Procedure: In a large bowl filled with water, add about 1/4 cup of the lemon juice. As you peel and slice the apples, place them into the water until ready to use.

In a separate bowl, combine the sugar, flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. Set aside.

Drain apples fully, then add the dry ingredients to the fruit and toss thoroughly until well coated. Place mixture into prepared bottom crust. Then cut the butter into small squares and place atop the apple mixture.

Roll out the top crust. Cover fruit with prepared dough and seal the edges by crimping (use forefinger and thumb to seal decoratively). Use the tip of a sharp knife to cut one or more small holes in the center of the top.

Bake pie until light brown, about 50 minutes.

Yield: Makes one 9-inch pie, about 6 to 8 servings.

Spice Crust

1-1/2 cups cake flour	1 teaspoon ground nutmeg (preferably freshly grated)
1-1/2 cups all-purpose flour	1 cup unsalted butter, thoroughly chilled
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon (see cook's notes)	2 teaspoons granulated sugar
	1/4 teaspoon salt
	1/2 cup ice water

Cook's notes: For more subtle flavor, reduce the amount of spice, especially the nutmeg. For a sharper flavor, include a pinch or two of freshly grated white pepper.

Do not use a mixer to prepare this dough.

Preliminaries: Cut the butter into small chunks and chill completely.

Procedure: In a large mixing bowl, blend the flours, spices, sugar and salt. With two forks or a pastry blender, combine and cut the small chunks of butter into the dry ingredients until they form tiny pieces the consistency of cornmeal. Do not mix to a paste.

With a tablespoon, sprinkle the cold water into the mixture while tossing with a fork; add

and blend in a tablespoon of ice water at a time, until the dough is forming into a ball. As soon as the mixture starts to bind together, stop the mixing otherwise, it will become tough.

Pat the dough into the shape of a ball, then wrap with plastic wrap and place it into the refrigerator until firm about 20 minutes.

Roll the dough into a large circle, about 2 inches in diameter larger than the pie tin you are using. Place the first crust in the bottom of the tin, then fill with desired filling.

Bake according to directions in your recipe

Yield: Makes enough for one 2-crust pie, or two single-crust pies.