

“PIE, OH MY!”



Four Berry pie, Moody’s Diner, Maine
Is there a finer dessert, or snack, than a good slice of pie? Fans of diners and other home-cooking eateries relish iconic pie and coffee, preferably enjoyed at the counter. Let us be precise here. It should be served on a small but durable dessert plate, with a fork, no matter how tall, broad, or slumped it may be, so you can relish it bite by careful bite. If the crust is good, you may eat every last crumb.

Naturally the mug of hot coffee alongside is needed, to sip, to warm your hands, to wash down the pie’s sweetness, to add to the overall climate of savoring a treat, but

i do understand that some of you may not drink coffee so in that case I’d recommend getting a mug full of tea instead.

Often a slice of pie is served a la mode (usually with vanilla ice cream, though I have appreciated the occasional cinnamon or butter-pecan scoop). There is that mysterious alchemy that occurs when very warm pie meets very cold ice cream. The ice cream begins to melt—not that that’s a problem.

Certain pies are served with a dollop of whipped cream (ideally, the real thing). That’s not a problem either, if it’s a suitable match, such as traditional pumpkin or chocolate silk pie. Either way, notice how nobody ever shovels down the accompaniment. No, it joins the mood.

You get a moderate forkful of the pie, then add a sufficient bit of this or that, then evenly lift the duo to your mouth so as not to spill anything, appreciating them individually as well as a complementary pair. This is a state of deliberate concentration pie-eaters know well, akin to the measured pleasure that seamstresses and those who hang drywall feel when fitting something into place or, if you are a guitarist, finally mastering “Little Martha.”

Pie is not something to be eaten quickly, is my point. That’s for cake, maybe. Enjoying a tasty slice of pie is closer to eating a bowl of good pudding (which is the province of solemn spoon-eating). No gulping down big bites, no hurrying through it. No jumping up and dashing off. The very spirit of pie-eating is in every way contemplative, comforting, and congenial.

Years ago, Roadside magazine profiled one of this nation’s great pie meccas, the Powderhorn Cafe in Grants Pass, Oregon. The author, self-described “pie-ro-maniac” Larry Levinger, shared

a memorable piece of pie wisdom from an overheard-at-the-counter chat. “Pie is a good-natured thing,” remarked a fellow to his companion. “Not like cake. Cake is lust.”

And although I was well-aware of good crusts and disappointing crusts, it was Levinger’s article that provided a simple way to codify this important matter. As already noted, if a piecrust is good (an expertly handled balance of flour, salt, ice-cold water, Crisco and/or butter–lard is lamentably out of fashion), you will eat it. “The back of the pie,” he explained. “I’ve heard it called the buckboard, meaning it ought not to be dense and brittle, but springy, like the seat of a wagon.” Hey, hey, let’s hear it for good buckboard!

Okay, ready for dessert? Apple pie, preferably made with robust Northern Spy or Baldwin apples. Lemon meringue, which I think reaches its highest and best form at Yoder’s Restaurant in the Mennonite neighborhood in Sarasota, Florida. Coconut cream from the Agawam Diner in Rowley, Massachusetts, so wonderful that it was once featured on the cover of the foodie magazine *Saveur*. Four-berry, from Moody’s Diner, Waldoboro, Maine, understandably available in summertime only...see photo above. Pumpkin pie enhanced with just enough spices, not an overpowering amount, perhaps a smidge of cloves or allspice as well as or instead of cinnamon. Strawberry: the bodacious, whipped-cream-slathered ones at the Powderhorn Cafe probably weigh an easy 10 pounds! Mincemeat, with or without walnuts. Shoofly, a Pennsylvania Dutch tradition made with molasses and buttermilk (my friend Sarah makes a melt-in-your-mouth edition). Aunt Heather’s peanut-butter pie is as light and lovely as a summer cloud. Pecan pie, don’t skimp on the fragrant bourbon, serve it warm. Chess pie, what is that? I need to do more research.