

# Baking it on the Hill

## The Mother-In-Law's Blackberry Pie

BY VARU CHILAKAMARRI

**Recently**, my mother-in-law Debbie came to visit from Ohio. Fortunately, I lucked out in the mother-in-law department because Debbie and I get along like best friends...except when she's teaching me a recipe, then, we just get along. She's very precise about the ingredients, while I like to think of cooking as a free-flowing art form.

For weeks, Debbie had been not-so-subtly reminding me that she could teach me how to make a blackberry pie - one of my husband's favorite desserts. I'll admit, initially I was unnecessarily grumpy about the whole affair because it meant that I would have to purchase extra cooking equipment (a rolling pin, a pie pan, and who knows what else), and that I would have to find room for it all in my tiny Capitol Hill kitchen. But when Debbie arrived at the BWI airport with the end of a wooden rolling pin sticking out of her suitcase, I knew we'd be baking. By day three of her stay, I had run out of excuses and Debbie had lost interest in my carefully orchestrated list of must-see museum exhibits. It was time to bake. Debbie pulled the neatly-folded pie recipe from her purse and began firing off the ingredients. I didn't have anything except for sugar and aluminum foil. Like many city dwellers, my husband and I got rid of our car and started using a car sharing service for biweekly trips to the grocery store and the like. Doing a little cost-benefit analysis in my head, I decided that the pie ingredients did not warrant an impromptu \$9-per-hour car rental, even considering the inflated price of groceries within the 10-block radius around the Capitol. It also happened to be cold and rainy that day, so I decided that a long metro ride and hike to the nearest Safeway also wasn't worth it. I told Debbie we'd shop for the ingredients along Pennsylvania Avenue.

Clearly, our first problem would be the blackberries. Blackberry season was over, so we opted for frozen blackberries. The only place within walking distance that I thought might have the berries was the Yes! Organic Market near the corner of Pennsylvania and Seventh Street, SE. I wisely called ahead and confirmed that they had frozen blackberries at \$3.50 a bag.

As we began our trek, the icy wind slapping our faces, we discussed getting the other ingredients at a convenience store to save money. "Okay, we can get the white vinegar and flour at the mini-mart," Debbie began.

Desperate to avoid clogging my cupboards with ingredients that I would never use again, I said, "Oh, don't worry, I've got red wine vinegar at home, we can just use that." Unlike the wind, this stopped Debbie right in her tracks.

"Red wine vinegar! We can't use that - it'll turn the pie crust pink!" This perplexed me, as I was sure that the black-

berries were already going to stain the pie crust. Our debate continued, with my mother-in-law sticking to the recipe, and me trying to decipher the true purpose of vinegar in a pie crust. It began to pour. We arrived at the Yes! Organic Market first and slowly waded through what seemed like the entire city populace crowded into the narrow produce aisle. When we finally got to the freezer in the back, we saw that the blackberries were actually \$4.25 a bag. On top of that, we calculated that we would need three bags to make the pie. I was ready to switch to another fruit - better yet a frozen pie - but Debbie pressed on. "Don't worry, this is going to be special...we're making a memory." Couldn't we make an apple memory instead? With our hair soaking wet from our walk, we took our bags of berries to the register. I explained my morning phone call to the cashier who pleasantly gave us the lower price which had been quoted. Apparently, they had had a big berry sale the week before and were still getting used to the new prices. Feeling like we had just gotten the deal of the century, we left the store in high spirits.

We then crossed the street and walked up to Roland's Grocery store, which is a convenience store on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Fourth Street, SE. This store was a recent discovery for me. On the outside, it looked like it might be pretty small, but once you walk inside, there's an entire second section to your left with everything from fruits and veggies to cat food. I bit my tongue when we grabbed the white vinegar but revived my protest at the thought of buying a tub of Crisco shortening. I'd never used shortening before, and the last time I'd seen anyone use it was as a beauty secret for dry elbows on the Tyra Banks Show. Sensibly, I decided to go Zen and give in to all of Debbie's demands; the woman did make a mean pie after all. An hour and a half later, we arrived home, cold and drenched. Debbie was amazed that we were able to find everything we needed without getting into a car.

After we settled in, much to my chagrin, I realized that I didn't have aluminum foil after all. We needed aluminum foil to make sure that the pie crust's flakey edges didn't burn while the filling was still cooking. Debbie saved the day. No, she hadn't stuffed a roll of foil in her suitcase for her trip to Washington. Instead, she surprised me with an unorthodox trick that she had learned from her mother. We found an old t-shirt of my husband's that I was saving for use as cleaning rag, cut it into strips, wet the cloth to keep it from catching on fire, and layered the strips over the pie crust's edges while the pie baked. (And yes, the old shirt had been washed beforehand.) It worked like a charm. A slice of the warm berry pie was exactly what we needed after a rainy day in the city, and it didn't go unnoticed that Debbie was fully capable of going off-script when needed. ■



The author prepares her pie.



### Simple Blackberry Pie

30-32 ounces of frozen blackberries (three 10-ounce bags, or two 16-ounce bags)  
1-1 1/2 cups of sugar  
2 cups of all-purpose flour  
2/3 cup of vegetable shortening  
1/2 teaspoon of salt  
1 medium egg (beaten)  
1 teaspoon of vinegar (white, or as it turns out, red wine vinegar works too!)  
1 tablespoon of butter

1. Defrost the berries according to the directions on the bag. Thoroughly drain the juice. Mix in 3 tablespoons of flour and 1 to 1 1/2 cups of sugar (depending on the sweetness of your berries). Set aside.

2. Using a fork or pastry cutter, combine 1 1/2 cups of flour, the shortening, and the salt together into fine crumbs. Add the egg, vinegar and 3 tablespoons of cold water (one spoonful at a time) to the flour, and, with a fork, gently moisten the mixture. (You want the liquids to be evenly distributed, but you do not want to overwork the dough or else the crust won't be flaky.) Gather the dough into a ball, and divide in half.

3. Using a rolling pin on lightly-floured wax paper, roll out the first half of the dough into a disc that will fit into your pie pan (up to a 10-inch pie plate). The dough should have a light-marbleized appearance. Carefully transfer the disc of dough into your pie pan, and press it into the sides of the dish, pinching the edges. Roll out the second half of dough for the upper crust.

4. Pour the berry filling into the crust-covered pie pan, and dot with little pieces of butter. Carefully cover the berry filling with the second disc of dough. There is no need to pinch the crusts together, unless you mind the filling oozing out a bit around the circumference. Cut a few slits in the upper crust, and cover the edges of the crust with foil. Bake at 400 degrees for 50-60 minutes, and cool well before enjoying. ■



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