




*Le Rôté sans pareil
ou le délice des Gastronomes.*

Frontispiece from *Le Partfait Cuisinier ou Le Bréviaire des Gourmands*.
A.T. Raimbault, Paris, 2nd edition, 1811.

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THE EVOLUTION OF BAKEWELL TART

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Moira Buxton is spending a year in Washington D.C. where she has just completed a book on medieval cookery, using as source for the recipes one of the extant manuscripts, Harleian Ms. 279 in the British Museum. Her researches in this field have enabled her to trace the history of Bakewell Tart back to the 15th century; and her own family tradition enables her to give a particularly good more recent recipe for it.

In PPC 2 Jane Grigson posed an interesting question: what is the earliest known recipe for Bakewell Tart? I immediately thought of Bakewell Tart's similarity to some of the sweet 'bakemeats' which ended a medieval dinner. I then began to consider the evolution of recipes for bakemeats from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Bakewell Tart is a rich, sweet open tart and, like many of the best English tarts, it can be eaten hot or cold. In my childhood home in Ireland it was called Bakewell Pudding when it was served hot and Bakewell Tart when it was served cold.

THE MAIN VERSIONS

There are two main versions of Bakewell Tart. Both are made in pastry shells; one with a filling of beaten eggs, melted butter and sugar baked over a layer of chopped, crystallized fruit on the pastry shell; and another made with a rich mixture of eggs, butter, sugar and ground almonds baked over a layer of jam, usually strawberry jam, in a pastry shell.

The second version has been much more common in this century and one of the puzzles of my childhood was why Bakewell Tart at school — a scone-like mixture, reeking of almond essence, in a tough pastry case — carried the same name as the delectable tart I knew and loved at home; certainly the name was all they had in common.

BACK TO FLATHONS AND DOUCETTES

The rich sweet texture and flavour of 'real' Bakewell Tart have given pleasure to generations, rather more generations, I think, than is often realised. The classic filling of eggs, sugar and melted butter can be traced back to the flathon, one of the sweet 'bakemeats' served at the end of a medieval dinner. A flathon was one of the best-known of all the medieval dishes — common enough to appear in a proverb, "As flat as a flathon", elegant enough to appear¹ in poetry. Here is a fifteenth century

recipe for a flathon.

FLATHONS²

Take milke an yolkys of eyroun, and draw it thorw a straynoure with whyte sugre, other blake sugre, and mylt fayre botter, and putte thereto, and salt; and make fayre cofyns,³ and sette hem on the ouen tyl they ben hard; than take a dysshe with a pele⁴ on the ende, and fylle the dysshe with thin comade, and pore in-to the cofyns, and lat bake a lytel whyle; than take hem out in-to a fayre dyssh, and caste whyte sugre ther-on, and serue forth.

And here is how I make it.

Line a 9 inch pieplate with short crust pastry and bake it blind in a preheated 400° oven for 10 minutes. Meanwhile beat or liquidise either 6 eggs and ¼ pint of milk or 6 egg yolks and ½ pint of milk. (A medieval cook, convinced that egg whites were dangerous to health, would have used only yolks and milk). Add 3 oz of sugar and 3 oz of melted butter to the mixture and pour the custard into the pastry case. Reduce the oven to 375° and bake for about 25 minutes. Remove and sprinkle with a teaspoon of sugar.

Unfortunately there is no medieval English pastry recipe which is precise about ingredients. So I've had to guess what sort of pastry to use for making flathons and I've found by trial and error that a short pastry supports the fillings best.

I find that the shallow depth of a pieplate is preferable to a quiche or flan mould for preparing them in and I think that the derivation of the word flathon⁵ confirms this. It comes from the early medieval Latin fladon, -em, a honeycomb; the old High German flado, a flat cake and the old Dutch vlade or vla, a pancake.

It is worth noting that in Lent or on other feast days, when eggs and butter and milk were forbidden to all but the sick, the old and young children, flathons were made with an almond filling.

FLATHONS IN LENTE⁶

Take and draw a thrifty milke of almandes; temper with sugre water; than take hardid cofyns, and pore thin comad ther-on; blanche almaundis hol, and caste ther-on poudre gyngere, canelle, sugre, salt, and safroun; bake hem and serue forth.

My version of this delicious variation is as follows:

Make a solid almond milk by beating 8 oz ground almonds ¼ pint of light sugar syrup and ¼ pint of white wine. Make a pastry case as for the ordinary flathon and fill it with the almond milk. Now decorate the flathon with whole blanched almonds. There is some scope here for all kinds of artistry from symmetrical formal patterns to lively designs of flowers and leaves. Mix in an eggcup a ¼ teaspoon each of ginger, cinnamon, sugar and salt with a tiny pinch of powdered saffron (the sugar is there just to blend the spices), and sprinkle ¼ to ½ teaspoon over the flathon. Bake for 20 minutes at 375°.

The origins of Bakewell Tart can also be traced to two other medieval bakemeats, as everything baked in an oven was called. They are doucettes and doucettes enforced or, as we would say, enriched. From doucettes spring all the rich custard tarts of English cooking and from doucettes enforced come the almond tarts of the seventeenth century. The difference between the custard and almond versions of Bakewell Tart has its parallel in the difference between the two kinds of doucettes.

DOUCETTES⁷

Take creme a gode cupfulle, and put it on a straynour; thanne take yolks of eyroun and put ther-to and a lytel mylke; then strayne it thorw a straynoure in-to a bolle; then take sugre y-now, and put ther-to, ellys hony forde faute of sugre, than coloure it with safroun; than take a dysshe y-fastened on the pelys ende; and pore thin comade in-to the dyssche, and fro the dyssche in-to the cofyns; and when they don a-ryse wel, take hem out, and serue hem forth.

My version follows:

Bake blind an 8 inch short pastry case in a preheated 400° oven for 10 minutes. Meanwhile beat 6 egg yolks with ½ pint double or heavy cream and 1/8 pint of milk and add 2 oz sugar and a pinch of powdered saffron. Remove the pastry case from the oven and pour in the custard mixture. Return to the oven and bake at 375° for about 30 minutes.

The filling for doucettes enforced or a-forced (the words are used interchangeably) consists of . . . "almaunds milke, and yolks of eyroun y-mellyd to-gederys, safroun, salt and hony".⁸ To fill an 8 inch short crust pastry case I blend 6 oz of ground almonds with ½ pint of sweet white wine and 1/8 pint water. Add 6 yolks one at a time, and 2 tablespoons of liquid honey with a pinch each of powdered saffron and salt.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY RECIPES AND THAT OF MRS SMITH

Now it is time to leave the medieval recipes for flathons and doucettes and turn to a couple of seventeenth century recipes for Egge Tart and Almond Tart. If you compare these with their predecessors and the three versions of modern Bakewell Tart a little of the intricate pattern that joins culture and civilization begins to appear. The Egge Tart has substituted rose-water for the flathon's saffron. Fashions change in cookery as in everything else and rose-water was as common in the seventeenth century as saffron was in the fifteenth century and as vanilla is to our times. The almond tart seems halfway between the Lenten flathon and a doucette.

EGGE TARTE⁹

Take six yolks of eggs, a little cream, beat them well; then melt a little butter, rose water, and a little musk stir in it; mix them well together; and put it into puff-past; bake it in a dish or paty-pan.

ALMOND TART¹⁰

Take half a pounce of suger, and halfe a pounce of almons, blanched and beaten small with rose-water; a pinte creame, ye crum of a peny-lofe soaked in the cream and smal broken; mingle them together with the yolks of six eggs; and so bake them in a little fine past.

In 1753 Mrs Smith has a recipe for Almond Tourt that resembles remarkably, in texture and flavour, the previous recipe. Both contain eggs, sugar, almonds and melted butter or cream with crumbs; you find as you make these tarts that cream and crumbs is a surprisingly good substitute for melted butter in an almond tart — the final textures are almost indistinguishable. She also has a recipe for Sweet-meat Pudding, very similar to that Jane Grigson refers to of John Farley; the same mixture of eggs, sugar and melted butter as in Egge Tart appears, only the name changes with the addition of the sliced crystallized fruit.

TO MAKE ALMOND TOURT¹¹

Blanche and beat half a pound of Jordan almonds very fine, use orange-flower water, in the beating of your almonds, pare the yellow rind of a lemon pretty thick; boil it in water til 'tis very tender: beat it with half a pound of sugar, and mix it with the almonds, and eight eggs, but four whites, half a pound of butter melted, almost cold, and a little thick cream; mix all together, and bake it, in a dish with paste at bottom. this may be made the day before 'tis used.

SWEET-MEAT PUDDING¹²

Put a thin puff paste at the bottom of your dish, and then have of candied orange, lemon, and citron peel, of each an ounce; slice them thin, and put them in the bottom on your paste; then beat eight yolks of eggs, and two whites, near half a pound of sugar, and half a pound of butter melted; mix and beat all together, and when the oven is ready, pour it on your sweet-meats in the dish. An hour or less will bake it.

THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

From there it is time to move to the 1860s. Here are three recipes from that time; the first is straight out of a very popular cookery book, the second was given to me in the 1950s by a fellow student (it had been in her family in Derbyshire) and the third comes from Ireland and certainly goes back to the 1860s — it is also the richest version I know.

BAKEWELL PUDDING¹³

Place a layer of preserved fruits (from humble goosberries up to exquisite peaches or apricots) in a tart dish bordered with paste. Mix with it a good deal of candied citron or orange peel cut in thin strips. Make a custard of five beat eggs, five ounces of melted fresh butter, six of pounded loaf-sugar, and three spoonfuls of lemon-brandy. Bake for three quarters of an hour.

GRANNY'S RECIPE FOR BAKEWELL TART

4 oz melted butter	1 oz ground almonds
5 oz sugar	a 9 inch pastry case
5 egg yolks	enough jam to spread over
3 beaten egg whites	the base of the case

(The recipe did not specify what kind of pastry to use but I was advised to, and have, used a short crust). Bake a 9 inch short crust pastry blind for five minutes. Spread it thinly with jam. Pour the melted butter over the mixed sugar and almonds, add the egg yolks one at a time and then the beaten egg whites. Pour the mixture into the case and bake. (I use a 350° oven for 35 minutes).

BAKEWELL OR ALMOND TART

3 beaten egg whites	6 egg yolks
6 oz melted butter	6 oz ground almonds
8 oz sugar	preserves
a 9 inch short crust pastry case	1 teaspoon of sugar

Spread the preserves, (I am not sure whether the recipe originally used jam or preserved fruit but both are excellent) over the pastry case. Mix the almonds and sugar and beat in the melted butter. Add the egg yolks one by one and then the whites. Pour into the case and bake at 350° for 30 minutes or 35 minutes. While hot strew the teaspoon of sugar all over the tart.

REMAINING PUZZLES

Thus from the 1440s to 1783¹⁴ the two fine English tarts made with eggs and melted butter show no signs of merging their identities.

Then in the next fifty years the real mysteries about Bakewell Tart appear. How did the two versions suddenly become alternative kinds of the same dish? After all, fifty years in culinary terms is very swift. Were the substitution of jams for preserves or crystallized fruit and the eking out of almonds with flour the economies of clever cooks? Was there another source for these changes? Where did the name Bakewell come from? Why should a dish which has been called Sweetmeat Pudding for a hundred years become known as Bakewell Pudding? Was a Bakewell Pudding a Sweetmeat Pudding with almonds in it? I doubt it; after all most of the early recipes don't have almonds. Does it come from the small town of Bakewell in Derbyshire?¹⁵ How then did the name become so pervasive so quickly?

Of all these questions the most important and the most difficult is how Almond Tart and Sweetmeat Pudding became united.

If anyone knows the answers, I'd love to know.

NOTES

1. *Roman of the Rose* circa 1400 line 7043.
"With deynte flawnes, brode and flat."
2. Harleian Ms 279
3. This was the word used to describe any pie or tart case, surprising as it may sound to our ears.
4. This was (and is, for it is still used in some bakeries) a long, flat shovel on which bread or cake is moved into or out of the oven.
5. *Dictionary of Historical Usage*.
6. Harleian Ms 279.
7. Ditto
8. Ditto
9. *The Compleat Cook or the Secrets of a Seventeenth Century Housewife* by Rebecca Price, edited by Madeleine Masson, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974.
10. Ditto
11. *The Compleat Housewife: or Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion* by E. Smith. 15th edition, 1753.
12. Ditto
13. *Meg Dod's Cookery: The Cook and Housewife's Manual*, 10th edition, 1856.
14. *The London Art of Cookery* by John Farley, 1783.
15. There are some clues, probably many more than I have found. For example Joyce Douglas (in *Old Derbyshire Recipes and Customs*, Hendon Publishing Co. Ltd., Nelson, Lancs, 1976) says that: 'Some [unspecified persons] say the recipe came about due to a misunderstanding between the landlady of the Rutland Arms Inn and her cook, that what was intended to be a tart ended up a pudding . . . In due course it became famous and was passed on from Mrs Greaves' cook to a certain Mr Radford who, in turn, revealed it to the Bloomer family, and they thereafter made and marketed the pudding on a considerable scale.' There may be documentary evidence somewhere to support this story.
Kettner, in his *Book of the Table* (London, 1877, p. 52), takes for granted that the dish belongs to Bakewell, and, incidentally, gives a very interesting recipe for it after the following passage: 'BAKEWELL PUDDING is the glory of Derbyshire. One might have expected some miracle of excellence for the palate from the ducal residence of Chatsworth, with all its fame and its splendour, and the highest fountain jet in the world. But, although a Duchess of Devonshire once kissed a butcher, the great house of Cavendish has done nothing for our tables which can compare with the humble achievement of some unknown genius in the small town of Bakewell, nigh to the prodigious Chatsworth.'