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Mawmaw's Christmas pie, with a meringue as high as her hair (Opinion)

Decades after Mawmaw died, her Christmas pie saved me

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Mawmaw's chocolate meringue pie, as baked

Mawmaw's chocolate meringue pie, as baked by writer Jamie Brickhouse.
Jamie Brickhouse

Every Christmas growing up in Beaumont I could count on my Cajun grandmother Mawmaw to show up with dessert. She'd pull up in her 1973 olive green

Chevrolet Impala, her aluminum, rhinestone-studded harlequin glasses barely above the steering wheel. She'd inch her way out of the seat, holding her three-tiered Tupperware pie container loaded with a lemon meringue pie, a pecan pie and my absolute favorite: chocolate meringue.



Mawmaw -- also known as Mabel Brickhouse -- with Jamie, the author, in her lap.

Courtesy Jamie Brickhouse

That pie deserved a blue ribbon. The meringue was as high as Mawmaw's Queen Elizabeth hairdo that she had done once a week. The crust: light and flaky. And the filling: dark brown, almost black, like Texas crude oil.

Mawmaw died in the late '80s, and I thought her pies died with her.

When I moved to New York City in 1990 I was blinded by the showgirl opulence of diner pies. Rotating in those lighted cylindrical glass cases, they rivaled Mawmaw's with

meringue higher than the Empire State Building. They looked too good to be true. I sunk my teeth into a lemon meringue.

It sucked!

The meringue was as tasteless as shaving cream. The filling merely lemon-flavored petroleum jelly. And the crust: soggy as a wet noodle. After a couple of years diner-hopping, with each diner failing the taste test, I gave up on pies in New York for decades.

It never occurred to me I could make my own. That was a talent only Southern mawmaws have.

When my father, Mawmaw's son, died, I discovered that her pies didn't die with her. I found in his kitchen drawer some of her recipes scribbled on scraps of paper in her fat, loopy Mawmaw handwriting. I greedily rifled through them. There was lemon meringue, pecan, but alas, no chocolate.

Four years later, my cousin Lisa and I reminisced on the phone about Mawmaw's pies. Lisa loved pecan the best.

I said, "Yeah, it was damn good, but my favorite was her chocolate meringue. And that recipe wasn't in the batch I found after Dad died."

"I have it."

"What?"

"Yeah, my mom used to make it. I'll send it to you."



Mawmaw, Pawpaw and a pie-hungry kid.

Courtesy Jamie Brickhouse

I felt like I'd found the Holy Grail. Before I hung up, I vowed to make Mawmaw's chocolate meringue pie, even though I'd never made a pie in my life.

So with no help or guidance, using a bare-bones recipe, I made Mawmaw's chocolate meringue pie 30 years after her death.

And it sucked!

The meringue was flat as a flitter. The crust was tough. And the filling? Baby-poo brown.

Part of the problem was that recipes from days of yore are often bare-bones — ingredients and basic steps — I think because it's assumed that the cook in the kitchen already knows what the hell she's doing. And the other part was that I went fancy and used Ghirardelli cocoa powder, not Hershey's as Mawmaw specified. Hershey's is darker and richer.

That was the end of it, I thought. I tried and failed. I decided I'd never bother again. But nine months into the COVID shutdown, as we headed into Christmas 2020, I changed my mind. "It's just us, but we need a little Christmas!" I said to my husband, Michael, sounding like Auntie Mame. "Let's put up a tree and decorate the apartment! You know what? I'm going to make Mawmaw's chocolate meringue pie again."



Writer and pie baker Jamie Brickhouse.

Courtesy Jamie Brickhouse

This time I had guidance from pie-maven friends: Add cream of tartar to the meringue and lard to the crust, they advised. And I used Hershey's cocoa powder.

The meringue: high as Mawmaw's Queen Elizabeth hairdo. The crust: light and flaky. The filling: rich as Texas crude oil.

And the taste? It shrunk me back to a kid at her Duncan Phyfe dining table in Beaumont.

I had succeeded. It was as exhilarating as the first success I'd had as a writer, and I wanted more.



The meringue on Mawmaw's chocolate meringue pie was as high as her Queen Elizabeth hairdo that she had done once a week.

Courtesy Jamie Brickhouse

As the shutdown crept on, I made Mawmaw's other pies: coconut meringue, pecan, lemon meringue. I became obsessed, making a pie every week. I became the Mildred Pierce of Manhattan.

For years I'd collected Junior League cookbooks, stuff like "Gasparilla" from the Junior League of Tampa, Fla. But though "Gasparilla" had posed on my counter for years, I'd never cracked it. It had earned its place because of the homoerotic cover of a muscled pirate.

Now I discovered some exceptional recipes in there, like Florida Orange Grove pie, an angel pie (crust made of meringue) with a filling of both whipped cream *and* meringue. I was meringue mad!

I made holiday pies, like a Valentine's Day pie for my husband — a chocolate-covered raspberry frothy pie as high as Mount Everest. When it comes to pies, I'm a size queen: the higher, the better.

Come Easter, we couldn't parade down Fifth Avenue in our Easter bonnets, so I invented an Easter bonnet pie with pink Peeps bunnies and lavender whipped-cream florets.

I became an amateur food stylist and posted my pie shots on Instagram: "Jamie's Gaymaw Kitchen," I labeled them. My followers went nuts and flooded me with suggestions of recipes to make — the older and more obscure the better. Folks adore pie porn.

Of course, there were failures along the way — the custard that didn't set, the graham cracker crust that wouldn't hold together. But now — unlike after that first chocolate meringue pie — I didn't let failure stop me. I kept trying until I succeeded again.

That's similar to writing, I realized. Most of writing is failing. You have to keep showing up for it.

I'd reached an impasse in the manuscript for my second memoir and hadn't touched the manuscript for months. At first, I felt guilty making all those pies while my manuscript languished. Then I realized the pie baking reignited my creativity as I tried new recipes

every week, failed, succeeded, invented, and immersed myself in the process. If I can make a pie a week, I epiphanied to myself, I can commit to writing at least ten pages a week and finish the manuscript.

I kept baking and writing. As COVID wore on, I was disappointed that I didn't have an audience to consume the pies. Then I realized I didn't need an audience. I created those pies for myself. That's how writing works. You have to love and care about what you're writing for yourself first before you can expect anyone else to. Baking Mawmaw's chocolate meringue pie taught me to love the process *almost* as much as the result.

Were pies that way for Mawmaw? Unlike pie-proud me, with no one to gobble my creations, she always had an eager audience of 10 grandkids waiting to devour hers. Maybe we were too eager. Once I asked why I couldn't have a slice of the pecan pie she'd just made. "Because I made it for your cousin David, who's visitin' from Dallas," she said. "It's his favorite."

She never let me taste the mincemeat pie she made every Christmas either. "You wouldn't like it," she told me. "I don't think hardly anybody does. I just make it for myself."

She was wrong. I love it. Now every Christmas, I make both the chocolate meringue pie (my favorite) and the mincemeat (hers). I always wonder if mine is as good as hers. But that doesn't matter. I'm making it just for me — and for Mawmaw.

Jamie Brickhouse is a comedic storyteller, author of "Dangerous When Wet: A Memoir of Booze, Sex, and My Mother" and is at work on his second memoir, "I Favor My Daddy: A Tale of Two Sissies." Follow him on Instagram [@jamiebrickhouse](https://www.instagram.com/jamiebrickhouse) and TikTok [@jamie_brickhouse](https://www.tiktok.com/@jamie_brickhouse).

Mawmaw Mabel's Chocolate Meringue Pie

From Jamie's Gaymaw Kitchen

Mawmaw's Pie Shell ingredients:

1 ½ cups flour
¼ tsp salt
½ Cup Crisco (broken into tablespoons)
2 tablespoons water

Jamie's Gaymaw Pie Shell ingredients:

1 ¼ cups flour
¼ tsp fine salt
6 tablespoons unsalted butter (use butter with high fat content like Kerry's Irish Gold) cut into cubes
4 tablespoons lard (use leaf lard for extra flakey crust)
2 – 4 tbs ice water

Steps:

1. Chill lard and butter (or Crisco) in freezer for 15 min.
2. Mix flour and salt in Cuisinart.
3. Add butter and lard (or Crisco) to flour and salt and pulse 12 or so times until butter and lard are lima bean sized.
4. Add 2 tablespoons ice water one at a time and pulse until flour comes together.
5. Throw mixture into large stainless steel, lightly floured mixing bowl.
6. Make a well in center of dough.
7. Add more ice water a bit at time until it comes together being careful not to let it get too wet.
8. Form dough into a ball and press down with heel of your hand and form a disc about ¼ to 1/8 inch thick.
9. Wrap tightly with Saran wrap twice and chill for minimum of one hour and up to 3 days.
10. If not using immediately, wrap twice with Saran wrap and then aluminum foil and freeze up to 3 months.

Rollout dough:

Steps:

1. Chill rolling pin for 15 min. in freezer.
2. Let dough disc rest for 5 min. on counter before rolling.
3. Roll out dough on lightly floured flat surface, working quickly. I roll on wax paper, so it doesn't stick and it makes lifting the rolled out dough into the pie dish easier. Sprinkle ice water to bind or repair in cracks or tears in dough.
4. Place dough in standard 9-inch pie dish (not deep dish).
5. Trim and crimp dough.
6. Wrap with Saran wrap and chill in refrigerator for 30 min.

Parbake pie shell:

1. Prick bottom of pie shell all over with fork.

2. Place aluminum foil or parchment paper over pie shell and fill with pie weights, dried beans or pennies.
3. Bake at 425 degrees for 15 – 17 min. until lightly browned and crust appears set.
4. Remove from oven and remove pie weights and foil/parchment paper.
5. Return to oven for 2 – 3 minutes.
6. Let cool while you prepare filling and meringue.

Filling:

1 cup sugar 1 tablespoon vanilla
¼ cup flour 1 tablespoon butter, melted and cooled
¼ tsp salt
1/2 cup Hershey's cocoa
2 cups whole milk
3 eggs, separated *SAVE egg whites for meringue below

Steps:

1. In a heavy saucepan and using a wire whisk, combine sugar, flour, salt & cocoa.
2. In another bowl, combine milk, egg yolks, vanilla, & melted butter.
3. Gradually add milk/egg mixture to sugar mixture, stirring until smooth.
4. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly until thickened (like pudding) and bubbly, (about 10 - 18 minutes). Be patient. It will thicken.
5. Pour into parbaked pie shell.

Meringue:

6 tablespoons sugar
3 egg whites at room temperature (4 egg whites for meringue as high as Mawmaw's Queen Elizabeth do)
1 tbs corn starch
¼ tsp cream of tartar
Pinch of salt
½ tsp vanilla extract
½ cup water

Cream of tartar note: It stabilizes the tiny bubbles in the egg whites, by precluding the egg proteins from sticking together. It thus speeds up the egg white whipping process and contributes to a stable, billowy, glossy meringue.

Cornstarch note: The cornstarch mixture of water and sugar added at the last step prevents meringue from weeping. It binds and stabilizes the liquid in the meringue (and keeps it from seeping out), leaving it shiny, beautiful, and puddle-free. Starch is especially helpful in hot, humid weather when a meringue is most likely to absorb extra moisture.

Steps:

1. In a small saucepan, combine water, 2 tablespoons sugar, and cornstarch. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly until clear and thick. Remove from heat.

2. In a large glass or metal bowl, beat egg whites, cream of tartar, and salt on medium/medium high until mixture is foamy.
3. Mix in vanilla, then gradually add the remaining 4 tablespoons sugar one tablespoon at a time, beating constantly on medium-high/high until meringue forms soft peaks.
4. Gradually pour in cornstarch mixture, beat on high until stiff.
5. Spread over top of pie and seal to the crust.
6. Flick the back of a dining spoon over the meringue to make pointy snow peaks.
7. Bake pie at 325 degrees for 25 minutes or until meringue tips have lightly browned.