



By: Janet Clarkson

The Tart

a brief history

What is a tart?

How does it differ from a pie?

If you think the answers are straightforward, think again.

Whatever your definition of a tart, others will disagree – some of them quite assertively.

In 1927 there was a vigorous discussion on the topic in the pages of *The Times* newspaper in England. It began innocently enough with one correspondent writing to complain about the deteriorating quality of 'apple tart' as it was being served in restaurants. He happened to describe the item as being 'stewed apple under a puff pastry crust' – and the argument started off immediately, with the first respondent adamant that such an item was clearly a pie (the crust being on top). The debate very quickly got very heated, with all sorts of 'experts' weighing in with their opinions – and of course it was never settled to everyone's satisfaction.

In fact, the definition of a 'tart' (or a 'pie', for that matter), has never been crystal clear. Both words have been around since at least the thirteenth century, and some cookbook authors use the words interchangeably. Even the Oxford English Dictionary is unclear. It suggests that for a pie, that it is the top crust that is essential, (except in America where the reverse is the case), and it then defines a 'tart' as 'nearly the same as a pie'. One of the correspondents to *The Times* in 1927 rather colourfully insisted that the word 'tart' was from the same root as 'torture', on account of the twisted lengths of pastry which were used to decorate the top of the tart. The OED prefers the idea that it is related to 'tourte' and 'torta', which originally meant a sort of round flat disc of bread.

The discussion about the number and location of crusts that define a tart probably misses the point. The original difference may have been to do with the depth of the dish – tarts being shallow compared to pies. Originally 'pies' were lumps of meat wrapped in dough and baked – because this was before the development of shaped metal baking tins. The development of hot-water crust (we don't know for sure when this happened), enabled free-standing moulded coffins to be made, and these functioned like casserole dishes do today. All manner of meat on the bone, whole birds and so on, were baked in them, and a sauce was poured in after the lid was lifted – the guests then scooping out what they wanted from the pastry 'dish.' The walls of the coffins were very thick (2 inches, or 5 cm, was not unusual) and designed to be robust enough to withstand long cooking (commonly 6-12 hours) and long keeping afterwards (if left uncut and hopefully airtight). This tough hard coffin pastry was not necessarily intended to be eaten – at least not by the well-to-do.

We don't know for sure when the first deliciously edible pastry was developed. The first known detailed instructions for fine pastry appear in an English cookbook of 1545, but it was certainly around for a long time before that. It is likely that pastry-making (of the buttery, 'short' kind) was raised to an art form by the Italians during the Renaissance, and spread to the rest of Europe from there. Fine pastry such as this could not support large quantities of filling, but did allow the cooking of 'wetter' ingredients such as custards which cooked quickly, and were intended to be eaten within a short time.

By the end of the 16th century, cookbooks gave many recipes for tarts. In one book published in 1591, called *A Book of Cookrye*, there are several

recipes for tarts. The fruit tarts are often given in two versions – with and without a 'cover', suggesting that the number and location of crusts was not the defining issue. Here are a couple of recipes for tarts from the book – one with plums, one filled with a delicately spiced custard, and both baked blind before filling, just as we would do now.

To make a Tarte of Prunes [Plums].

"Take Prunes and wash them, then boil them with faire water, cut in halfe a penny loaf of white bread, and take them out and straine them with Claret wine, season it with sinamon, Ginger and Sugar, and a little Rosewater, make the paste as fine as you can, and dry it, and fill it, and let it drie in the oven, take it out and cast on it Biskets and Carawaies."

To make a Tart of Cream.

"Take Creame and Eggs and stir them, together, and put them into a strainer till the whay be come out, then strain it that it may be thick, season it with Ginger, Sugar, and a little Saffron, and then make your paste with flower, and dry your paste in the Oven, and then fill it, and set it into the Oven to dry, and then take it out, and cast Sugar on it, and so serve it forth."

The whole pie-tart debate is not likely to have confused our ancestors. They had many more words to describe pastry-filled dishes, so could be much more specific about what they were offering. Here is a medieval selection.

A florendine (several spellings) was a covered pie (or tart!).

A vaunt was a fruit pie – but in the medieval tradition would be enriched with bone marrow.

A flampoyne (various spellings) was a 'tart' ornamented with pointed pieces of pastry. The name perhaps comes from 'flame point' or 'flan pointé'.

A herbelade was filled with minced pork and herbs.

A talmouse was a sort of cheesecake, often made in a triangular shape.

A flaune, or flawn is obviously related to the modern 'flan', and was an open tart, like a custard or cheesecake.

I will finish my story with one from an intrepid woman traveller of the seventeenth century. Her name was Celia Fiennes (1685 – c. 1712), and she was unusual for her time in the amount of journeying she did around England, on horseback mostly, with only one maid. She was in Cornwall when she wrote:

"... my Landlady brought me one of the West Country tarts, this was the first I met with, though I had asked for them in many places in Sommerset and Devonshire, its an apple pye with a custard all on the top, its the most acceptable entertainment that could be made me; they scald their creame and milk in most parts of those countrys and so its a sort of clouted creame as we call it, with a little sugar, and soe put on the top of the apple pye; I was much pleased with my supper ..."

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