

# Don't mince your words

Once packed with meat, such as ox tongue and mutton, alongside dried and candied fruit and extravagant spices, the mince pie is not what it once was, argues Neil Buttery

**F**OR anyone unused to the food culture of the British Isles, a mince pie is positively strange: a sweet pie, with a filling called mincemeat and containing, we would expect, minced meat—yet it does not. This confusion was perfectly illustrated in the North American online magazine *The Spruce* in 2019, which took a traditional mincemeat-and-apple pie recipe at face value, baking a pie with a filling of minced beef and grated apple—then suggested serving it with custard. The mistake went viral and the recipe was pulled. Yet it is odd, when you think about it—why on earth is the filling called mincemeat when there is no meat, minced or otherwise? Well, 'minced' pies did once contain minced meat and, not only that, they were not confined to Christmastime.

## ‘Cromwell considered these opulent pies too indulgent and tried to suppress them’

We can trace the history of the mince pie as far back as the Middle Ages. These pies were large, high sided and filled with expensive ingredients: dried fruit, meat, spices and candied fruit. They sat on the dining table, together with several other dishes, the pastry—which was merely a container—cracked open and the delicious filling spooned out. The mixture sounds odd at first, but there wasn't the sweet-savoury distinction we have today and it isn't that weird, really—think of a North African tagine.

Because these pies were extremely expensive to make, they were only served on special occasions. Yet the folk of the Western world are an aspirational lot and what the upper classes had, the lower classes wanted, creating a trickle-down effect, with food being no exception. By the early modern period—the days of the Tudors and Stuarts—mince pies were a little more common, with the upper middle classes now getting a taste. Recipes for mincemeat were similar to those of the Middle Ages, although the pastry was by then edible. Standard recipes contained

shredded suet, currants, prunes and spices such as caraway, cloves and mace. Booze and sugar were not typically added, although the mixture is recognisably mincemeat. There was a range of meats, such as beef and mutton, but there were many alternatives, especially for fasting days when no meat was allowed, including salmon, sturgeon and egg. Large mince pies were cylinder- or cube-shaped, with a fashion also developing for making intricately and variously shaped small pies that, if arranged carefully, made a beautiful symmetrical pattern, like a Tudor garden: edible art for the upper classes.

By the time Oliver Cromwell ruled over England, the mince pie had become associated with Christmas (its lack of fresh ingredients meant it was perfect for wintertime feasts). Cromwell, however, considered these expensive, opulent pies too indulgent—in other words, too Catholic—and tried to suppress them. He wasn't stealing the mince pie from the mouths of the common people; they were very much still out of reach for them.

Mince pies were not extravagant solely because of their fancy ingredients, but also because they were time-consuming to make. All of the ingredients had to be finely chopped, which is the original meaning of the word 'mince'. Not only was there a lot of chopping, but each raisin had to be de-seeded by

hand—seedless grapes weren't a thing until the tail end of the 19th century.

The habit of making unusually shaped mince pies carried on into the Georgian era and, at this point, you find templates for them in cookery books, with stars, *fleur de lys* and other heraldic symbols being the most popular. By this time, the fillings were looking very modern, with dried and candied fruits, chopped apple, brown sugar, spice and a good dash of booze. There was still meat and the favourite by quite a margin was ox tongue—don't recoil in horror, as the tender meat provides a wonderful succulence.

The 18th-century cookery writer Elizabeth Moxon has two recipes of note in her book *English Housewifery*, first published in 1741, one of which asks for a rather austere 'pound of the finest seam tripe you can get', currants (no plump raisins or candied citron peel) and a reduced amount of spice, sugar and brandy—an economical recipe, perhaps made for servants or given to the almshouse as a charitable donation. There's another for mincemeat that contains no meat (although suet is still present). Her book is important because it shows that mince pies were now available to most people, although not all mincemeats were created equal.

In the first edition of *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861), a huge tome of more than 1,000 recipes, there are only →

### Mrs Beeton's mincemeat

Mrs Beeton used beefy mincemeat in her mince pies, a habit that needs reigniting. In the Victorian era, mincemeat was made in vast amounts, so the recipe below is still scaled down rather, but you might need to reduce it further. This is a no-cook recipe: the booze, fruit acids and sugar preserve the contents. Try it—your guests will never guess the secret ingredient that made such superlative mince pies.

#### Ingredients

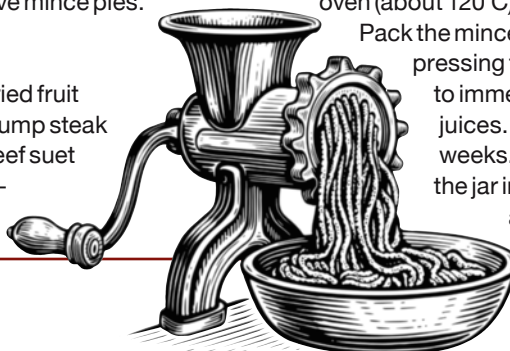
1.3kg mixed dried fruit  
400g minced rump steak  
750g grated beef suet  
500g soft dark-brown sugar

90g candied citrus peel  
Half a grated nutmeg  
750g peeled, cored and grated apple  
Grated zest and juice of a lemon  
150ml brandy

#### Method

Simply mix all of the ingredients in a large mixing bowl. Sterilise some jars in a cool oven (about 120°C) for 20 minutes.

Pack the mincemeat into them, pressing the fruit down firmly to immerse it in the boozy juices. It will be ready in two weeks. Once open, keep the jar in the fridge and use as required.





## The pie's the limit

Do you prefer a zesty, fruity filling or a crunchy pastry topping? Amie Elizabeth White asks the COUNTRY LIFE team to assess some of the best mince pies on the market

### **Crumble-topped mince pies, £12.50 for six, The Newt in Somerset**

What do you get when you cross the best parts of a mince pie (biscuity shortcrust pastry, sweet and spicy mincemeat) with the best parts of a crumble pudding (Somerset Cider Brandy-infused apple, crunchy almond and hazelnut-crumble topping)? An utterly scrumptious pastry packed with a riot of tangy flavours and textures, best served warm with a dollop of ice cream.

<https://shop.thenewtinsomerset.com/uk>

### **Traditional mince pies, £4.95 for three, Chatsworth Farm Shop**

Enormous in size and rustic in style—‘the sort of mince pies Hagrid might serve up to Harry, Ron and Hermione,’ declares Digital Editor Toby Keel. However, their mighty appearance is almost deceptive, as the delicate pastry is ‘so light and crumbly’. In addition, the zesty mincemeat filling—which oozes as you bite into the pie—is so rich that no cream is required. The box is also charmingly decorated, making these pies a beautiful gift.

<https://shop.chatsworth.org>



### **Sour cherry, Armagnac & prune mince pies, £14 for six, Daylesford Organic**

‘The finest mince pie I have eaten so far,’ enthuses COUNTRY LIFE’s Editor-in-Chief, Mark Hedges—the team struggled to disagree. Deeply rich and splendidly festive, abundant sour cherries and prunes have been given a boozy oomph, but it’s the almond frangipane topping that takes them from pie to perfect pudding. Deputy Editor Kate Green called them ‘picnic-y; ideal for a Boxing Day meet’.

[www.daylesford.com](http://www.daylesford.com)



### **Classic mince pies, £2 each, Birley Bakery**

If you need an example of good things coming in smaller packages, let these pies be it. Incredibly fruity

mincemeat sits amid beautifully crisp golden pastry, both ‘delicious enough to hold their own’. Two bites and they were gone, yet the compliments kept coming: ‘Top of the class’ and ‘the nicest I have had’ being only some. An excellent canapé when hosting many and even better as a tempting treat for one. [www.birleybakery.com](http://www.birleybakery.com)

two for mincemeat: one with beef, the other without. Beeton’s mince pies are very modern, because hers are made in patty pans, as we use today. Baking this way made perfect sense when homes were making large amounts for parties and charity events, as well as to give out to hungry carollers, all of which was expected of the middle classes at Christmastime.

After that, we left large mince pies behind, although a sweet lamb pie did live on in Northumberland until the 20th century (and very good it is, too). The television chef Fanny Cradock attempted to bring large pies back

## ‘Fanny Cradock said small pies were mean and “men hate them”’

in her classic 1975 BBC series *Fanny Cradock Cooks for Christmas*, declaring the small ones were mean and that ‘men hate them’. A nice big slice of pie was much more agreeable to her.

Today, few of us make mince pies and, if we do, we likely use shop-bought mincemeat

filling, which is now a vegan product. These modern preparations are far too sweet—sugar is no longer a luxury ingredient, but a cheap filler. If you think you aren’t a mince-pie fan, you must try a vintage recipe, in which most of the sweetness comes from dried and candied fruit, not spades of brown sugar. The meat and suet give a delicious richness that cannot be replicated. Take Cradock’s advice, make large pies served with a big blob of clotted cream and you cannot go wrong—even the most vociferous naysayer will be converted. 🍷