

A History of Pies

The British love a pie, in fact the Pie is our unique contribution to International Cuisine. We have developed this delicacy more than any other nation to give us the range and styles of pies that we know and love today. One of them, the Melton Mowbray Pork Pie, has even gained official PGI protected status in the European Union along with its cousins the Cornish Pasty and the Forfar Bridie.

Sweet and Savoury, Hot and Cold, Fusion, Vegan, Vegetarian, Gluten Free there is now a pie for almost everyone. We have even developed the pastry casing along with the pie to include shortcrust, puff, rough puff filo, hot water crust, suet crust..

It's worth reminding ourselves that the definition of a pie is 'a filling totally encased in pastry and baked'. So no lattices, tarts or those casseroles with a puff pastry lid which some gastropubs etc misleadingly call 'pies'. No Shepherd's Pie (lamb mince with potato topping), Cottage Pie (beef mince with potato topping) or potato topped so called 'Fish Pie' either. Pies include pasties which were the forerunner of the pie and defined as 'a filling encased in a single sheet of pastry which is folded over and crimped – and of course baked'. So now you know!

The British eat £1billion worth of pies every year, that's those bought and sold commercially and so not counting those made by every self-respecting cook in home kitchens across the land throughout the year.

To commemorate this unique food we have created a week-long celebration called British Pie Week which starts on the first Monday in March. The highlight of the week on the Wednesday is of course the British Pie Awards in which almost 1,000 pies are judged in the magnificent St Mary's Church (the 'Cathedral of Pies') in Britain's Pie Capital Melton Mowbray. Check out to see what your local pie maker, bakery, pub, restaurant etc is doing during British Pie Week. A map of piemakers is available through the British Pie Awards website www.britishpieawards.co.uk.

Pies have been with us for centuries. There's a claim that the Egyptians and Romans had pies, maybe not like we would recognise, but they most likely had pasties similar to those of today.

Our earliest reference to pies goes back to the Middle Ages. The poet Chaucer wrote a recipe for an apple pie in 1381 in old English. The first cook book in the English language was written for the chefs of King Richard II in the 1390's and called 'The Forme of Cury' adapted from the French word 'Cuire' to cook. The book had numerous recipes for pies; at the time also called coffyns, presumably because of their shape. The earliest recipe for a pork pie is in this book and is for Flampoyntes a pork and cheese pie decorated with pastry triangles. There is also a recipe there for a pork quiche. Later in history comes a recipe for a Cheshire Pork Pie.

The pies at this time were often made from pastry which was just a thick paste (hence the origin of the word) of flour and water. It was used as a container to cook

meat and vegetables together often in the oven after the bread had been baked to use the remaining heat. Once cooked, the contents would be served up on a dish and the pastry case thrown away. Alternatively, the gravy would have been drained and eaten with bread and then clarified butter poured in through the hole to seal the pie, rather like potted meat. This then, in the days before refrigeration, would have been used to store the contents for eating at a later date.

In the medieval banquet the discovery of the hot water crust pastry led to pies becoming the centre piece of the banquet. They were often made using elaborate figurative moulds, glazed and adorned, occasionally with a stuffed animal or bird to indicate its contents, swan pie being one of the most elaborate.

In the hierarchical society of the Middle Ages, the lord of the manor seated at the top table would be served the prime cuts of meat such as venison. The extremely lower orders or serfs seated on benches right at the back of the room would be served the entrails of the deer cooked with vegetables in a pie. The offal of a deer is known as umble hence the term to eat 'humble pie', the word humble often erroneously replacing the proper word umble.

As ovens became more common items in the kitchens of ordinary people so pies became a staple item of the British diet. The discovery of the potato and its spread to Europe in the 16th and later centuries led to its inclusion in the main meal of the day for most families. Pie and mashed potato became more widespread and was a convenient way for many inns and alehouses to serve a hot meal at relatively short notice. The pies were made with whatever local ingredients were around, eels being a particular delicacy in certain areas. Pie, mash and hot liquor (gravy) became the staple diet of many a workman seeking a hot meal from his lodgings.

The discovery of spices around the time of the crusades led to pies being made from meat and also from added dried fruit such as raisins and spices to give a sweet pie eaten at the best feasts. Mince pies were said to be on the menu for the coronation banquet of King Henry V in 1413. Little by little less meat and more sweet contents were contained in the pies, suet eventually replacing the minced meat until the need for vegetarian mince pies led to any connection with meat being dropped. Originally eaten all year round, mince pies became more associated with Christmas through the Christmas Pie which was made using the same ingredients as the traditional minced pie.

And talking of kings, there is a tradition of Gloucestershire sending a lamprey pie to the monarch on the occasion of their coronation or jubilee. Lampreys are small eel like fish which are now protected in the UK so have to be supplied from Canada. But beware, King Henry I died in 1135 from eating a surfeit of lampreys.

The Pilgrim Fathers took their apple pie recipe to the Americas. Apples were often called pippins at the time (Cox Pippin) and so apple pies were called pippin pies. In the 18th and 19th Centuries regional pies developed. Melton Mowbray Pork Pies

developed from their association with hunting, Cornish Pasties from tin mining, the Stargazy pie in Mousehole from a famine in Cornwall where fish heads and tails were all that was to eat in some households. A better fare than Rat Pie that was also eaten in famine times!

Pork pies were a convenient way of using and preserving the less desirable cuts of meat from the family pig which was usually slaughtered during the winter. In many parts of the country the meat was cured and when needed made into pies which gives these pies their pink colour inside. In Melton Mowbray pigs were reared and fed on the whey from local Stilton Cheese production. The pigs were killed in the winter and the fresh meat, uncured, used directly in the local pie which probably evolved from a pasty. Fresh meat which is then roasted gives the pie a grey colour inside, the colour of uncured roast pork. These pies were made by housewife or stable lads, rather than by bakers, and so were made without the hoops which would have been available to the baker but not the housewife. Instead she would have hand raised the pie around a bottle, later a wooden dolly, to make the pie case. This would have been filled with coarse chopped pork, seasoned with salt and pepper, sealed and baked in the oven. The unsupported pie would have sagged while baking giving rise to the traditional bow-shaped Melton Mowbray Pork Pie.

When Melton Mowbray became the capital of hunting in the late 18th early 19th century, the local pie was adopted by the hunting aristocracy and taken with them whilst out riding. The pie was strengthened by using a hot water crust recipe for the pastry. Hot bone stock jelly would have been added to the pie after baking to help preserve the contents by driving out any air inside and also by sterilising the contents. It would have also made the pie more solid and so suitable for packing in the pocket whilst jumping the hedges and ditches on the typical hunt. The unique origin of the Melton Mowbray Pork Pie was recognised by the European Union when protected name status (PGI) was granted to the pie in 2009. This only after there was a much publicised case in December 2005 against granting recognition for the pie in the High Court in which the court supported recognition for the Pie. A subsequent appeal to the Court of Appeal was later withdrawn.

In recent years pies have undergone a renaissance. We still have the much-loved regional pies and large family pies, a godsend in difficult economic times. However, a number of bespoke pie companies have developed the gastro pie which is almost like having a restaurant in a pie. Vegetarian pies have been around for years but more lately vegan pies have come to the fore and a Vegan Pie became Supreme Champion or 'Pie of Pies' in the 2019 British Pie Awards. A gluten-free vegan pie won the same accolade in the 2022 Awards. More recent developments include 'Fusion Pie's' such as Chicken Tikka Pies, Balti Pies, Vindaloo Pies and Lasagne Pies.

Pies now come in all shapes, sizes with all manner of pastry and fillings. There is a pie for practically everyone. This is why the humble pie has come to be so loved and

recognised as distinctly British and why it is celebrated in British Pie Week and the British Pie Awards.

Dr Matthew O'Callaghan OBE

Chairman: Melton Mowbray Pork Pie Association, British Pie Awards

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