

Strawberries are low in pectin, a natural thickener found in citrus fruits and many other plants. To make up for the lack of pectin in strawberries, I added 2 tablespoons of lemon juice, which also encourages thickening. It tightened the texture of the filling (and perked up the flavor), but not enough—the pie still wouldn't hold its shape when sliced. Many jams rely on powdered pectin, such as Sure-Jell, to thicken. After using an entire box without getting a sliceable pie, I mixed this ingredient. Next, I tried Minute Tapioca, which the test kitchen often uses to thicken crisps and puddings—but it made my strawberry filling unpleasantly slippery. Then it dawned on me that I might replace the strawberry Jell-O in some of the original recipes with unflavored gelatin. I tested various quantities and found that 1 tablespoon (a smidgen over one packet of Knox gelatin) produced a clean-slicing yet not bouncy pie. I tasted a spoonful of the filling, then stirred in a pinch of salt. As I'd anticipated, it sharpened the flavors.

Diner strawberry pies typically get a squirt of Reddi-wip. I hadn't gone to the trouble of making my own filling to reach for the can now. Instead, I whipped cream cheese into real whipped cream (along with vanilla and sugar) for a slightly tangy topping that balanced the sweetness of the berries and, thanks to the cream cheese,

gave the topping some pleasing heft. Then I sat down to enjoy my bright, fresh, very red, and very berry pie.

ICEBOX STRAWBERRY PIE Serves 8

In step 1, it is imperative that the cooked strawberry mixture measures 2 cups; any more and the filling will be loose. If your fresh berries aren't fully ripe, you may want to add extra sugar to taste in step 2. Use your favorite pie dough or go to CooksCountry.com for our recipe. Chill the heavy cream in step 4 to help it whip more quickly.

FILLING

- 2 pounds frozen strawberries (see box below)
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon unflavored gelatin
- 1 cup sugar
- Pinch salt
- 1 pound fresh strawberries, hulled and sliced thin
- 1 (9-inch) pie shell, baked and cooled (see note)

TOPPING

- 4 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup heavy cream

Troubleshooting Blind-Baked Crusts

Even if the pie you're making requires little or no baking, chances are good the crust needs oven time. In those cases, bakers "blind" bake, or prebake, the crust, a step that presents a number of challenges. Here's how to avoid trouble.

PROBLEM: Tough and Shrunken

SOLUTION: Cool the Crust

After the dough is rolled out and shaped, but before it is baked, chill it for at least 20 minutes in the refrigerator. This allows the gluten in the flour to "relax" and the butter to chill. Then freeze for 10 minutes to set its shape. Skip these steps at your peril: The crust will be misshapen and tough.



PROBLEM: Bubbled and Irregular

SOLUTION: Weigh It Down

Left to their own devices, pie crusts will puff, crater, and bake unevenly. To avoid those problems, line the shells with foil and fill them with pie weights before baking. Spray two 12-inch squares of foil and overlap over the dough, greased-side down, making sure to cover the crimped crust. Then fill them with 2 cups of ceramic pie weights, pennies, or dried beans.



PROBLEM: Pale Bottom

SOLUTION: Rearrange the Rack

Prevent a doughy crust by baking the (weight-filled) pie shell on the lower-middle oven rack at 375 degrees. Bake until the dough no longer looks wet under the foil, about 20 minutes. Carefully remove the hot foil and weights and—for an icebox pie—continue to bake the crust until firm and light brown, another 10 to 15 minutes.



1. COOK FROZEN BERRIES Cook frozen berries in large saucepan over medium-low heat until berries begin to release juice, about 3 minutes. Increase heat to medium-high and cook, stirring frequently, until thick and jamlike, about 25 minutes (mixture should measure 2 cups).

2. ADD GELATIN Combine lemon juice, water, and gelatin in small bowl. Let stand until gelatin is softened and mixture has thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir gelatin mixture, sugar, and salt into cooked berry mixture and return to simmer, about 2 minutes. Transfer to bowl and cool to room temperature, about 30 minutes.

3. ADD FRESH BERRIES Fold fresh berries into filling. Spread evenly in pie shell and refrigerate until set, about 4 hours. (Filled pie can be refrigerated for 24 hours.)

4. MAKE TOPPING With electric mixer on medium speed, beat cream cheese, sugar, and vanilla until smooth, about 30 seconds. With mixer running, add cream and whip until stiff peaks form, about 2 minutes. Serve pie with whipped cream topping.

Don't Make This Mistake

In step 1, be sure to accurately measure the reduced strawberry mixture: You'll need exactly 2 cups. Scrape the strawberry mixture into a large liquid measuring cup. If it measures more than 2 cups, return it to the pan to cook down. It may seem fussy to stop to measure, but the pie will not set or slice properly if you have more than 2 cups of the strawberry mixture.



MEASURE METICULOUSLY

RATING FROZEN STRAWBERRIES

Our Icebox Strawberry Pie recipe calls for 2 pounds of frozen strawberries. Would the brand of berry matter? We thawed and sampled three national brands, both plain and cooked in pie. Tasted plain, each brand had a surprisingly different flavor (one even tasted "pickled"), while textures ranged from mushy to firm and sizes from small to exceptionally large. The flavor variations were less pronounced but didn't disappear when the berries were used in pie.

What made them different? All three brands were Individually Quick Frozen (a system of rapidly freezing individual items to retain flavor, shape, and nutritional value), and none added sugar. While IQF increases the shelf life of the fruit, freezing can also damage it. As the berry thaws, sulfide ions are released, increasing the possibility of off-flavors. Two brands had these off-flavors, which tasters noticed in both raw and cooked berries. To be certain that this wasn't the result of supermarket handling or other outside factors, we tested multiple bags over time: our results were the same. Tasters preferred the only brand with no off-flavors: Cascadian Farm Frozen Premium Organic Strawberries. They were also the plumpest, juiciest berries, with good strawberry flavor and "balanced sweetness." —MEREDITH BUTCHER

RECOMMENDED

CASCADIAN FARM

Frozen Premium Organic Strawberries
Price: \$3.50 for 10 ounces



TASTERS' NOTES

Comments: Tasted on their own, these strawberries had the "strongest berry flavor, deepest red color and plumpest texture." They had the right balance of tartness and the "sweetness didn't override the berry taste." The berries were the largest and firmest of the three brands we tasted. And the pie made with this brand had the truest, brightest strawberry flavor.

NOT RECOMMENDED

WYMAN'S Stand-Up Bag Quick-Frozen Strawberries
Price: \$3.99 for 15 ounces



TASTERS' NOTES

Comments: Tasters described these berries as "woody" and "moldy," with a "bitter, grassy aftertaste." Their tartness overpowered any strawberry flavor, and the puckery, acidic punch left tasters wishing for a spoonful of sugar. Even in the pie, these berries were tart, and some found their flavor plasticky.

DOLE Whole Frozen Strawberries
Price: \$2.99 for 16 ounces



Comments: Tasters disliked this brand's "metallic," "tinny," and even "pickled" taste and found these berries the tartest of the bunch. The sugar muted most of the sour flavors when we baked the berries in the pie.