

French Silk Chocolate Pie

Don't let the name fool you: French Silk Pie was "born" in America. Betty Cooper, who lived in Maryland, won a \$1,000 prize for the recipe in 1951 in the third annual Pillsbury Bake-Off. Betty's recipe is an old-fashioned icebox pie—the exotic name reflects the international curiosity of postwar America and the Pillsbury contest. Cooper and other contestants wore corsages and dined on such swank dishes as breast of guinea hen and nectarines flambé. That's a far cry from the modern Pillsbury contests, where cooks create recipes from convenience products: Last year's winner, Double-Delight Peanut Butter Cookies, starts with refrigerated peanut butter cookie dough! In contrast, the Pillsbury product Betty Cooper used in French Silk Pie was flour (in the crust), plain and simple. BY DIANE UNGER



While some of these prize-winning recipes have gone the way of the black-and-white television, others stayed in the public eye long after the checks were cashed. To make the filling for her icebox pie, Betty whipped together butter, sugar, three squares of melted-and-cooled unsweetened chocolate, and raw eggs until the mixture was incredibly light and fluffy. She poured the filling into a homemade prebaked pie crust and chilled it until it was firm; no baking required. Served with dollops of whipped cream, French Silk Chocolate Pie was an instant hit.

Although you can find commercial versions of French Silk Pie in the freezer section of the supermarket, not many home cooks tackle it these days, possibly because the recipe calls for raw eggs. When I made Betty's original prize-winning recipe, I uncovered another reason: The pie barely tasted like chocolate. It may have pleased eaters 60 years ago, but

Americans today have become accustomed to ramped-up chocolate flavor.

In the interest of food safety, the recipe on the Pillsbury website calls for egg substitutes in place of the original raw eggs. I tested a few pies with various brands, but the fillings had an off, artificial flavor. I decided to stick with real eggs and cook the eggs and sugar on the stovetop, almost like making a custard. Once the egg and sugar mixture was light and thick (and cooked to a safe 160 degrees), I removed it from the heat and continued whipping it until it was fully cooled.

The original recipe called for 3 ounces of melted unsweetened chocolate. Wanting a more chocolaty pie, I tried doubling the amount, but the unsweetened chocolate was acidic and harsh at that volume (and adding more sugar ruined the texture). Next I made pies with semisweet and bittersweet, in combination and alone. Across the board, tasters preferred

the bold-but-balanced flavor of pies made with bitter-sweet chocolate. I tried different amounts and settled on 8 ounces, which I folded into the cooled egg and sugar mixture.

The filling tasted terrific, but it was much too dense when I beat in the two sticks of softened butter called for in the original recipe. Cutting the amount of butter in half got me closer to the satiny texture I wanted. But the filling wasn't quite silky or light enough.

Most recipes suggest serving the pie with whipped cream. I wondered if I could lighten the pie by incorporating whipped cream into the filling. I whipped 1 cup of cream, folded it into the chocolate mixture, and spooned the filling into the pie shell. I waited patiently for the pie to set (it took about three hours), sliced the pie, and dug in. The filling was light, but rich, thick, and chocolaty all at once. It was, finally, as smooth as French silk.