

WINTER SQUASH PIE

by Claire Fountain

With news of the great-pumpkin-shortage-of 09 folks are a bit worried about making those season specific pies. Fear not, pie fans, there is a better way that is conscious, sustainable and uses up beautiful winter squash. Yes, you can avoid the can all together by making your own puree of pumpkin or winter squash. If you are using a pumpkin, opt for a sugar pumpkin at the market. Smaller and sweeter with a better flesh for pies than a carving pumpkin, these are easy to deal with in general. Butternut squash is very similar to canned pumpkin, but other sweet winter squashes work too (Japanese pumpkins are good, Acorn is sweet but a little stringy, Buttercup is delicious, Kabocha could work, too.)

I usually make the entire squash or squashes (or pumpkin) into puree and then use what I need for the pie, and eat the rest (or stir it into muffins, scones, oatmeal, etc.) Five to six pounds will usually yield about 4 cups of puree, but... truth be told, I sometimes cut a winter squash open and the meat is thin, making less puree in the end. Use your best judgement here, and error on the side of too much... extra puree to eat is never a problem.

Cut your squash in half, remove the seeds and strings. I usually place the squash into a roast dish with a little water, cover with foil and bake until soft only because I really like using my oven. Steam squash until soft, or if you actually own and use a microwave... I assume you could use a glass lidded dish and "steam" the squash that way... as I do not discriminate against the microwavers out there. Once the squash is soft, remove the skin and make some puree! Ways to do this are my favorite food processor method (hello, simple) or you can use an immersion blender (hello, even more simple with less to clean.) If you have a ricer or food mill, those both work as well.

Now, I know you might be staring at your bowl of winter squash inners and thinking... how is this watery mess going to be pie, Claire? Ok. If you run into the problem of a watery squash or if you really want a more concentrated puree, place the squash mixture into a cheesecloth overnight or drain with a coffee filter. Some squash can be quite watery as you and I both know so if find this, get to draining.

Time for Pie!

You can make your own single layer crust, have chilled and ready in a glass pie pan, or purchase a, cough, organic and natural, cough one. Bring to room temperature. I crumble toasted pecans in the bottom of my pie crust before I pour the filling in, but that is the southern in me. You could easily save toasted nuts of any kind to sprinkle on top after it is baked with a rum whipped cream or a maple whipped cream or a whipped mascarpone cheese/whipped cream (1:1 ratio to make) topping.

1. Preheat oven to 375° F.
 2. Stir together 2 eggs, 2 cups puree, 1 1/4 cups half and half, 1 cup sugar (I like to use brown sugar 3/4 cup, and 1/4 cup white sugar but this is up to you. You could also use 3/4 cup honey or maple syrup but take note that will add moisture... not good if you have a watery squash.) 1/2 teaspoon sea salt, 1 teaspoon of cinnamon, 1/4 teaspoon fresh nutmeg, 1/2 teaspoon ginger, 1/8 teaspoon cloves...and if I have allspice I add that too but up to you....
 4. Pour into crust and bake until almost like gelatin in the middle. Over baking will cause that separated filling and crust problem around the edges (you know you've seen it.) Let cool to firm up and enjoy! Options on serving are at the top.
- note.** I have also made a quick cookie crust and pressed it into the bottom of a glass 13 x 9 inch baking dish and poured a double to triple round of filling onto it and made a slab pie-bar of sorts. Shape might change but concept and taste is the same, just more filling, less crust.

Put a fork in me, I'm done...and so is your pie! Happy Holidays.