

Recipes from The Brass Sisters



Marilynn Brass and Sheila Brass describe themselves as “two roundish bespectacled women in our sixties who have a combined total of 115 years’ home cooking experience.” The food historians and authors of two successful cookbooks, *Heirloom Baking with the Brass Sisters* and *Heirloom Cooking with the Brass Sisters*, they are also the stars of their own PBS television special, “The Brass Sisters: Queens of Comfort

Food.” Visit Marilyn and Sheila on their Web site at thebrassisters.com for more information and recipes.

Introduction: An Ample Serving of Dickens

Reading the works of Charles Dickens is very much like participating in a moveable feast because he captures so faithfully the characters of 19th-century England by what they eat and drink. Whenever one explores how people survived in past times, food is often a way of learning so much about them. Readers become culinary historians as they rediscover the Victorian world of Charles Dickens. Not only was he a conscientious recorder of the customs of the times, his works are fun to read or view.

Through Dickens and his vibrant prose, we learn that the class system was alive and well in Victorian England. The titled aristocracy enjoyed the many-coursed banquets, served by liveried servants, described in the cookbooks of Mrs. Agnes Marshall or Mrs. Isabella Beeton. Those in trade lived on a more modest level, but managed to eat well with their Christmas Goose, Plum Pudding, and High Teas. It was the poor, living on scraps of offal, gruel, and alcohol, who struggled to survive in an insensitive world.

With Dickens we see again the rough-and-tumble hawkers of meat pies and hot sausages on the smoky gas-lit streets of London. We walk with Mrs. Cratchet in *A Christmas Carol* as she retrieves her Christmas goose at the poultry or butcher market, after making her final weekly payment to the goose fund. We ride the bouncing coaches of Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, stopping at inns and chophouses for hasty

meals of mutton and beer. Sometimes the foods we learn about from the works of Dickens seem exotic and unfamiliar, but much of it, through his vivid descriptions, still seems appealing. One of the best ways to enjoy Charles Dickens is to prepare the dishes he describes in your own kitchen.

We have adapted four recipes from our two cookbooks, *Heirloom Cooking* and *Heirloom Baking*. They are recipes that have been rescued from crumbling handwritten scraps of paper or from oral tradition, and they mirror the food that Dickens' characters would have enjoyed.

Gather your friends around your table, light candles, and serve a Meat Pie with a rich pastry crust or a Shepherd's Pie with its comforting cover of mashed potatoes. At teatime, present the Currant Cream Scones with clotted cream and jam, or, perhaps, offer a slice of the Irish Sponge Cake with its glistening sugary crust, and become a part of the world of Charles Dickens.

Shepherd's Pie

by Marilyn and Sheila Brass

Serves 8 to 10



There is a long history of serving Shepherd's Pie in England. However, this is more a casserole than a pie because it has no crust, and uses a topping of mashed potatoes enriched with eggs and cream. Although the people of Dickens' world were fond of mutton and root vegetables, this milder, lighter, 21st-century adaptation is simple to make, filling, and economical. A similar pie made with ground beef is known as Cottage Pie. You can substitute ground beef for the ground lamb in this recipe, and the resulting pies will both be wonderful.

For Carmelized Onions

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2½ cups chopped onion

1 teaspoon salt

5 oz. (⅔ cup) water

For Filling

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 lbs. ground lamb

½ teaspoon dried thyme

1 teaspoon coarsely ground

black pepper

½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon chopped fresh parsley

¾ cup low-sodium beef stock, or as needed

1 tablespoon Wondra quick-mixing flour, or as needed

For Potato Topping

4 large potatoes, peeled, cut in quarters, and cooked in boiling water until tender

1 teaspoon salt

2 eggs, beaten

⅛ teaspoon nutmeg

½ cup heavy cream

1. To make the caramelized onions: Heat olive oil in a large frying pan over medium heat. Add onion and salt and cook, stirring with a wooden spoon, until translucent, 5 to 7 minutes. Reduce heat to low, add water, cover, and cook another 5 minutes, checking occasionally to be sure onions are not catching on bottom of pan. Remove cover, turn heat to medium, and stir with wooden spoon. Continue cooking until water is completely evaporated and onion is golden brown. Remove to a bowl and set aside.
2. Set the oven rack in the middle position. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Coat a 9-inch by 13-inch ovenproof glass baking dish with vegetable spray.
3. To make the filling: Add olive oil to frying pan and heat over medium heat. Add lamb and cook until no longer pink. Add caramelized onions, thyme, pepper, Worcestershire sauce, parsley, and beef stock. Stir with wooden spoon to combine. Add flour, reduce heat to low, and cook, stirring, until flour is absorbed and mixture thickens, approximately 3 to 5 minutes. Adjust consistency of gravy to your taste, adding more stock or flour as needed. Scrape mixture into prepared dish.
4. For the potato topping: Place potatoes in a potato ricer or mash in bowl until smooth. Add salt, eggs, nutmeg, and cream and stir well to combine. Spoon potato mixture into a disposable pastry bag fitted with a rosette tip. Pipe potatoes over top of pie until it is completely covered. Bake 25 minutes, or until potatoes are golden brown. Cover with foil if potatoes brown too quickly. Serve immediately. Cover leftover Shepherd's Pie with plastic wrap and store in the refrigerator.

Tips & Touches

- Place the mashed potatoes in a sturdy plastic bag. Snip off a corner diagonally with scissors to pipe potatoes.
- Always discard a used pastry bag or plastic bag because of possible raw egg contamination.

This recipe originally appeared as "Katherine's Shepherd's Pie" in *Heirloom Cooking with The Brass Sisters* by Marilyn and Sheila Brass, published by Black Dog & Leventhal, Inc. ©2008 Marilyn and Sheila Brass. Photographs copyright © 2008 Andy Ryan.

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Hearty English Meat Pie

by Marilyn and Sheila Brass

Serves 6 to 8



Traditional English Meat Pies were made with pork because it was more economical. Every cottager kept a pig, and there was an ample supply of pork in the butcher shops of London. We lightened this recipe by adding some ground beef. The Pork Pies of Dickens' time also used a larger proportion of pork fat. This recipe uses poultry seasoning, while other versions use a touch of dried thyme and savory. A heavier 19th-century Pork Pie would have included breadcrumbs, but crushed soda crackers work well. It is also acceptable to pulse the crackers in a food processor in your 21st-century kitchen.

Pastry for savory double-crust pie, divided in half and chilled (see below)

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

¼ cup chopped onion

2 tablespoons chopped shallots

1 lb. ground pork

½ lb. ground beef

1 teaspoon poultry seasoning

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper

¼ teaspoon ground cloves

1 cup crushed soda crackers, pulsed to large flakes in the bowl of a food processor fitted with the metal blade

1 egg, beaten

1. To prepare the crust: Coat a 9-inch ovenproof glass pie plate with vegetable spray. Roll out pastry dough in two rounds. Fit half of the dough into bottom of pie plate and trim off excess. Chill pastry for top and bottom crust in the refrigerator while you make the filling.
2. Heat olive oil in a large frying pan over medium heat. Add onion and shallot and cook, stirring with a wooden spoon, until translucent, 5 to 7 minutes. Do not brown. Add ground pork and beef and sauté, breaking up clumps of meat with wooden spoon, until meat is no longer pink. Remove mixture to a large bowl. Add poultry seasoning, salt, pepper, and cloves. Add cracker flakes and combine. Set mixture aside until cool.

3. Set the oven rack in the middle position. Preheat the oven to 450°F. Line a 14-inch by 16-inch baking sheet with foil, shiny side up, or use a silicone liner.
4. Add cooled filling to pie shell. Brush edges of pastry shell with beaten egg. Add top crust and seal and crimp edges. Make 2 slits in center of pie to allow steam to escape. Brush top crust and edges with beaten egg.
5. Place pie on foil-lined baking sheet and bake 30 minutes, or until top is golden brown. Check for browning after 20 minutes. If crust is browning too quickly, cover loosely with foil. Remove pie to a rack and cool slightly. Serve while still hot. Cover cooled leftover pie with a paper towel and plastic wrap and store in the refrigerator.

Tips & Touches

- Reheat leftover Meat Pie uncovered in 300°F oven for 20 minutes, or until warmed through.
- Serve slices of Meat Pie with strong mustard or bread and butter pickles.

Savory Pie Crust

This Savory Pie Crust is suitable for making the Meat Pie. It is easy-to-make and handle. Although it's not as substantial as the crusts of Victorian England, which were often made with lard or beef suet, it is a good adaptation of the more substantial crust that the bakers in Dickens' time would have produced in their home and inn kitchens. The crust for Dickens' Meat Pies would have been thicker and higher. Any leftover modern dough can be used to make leaves or other decorations to apply to the top pie crust before baking. This pie crust makes use of the innovative 21st-century food processor.

Makes dough for one double-crust, 9-inch pie

2 ½ cups flour

¼ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon chopped fresh herbs or ⅛ teaspoon dried herbs (optional)

½ cup cold butter, cut into 8 slices

½ cup chilled vegetable shortening

¼ cup ice water

1 egg, beaten (optional; for double-crust pie)

To make pastry

1. Place dry ingredients in the bowl of a food processor fitted with the metal blade. Pulse three times to mix. Add butter and shortening and pulse until crumbly. Add ice water. Pulse until mixture comes together.
2. Remove dough from bowl of processor, divide in half, and shape each half into a disk. Unless your kitchen is very warm, you don't have to chill dough before rolling out.

To make a double-crust pie

1. Coat a 9-inch ovenproof glass pie plate with vegetable spray.
2. Roll out each disk of dough between 2 sheets of floured wax paper or parchment paper until 2 inches wider than diameter across top of pie plate.
3. Fold one rolled disk in half and then in quarters. Place folded dough into bottom of pie plate. Carefully unfold dough and let it relax into pie plate. Trim excess dough from rim. Chill bottom crust while preparing filling.
4. Brush edges of bottom crust with beaten egg. Fill pie and flip second crust over top of pie. Trim excess dough around rim, leaving just enough dough to make a crimped edge. Press edges of dough together gently with your fingers. Crimp edges with tines of a salad fork or pie crimper. Cut six 1-inch decorative slits in center of top crust to allow steam to escape. Brush top crust and edges with beaten egg. Bake as directed in recipe.

The Hearty Meat Pie recipe originally appeared as "Germain Asselin's Stuffing Pie" in *Heirloom Cooking with the Brass Sisters* by Marilyn and Sheila Brass, published by Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, Inc. ©2008 Marilyn and Sheila Brass. Photographs copyright © 2008 Andy Ryan.

The Savory Pie Crust recipe originally appeared as "Sheila's Savory Pie Crust" in *Heirloom Cooking With The Brass Sisters* by Marilyn and Sheila Brass, published by Black Dog & Leventhal, Inc. © 2008 Marilyn and Sheila Brass. It is similar to a recipe for sweet pie crust by Bertha Bohlman, found in an early 20th century Manuscript Cookbook, from the collection of The Brass Sisters.

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Currant Cream Scones

by Marilyn and Sheila Brass

Makes 12 scones



Scones were the comfort food of the Victorians. A Scottish contribution to the English culinary menu, they were enjoyed hot with butter and jam, and clotted cream. Originally made with oats, the composition of scones has become more refined because the texture of flour and sugar and the size of eggs have become more standardized. The cooks of Dickens' time had to break up their sugar with metal nips because it came in large cones wrapped with blue paper. They also had to pulverize it to the desired grain. Flour varied from mill to mill, and eggs came directly from the hen. Scones were enjoyed by the upper and middle classes, but the ingredients were too costly for the very poorest in Dickens' England.

2 cups flour (plus ¼ cup for kneading dough)
 1 tablespoon baking powder
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon cinnamon
 ¼ cup butter
 ¼ cup sugar
 2 eggs
 ½ cup plus 2 tablespoons heavy cream
 1 tablespoon grated orange zest
 1 cup dried currants, plumped in ¼ cup orange juice*
 ¼ cup sugar

1. Set the oven rack in the middle position. Preheat the oven to 425°F. Cover a 14-inch by 16-inch baking sheet with foil, shiny side up. Coat the foil with vegetable spray or use a silicone liner.
2. Sift together flour, baking powder, salt, and cinnamon.
3. Cream butter and sugar in a medium bowl. Combine eggs and 1/2 cup of the heavy cream and add to butter mixture. Add grated orange zest. Add sifted dry ingredients and stir until a soft dough begins to form. Squeeze orange juice from currants and incorporate fruit into dough with your fingers.

4. Place dough on a generously floured surface. Knead gently five times, turning corners of dough toward the center. Pat dough into a 1/2-inch thick circle. Using a floured knife, cut dough into 12 equal wedges. Using a floured wide spatula, transfer each wedge to baking sheet. Brush wedges with the remaining heavy cream and sprinkle with remaining sugar. Bake 12 to 15 minutes, or until tops of scones are lightly brown and bottoms are golden brown. Place baking sheet on a rack and cool about 10 minutes. Serve scones warm with butter and jam. They are best when eaten the day they are made.

*To plump currants in tea, orange juice, or water, bring the liquid to a boil, immerse the raisins, continue to boil for 1 minute and set aside to allow them to absorb the plumping liquid. If needed immediately, place in plastic container and chill in freezer for 10 minutes. If not used the same day, refrigerate and use when needed.

This recipe originally appeared as "Marion A. Carter and M. E. Carter's Cranberry-Orange Cream Scones" in *Heirloom Baking With The Brass Sisters* by Marilyn and Sheila Brass, published by Black Dog & Leventhal, Inc. © 2006 Marilyn and Sheila Brass. Photographs copyright © 2006 Andy Ryan.

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Irish Sponge Cake

by Marilyn and Sheila Brass

Makes 10 slices



This simple sponge cake with its sublime sugar crust is similar to the dainty treats that would have been served at Afternoon Tea during Charles Dickens' time. Afternoon Tea featured cakes, scones with preserves and clotted cream, small sandwiches filled with thinly sliced cucumbers, salmon, or fish paste, as well as refined plates of buttered bread, and of course, tea—either Chinese or Indian. Afternoon Tea is not to be confused with High Tea, the hearty family meal that was served in the early evening.

At High Tea, strong cups of tea accompanied heavier fare such as boiled eggs, plates of sliced ham and tomatoes, small cakes, and toasted crumpets lavished with butter. Afternoon Tea was the custom of the rich and highly positioned, while High Tea was enjoyed by the middle class. Long-handled toasting forks were often handed down as sentimental reminders of pleasant family gatherings.

1 ¼ cups sugar, divided
4 eggs, separated
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 cup cake flour

1. Set the oven rack in the middle position. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Coat an 8-inch Bundt pan with vegetable spray. Dust the sides and bottom of pan with 3 tablespoons of the sugar.
2. Beat egg yolks in the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the paddle attachment. Add ½ cup of the sugar and beat until thick, about 5 minutes.
3. Place egg whites in another bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the whisk attachment. Beat until stiff. Add ½ cup of the sugar and beat again until sugar is incorporated.
4. Add egg yolks to egg whites. Add vanilla and continue beating with paddle attachment at medium speed until combined. Fold in cake flour.
5. Pour batter into Bundt pan. Sprinkle remaining tablespoon sugar on top of batter. Bake 30 minutes, or until tester inserted in middle comes out clean. The cake should

have a nice yellow color. Place on rack to cool. When completely cool, invert cake onto plate. Slice with sawing motion. Store under cake dome or loosely wrapped in wax paper at room temperature.

The recipe originally appeared as “Esther Pullman and Mary Brinkman’s Irish Sponge Cake” in *Heirloom Baking With The Brass Sisters* by Marilyn and Sheila Brass, published by Black Dog & Leventhal, Inc. ©2006 Marilyn and Sheila Brass. Photographs copyright © 2006 Andy Ryan.

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