



For me January is not the month to start a diet. It's too cold, too miserable and food treats offer a satisfyingly cheap and warm glow of simple pleasure that is just what I want at the tail end of winter. So I'm not even going to pretend to be detoxing by having some lovely healthy salad recipe. No, instead I created a new category - Diet-be-damned. And what else to have as the first recipe but one of my childhood favourites - lemon meringue pie. Yep sounds easy, like I just had to pull my well loved lemon meringue pie recipe from memory. Except although I love desserts I very rarely make them myself. I had a recipe mum had given me a few years ago - I decided to make the pie for a bake sale at the place I was working. It was a disaster. I hadn't beaten or cooked the egg white enough and by the time the bake sale opened it had - not sure what the word is - melted(?) into a liquid mess with still some meringuey looking bits floating around it. So I just bought it myself and ate the lemony bit - much to horror of my then colleagues. It's really not that difficult to make - I'm not sure how I managed to mess it up so badly. It didn't at all turn me off the pie though nor did it discourage me for trying to make it again. So this week I decided to try making it again as I was in the mood for something tangy and sweet, I had all the ingredients to hand (lemons, eggs, flour, cornflour, sugar and butter), and because one of the few resolutions I made was to add a new recipe each week.

Was it a disaster? Well I had to make it a couple of times, and it was a rocky start but now I've found a recipe that I'm really happy with.



The secret, I think, to a great lemon meringue pie is the pastry, well the pastry and managing to not mess up the meringue (and it isn't easy to mess up - really). I wanted a sweet pastry that wasn't too heavy or dry. The first pastry I made was very dry and heavy - a thick shortcake style. I found it very heavy and I briefly considered adding a category called You-might-as-well-stick-with-the-diet but in the end I decided that posting a recipe simply for the sake of sticking to the resolution would mean completely ignoring my original intention.

I thought that the shortcake didn't go well the lemon curd but then I tried a slice of the first pie the following day and the night in the refrigerator had really made a difference. While there was still too much pastry for my liking, the shortcake taste went really well with lemon and it was no longer so dry. It's basically a thinner version of the first attempt. It's very moist and difficult to roll but if you flour the surface very well and sprinkle flour over the dough itself before rolling it should be fine.

While I had all the ingredients to hand I don't have any baking beans so I just used some pebbles (that I sterilized first of course). They looked so pretty in the tin I had to take a picture.



The way I make Lemon Meringue Pie is

Ingredients

Serves 4

For pastry

- 80g plain flour
- 30g golden caster sugar (or fine brown sugar)
- 50g butter, chilled and diced
- 1/2 egg yolk
- 2 tbsp ice-cold water

For filling

- 1 1/2 lemons, juiced
- 3 eggs, separated (*the 1/2 egg yolk for the pastry is taken from these eggs*)
- 150g white caster sugar (for lemon curd)
- 3 tbsp white caster sugar (for meringue)
- 125ml water
- zest of 1 lemon
- 50g (or 2 heaped tbsp) cornflour

Instructions

1. Separate the 3 eggs into 2 large bowls. You need to put the egg whites into a very large bowl and be careful not to let any egg yolk (or anything greasy) in the bowl with the whites or else they will not form meringues.

2. Take a teaspoon of the egg-yolk and blend in a cup with the 2 tablespoons of chilled water.

3. Beat the 150g white sugar into the rest of the egg yolks, cover the 2 bowls (the one with yolks and the one with the whites) and leave aside.

4. Put the flour, the golden/brown sugar and butter into a food processor. Blend until it has reached a crumbly consistency.

5. With the food processor still running slowly add in the egg and water mix. The dough should now be clumping together.

6. Take the dough from the processor, wrap in some clingfilm and leave to chill in the fridge for 15 minutes. The clingfilm is necessary so that the pastry doesn't form a "skin".

7. Add the 125ml of water and the zest of one lemon to a small saucepan. Turn on the ring/hob to the lowest heat setting and leave to infuse.

8. Add the cornflour to a pint glass and blend with the juice of one and half lemons.

9. Pre-heat the oven to 200° C.

10. Grease your baking tin (about 7 inches) well with butter and place in the fridge. *Placing the tin in the fridge is necessary in my small flat as the kitchen gets quite warm while I heat the oven. It may not be a necessary step for you.*

11. Flour the surface well where you are going to roll out the dough. Take the dough from the fridge. Sprinkle some flour over it and roll it into the shape of your baking tin. *If your pastry sticks to the surface and tears when you try and transfer it to the baking tin - don't worry just gather all the pastry together again, pat back into a ball, re-flour the surface and the dough and try again. Eventually you'll have a sheet of pastry hanging off your rolling pin that you can line your baking tin with.*

12. Take the tin from the fridge, line it with the pastry. With a knife or spatula remove the excess pastry. With a fork prick the pastry base in the tin lightly here and there. Weigh down the base with baking beans (or sterilized and oiled pebbles). *You might be wondering if this is really necessary - it is. I know this because the first time I followed a recipe like this I didn't have any baking beans (still don't) and thought I bet it will be fine without them. I was wrong. The base rises in the centre and the pastry case will then break if you try and fill it with anything.*

13. When you line the tin there is always excess pastry and I don't like to just throw out the scraps. Instead gather the scraps together roll them out into a square, add a teaspoon of jam in the centre, fold the sides into the centre, leaving a sliver of gap there. As this pie is best when it has chilled in the fridge for a couple of hours this little jam tart will be a nice treat to have with a coffee right after you've baked.

14. Put the pie base (and the jam tart if you made it) into the oven and bake for 15 - 20 minutes or until it is golden brown.

15. While the pastry is baking you can prepare the filling. Uncover the bowl with the egg yolks and have it ready by the cooker (but not on any heat source).

16. 

Stir the lemon juice and cornflour mix again to ensure it's nicely blended. Then pour in the lemon zest infused water, through a strainer, into the cornflour mix while stirring all the time. Pour the glass back into the saucepan and turn up the heat. Keep stirring. You will probably be stirring for 2 - 3 minutes before the mixture thickens but keep stirring as it will thicken and by continuously stirring it in you'll ensure that it doesn't form lumps.

With the proportions I've given it should definitely thicken but on the off-chance that it really isn't thickening after 5 minutes then take the saucepan off the heat, put a tsp of cornflour into a glass, blend with a little water, return the saucepan to the heat and while stirring continuously, slowly add in this mix.

17. When the lemon mixture has thickened. Stir it into the yolk-sugar mix. It's important to add the hot mixture into the cold rather than adding the yolks straight into the saucepan to avoid curdling. When you have the lemon well blended with the eggs and sugar, again return to the saucepan, reduce heat to lowest setting and stirring continuously cook for another 2 minutes. Take off the heat and leave aside.

18. If you are as slow as me the pastry should probably be ready. If so, take out and leave to cool a little.

19.



Add the 3 tablespoons of white sugar to the eggs and beat until they form soft peaks. Give it one more round of beating for luck.

20. Remove the pebbles or beans from the pastry base and fill with the lemon curd.

21. With a spatula spread the meringue on top of the lemon curd. Bake in the oven for just 5 minutes at 200° C. Then turn off the oven and turn on the grill. Toast the meringue till golden brown on top. *This way you still have the lovely soft airy texture of meringue and it also wont "melt" later.*

22. Leave to cool completely. Then refrigerate for at least 2 hours more. And then - enjoy.