

Cornish pasties

Pasties are semi-circular hand pies with a distinctive crimped edge. Today they are often sold in British train stations with a range of fillings, but in the past they were only made with meat, potato, onion and turnip. They were eaten by fishermen and other workmen, but especially by the miners of Cornwall in the many tin, silver and copper mines that are still dotted around the rugged landscape of the Cornish peninsula. An 1861 newspaper article from Leeds indicates that the Cornish pasty was already being sold to tourists in the region at the time. By then the pasty was no longer just food for the working people, and Victorian tourists would buy them as the local delicacy.

At the beginning of the 19th century, many Cornish miners emigrated to the American states of California, Montana, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, and to Mexico and Australia. Known as the best miners in the world with the most progressive tools and the best techniques, they started working in mines that were sometimes even bought up by British investors. They took their culture of pasties with them and, as a result, a pasty culture emerged in those regions. In 1968, Governor George Romney declared 24 May as Pasty Day in the state of Michigan. There you will now find places that sell pasties as Michigan pasties.

In Mexico's state Hidalgo, the pasty is the legacy of the mining past. Here the pasty has Mexican-style fillings such as *mole*, a spicy chilli and chocolate sauce, and *tinga*, pulled pork marinated in a sauce of chipotle, pepper and tomatoes. In Real Del Monte, Cornish Mexico, *auténtico paste* is decorated with the flag of Cornwall. There is a Museo del Paste and the city holds an international pasty festival every year.

In 2011, Cornish pasties were granted a PGI status by the EU, which means a pasty can only be called a Cornish pasty if it's made in Cornwall, has the shape of a D, it contains a minimum of 12.5 per cent raw beef, turnip, potato, onion and a light seasoning, and the dough is shortcrust and crimped on one side, never on top. Where the crimped edge should be is debatable, since I have found a postcard from around 1900 showing the pasties crimped on the top and not the side. That goes to show that what is considered authentic or traditional is often not certain.

For 6 pasties

For the shortcrust pastry

600 g (1 lb 5 oz) plain (all-purpose) flour

½ tsp sea salt

300 g (10½ oz) chilled butter, diced

150 ml (5 fl oz) water

flour, for dusting

2 egg yolks + 2 tbsp milk, for egg wash

For the filling

450 g (1 lb) onglet, skirt steak or hanging tender

450 g (1 lb) floury potatoes

120 g (4¼ oz) turnip

2 onions

sea salt and pepper, to taste

Make the pastry by combining the flour, salt and butter in a food processor fitted with the blade attachment. Pulse for 8 seconds or until the mixture resembles breadcrumbs. Add the water and pulse again until the dough forms a ball in the bowl. Remove from the bowl and knead briefly. You can also do this by hand by rubbing the butter into the flour and salt until it is the consistency of breadcrumbs, then add the water. Remove from the bowl and knead to bring the pastry together. Wrap the pastry in plastic wrap and let it rest in the refrigerator for 30 minutes.

Preheat your oven to 190° C (375° F) and line a baking tray with baking paper.

For the filling, chop the meat, potatoes and turnip into 1 cm (½ inch) cubes. Finely chop the onion. Combine the meat and vegetables in a large bowl and season with salt and pepper.

Roll out the pastry on a floured work surface. Using a plate as a guide, cut out six 24 cm (9½ inch) circles and brush the edges with the egg wash. Divide the filling among the centre of the circles and fold in half. Use your fingers to crimp the pastry in the traditional way.

Lay the pasties on their side on the baking tray and brush with the egg wash. Bake for 40–50 minutes until the pasties are golden brown. Serve hot, or reheat the next day.

Oats in the North, Wheat from the South: The history of British baking, savoury and sweet by Regula Ysewijn (Murdoch Books, £25). Photography by Regula Ysewijn.