

# Delivering Pie in the Sky

A Recipe from Mom Showcases the Lemon's Star Qualities

THE ONLY TIME I'VE EVER SENT A SUSPICIOUS package through the mails was when I shipped a lemon meringue pie to a writer friend. I owed him a favor and had promised a pie, but when he kept canceling the drop-off date, I finally just baked it, put it in a box, wrapped it in brown paper and sent it to the magazine where he worked. It should have been dangerous after sitting for several days in the mail room, but he ate the entire

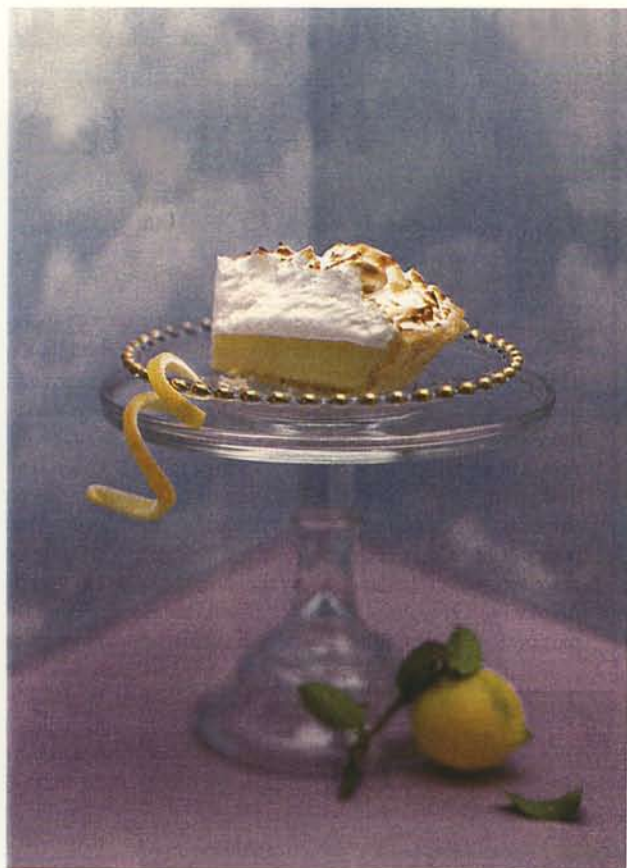
thing and said it was delicious.

I believe him. I've never had any complaints about the lemon meringue pie made from my mother's recipe. My husband's eyes glaze over if there's one in the house, and he can't think of anything else until it's gone.

Lemons are a natural attention-getter. In desserts, they cut through the fog of a heavy meal. In savory dishes, they focus and intensify flavors, lessening the need for salt. And when I say lemon, I mean Eureka, the bright yellow oval fruit with the nipple-like knob, developed and grown commercially in California, provider of four-fifths of the nation's supply. I don't mean the less-acidic Meyer lemon now considered chic among varietal-name-dropping chefs. Meyers are an insipid lemon, thin-skinned and weak-natured. They're said to be a cross between a lemon and an orange. I say they're not to be trusted. Eureka's are the Little Richard of lemons; Meyers are the Pat Boone.

Interior designers use lemons for their eye-catching yellow. The 3-foot-tall iron lattice-weave baskets filled with Eureka lemons stopped me dead in my tracks at last year's Pasadena Showcase House of Design. Such an extravagant lemon supply wouldn't last long in my decor. Then it dawned on me—this load was meant just for looks. Conspicuous non-consumption. Letting so much lemon potential go admired but untouched might be considered a little obscene.

I'd be less sour on the subject if it weren't for the years of stunted growth, premature fruit drop and mutant offerings I've suffered while growing a backyard lemon supply. After my Pasadena epiphany, I decided to plant another tree and this past winter delivered our first serious crop.



## MOM'S LEMON MERINGUE PIE

- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup water
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 4 tablespoons cornstarch
- 4 tablespoons water
- 4 to 6 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- Zest from 1 lemon, finely grated
- 3 eggs, yolks and whites separated
- 1 to 4 tablespoons sugar for meringue (or to taste)
- 1 pie crust (see below)

Suggested order of preparation: Make pie crust first, then cook filling and whip meringue. To make filling, combine sugar, water and butter in medium saucepan over medium heat. Cook until sugar dissolves. Combine cornstarch and water and add. Cook until thickened. Transfer filling to double boiler. Add lemon juice, zest and egg yolks. Cook until slightly thickened. Set aside. To make meringue, whip egg whites until they form stiff peaks. Add sugar. Set aside. To assemble pie, pour filling into cooled crust. Spoon meringue over filling. Bake in preheated 350-degree oven until golden brown, about 7 minutes.

## Mom's Basic Pie Crust

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/3 cup shortening (preferably Crisco)
- 2 to 3 tablespoons milk or water

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Sift together flour and salt. Cut in shortening until it forms pea-size bits. Add milk or water. Mix dough with hands until it forms workable ball. Roll out dough on floured board. Fit dough into 8-inch pie pan, then trim and crimp edges. Chill till firm. Bake 25 minutes. Cool and set aside.

I bought a zester and peeler to celebrate, and the two gadgets are now on permanent kitchen display next to a few lemons-in-progress. We strip fragrant peels for morning espresso, rake pungent zest strings, like party streamers, into soups, stews, poultry and meat marinades, pastas and rice, and use the juice in most everything edible, but especially to revive frozen or canned foods. One of the best salad dressings is simply lemon juice whisked with extra-virgin olive oil, salt and pepper. Drizzle it on arugula with shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.

There may be no greater lemon showcase, though, than lemon meringue pie. My mother's is as fundamental and necessary as the citrus fruit from which it is made. I bake it for 10 to 15 minutes, until the meringue gently weeps. With the golden moisture beads dribbling down the browned meringue mounds, it looks like the perfect airbrushed illustration of what a pie should be. And the first warm, tart yet sweet bite is always, and by far, more beautiful than a basket filled with lemons begging to be used.

—NANCY SPILLER

Nancy Spiller last wrote about artichokes for the magazine.