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A square-shaped Concord grape pie (Renée LaReau)

by Renée Lareau

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I'm not proud to say it, but I'm ordering takeout for Thanksgiving. I'm tired, and our household of five is celebrating on our own, as so many of us are. I won't be roasting a turkey, cleaning our house for guests or dressing up for the day. I will, however, rally to make and bake a couple of fresh pies. It's what I do — during pandemic times, anyway.

You see, since our city first went under lockdown in March, I have baked nearly 50 pies. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, I had baked three, maybe four. I blame Instagram for this madness — madness that has also brought extraordinary comfort, connection and meaning in the past seven months.

This is how it began: One night, during a pre-bedtime Instagram scroll, my eyes landed on an image that captivated me. It was a photo of a cranberry-apple pie, made by a baker in London. But this was no ordinary pie — its top crust was decorated with braided pie dough and columns of impeccably cut-out hearts. It was the most beautiful pie I had ever seen.

I have admired stunning birthday and wedding cakes before, of course, but there was something about this homey yet detailed design that seemed within my reach. Before long, I was deep in the interwebs, studying intricate pie designs, how-to videos and ordering extra flour and butter from Instacart. "I'm earning a Ph.D. in pie crust from IGTV," I told my friends.

I recreated that braided and heart-studded pie straight from the Instagram photo, and it was beautiful. I filled it with strawberries and fresh rhubarb from our farmers' market, and it was delicious. Beginner's luck, perhaps, so I decided to try again.

I found another beautiful pie to recreate, this time a custard pie decorated with pie-crust roses. Again, it worked, and it was delicious. I posted photos of both pies on Instagram, and my friends loved them.

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"Keep posting these pies," wrote a friend in the throes of entertaining two young kids in lockdown. "They are making me smile!"

"Quit your job!" commented another. "These are amazing!"

I haven't quit my day job and enjoy it too much to do so, but pie-baking has become my number-one spiritual practice. In part this is because some of my usual means of praying — playing flute at Mass and reading spiritual books — are now inaccessible to me due to safety protocols and a compromised ability to concentrate (thanks, anxiety).

But working with my hands is different. I'm able to make a pie with extraordinary, laser-like focus. It's soothing to create something beautiful from start to finish in just a few hours. I'm reminded of the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist after the presentation of the gifts, when we hear the ancient Hebrew blessing, the *berakah*, of the bread: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all Creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life."

I'm not equating homemade pie and the Eucharist, but there certainly are some parallels. I became more conscious of these parallels as I baked pies along with the seasons, picking up local fruit from the farmers' market throughout the summer and fall. I started with strawberries and rhubarb in May and June, transitioned to blueberries and cherries in July, then shifted to apples and Concord grapes (literally, the fruit of the vine!) in August and September. These days, of course, I'm up to my elbows in pumpkin.



Pumpkin pie (Renée LaReau)



Apple pie (Renée LaReau)



## Cherry hazelnut pie (Renée LaReau)

In addition to the creating, I have also found meaning in the sharing. Sharing pies sparks joy within me. I give most of my pies away, as there's no shortage of weary, grieving people who deserve them. I've baked pies for our mail carrier, the local Catholic Worker community, my kids' overworked teachers, a newly widowed neighbor, a friend recovering from surgery and all of my immediate coworkers. I've also made new connections with neighbors, friends and family. I learned that one neighbor loves to eat pie for breakfast with coffee and discovered through an Instagram message from my aunt that strawberry rhubarb pie was my grandfather's favorite. I am newly acquainted with the favorite pie flavors of my cousins, grade-school classmates and Facebook friends, and have dozens of recommended recipes bookmarked. It's been heartening to communicate about something so seemingly lighthearted yet so meaningful. After all, there are few things more personal than what we eat.

I've also discovered baking can be used as a tool for social change — in June, I participated in the international fundraiser [Bakers Against Racism](#), raising funds for a local Black-owned bookstore. Unofficially the world's largest bake sale, the movement raised over \$2 million for social justice causes worldwide. Again, making even more connections beyond my usual networks was energizing and heartening, and it fulfilled my desire to do something tangible and immediate amid the summer's anguish, grief and unrest.



Pecan pie (Renée LaReau)

Whoever coined the phrase "easy as pie" didn't get it quite right, if you ask me. I wouldn't classify pie-making as easy. It's time consuming, a little tricky, and doing it well requires many unsuccessful attempts. But for me, it has been a meaningful spiritual practice. It has not eliminated the stresses of the pandemic but certainly has made them much easier to endure.

I haven't yet decided what kinds of pie I'll make for Thanksgiving, though a chocolate-pecan recipe has caught my eye. But I do know we'll begin our dinner as we always do: by saying grace. And once the dishes are cleared, I'll slice up the pies, sharing them with my family as my new favorite post-meal prayer of gratitude.

[Renée LaReau is a senior writer at the University of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs and the founder of South Bend Baking Supply.]