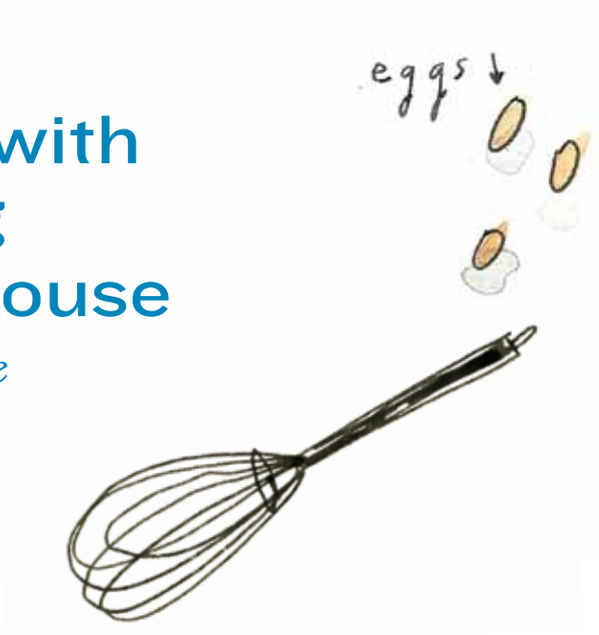
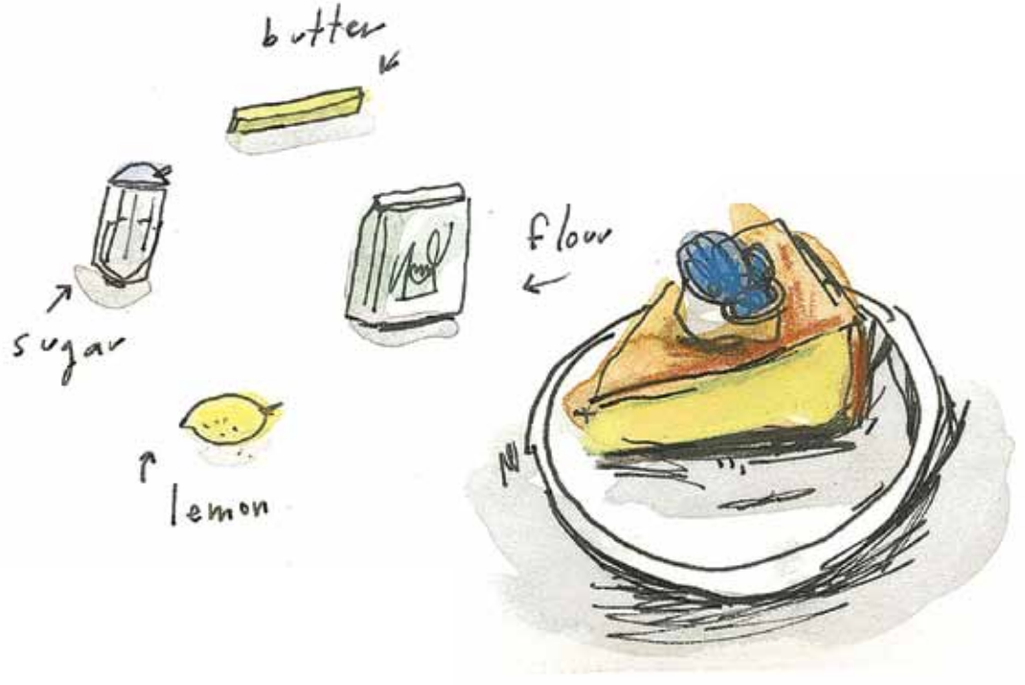
# Baking with Nothing in the House

## *Lemon chess pie*

*by Emily Hilliard*




I STARTED BAKING PIES the summer after college. My friends and I had discovered a wealth of berry trees and bushes near the house we shared in Ann Arbor, and we'd go out on frequent picking missions. We collected so many berries that we started baking pies together in the evenings. When I moved away after that summer, my friend Margaret suggested that we start a blog to keep in touch through the pies we baked, and "Nothing-in-the-House" was born.

Nothing-in-the-house pies, also called "desperation pies," were popular during the Great Depression in the South and beyond. These pies were made from a few inexpensive ingredients, and included vinegar pie, cracker pie, and green-tomato pie. Thus the name of my blog is a nod to history, thrift, and practicality, in solidarity with other home bakers, past and present.

Chess pie is one of those true nothing-in-the-house pies, made with cheap, readily available ingredients. Though there are many speculative stories on the origins of the name for this humble dessert, the one that most historians agree upon is that it is an alteration of "cheese pie," a common British tea or after-dinner tart that, curiously, did not actually contain cheese.



The name was probably linked to the pie and other non-cheese puddings because the lemon curd–like filling simulated the texture of soft cheese. In fact, "lemon cheese" was a colloquial term for lemon curd. As Karen Hess notes in her annotated edition of Mary Randolph's *The Virginia Housewife* (1824), cheese was often spelled with only one "e," hence the misreading and subsequent evolution to "chess." Though *The Virginia Housewife* includes neither a cheese nor chess pie recipe, Randolph's transparent pudding is essentially the same as S.R. Dutt's "chess pie," which appeared in her 1928 book *Southern Cooking* and was the first recipe to bear the name. As is true in most of today's chess pie varieties, the main ingredients for the filling are butter, sugar, and eggs.

This pie is adapted from the recipe for Kentucky lemon chess Pie in the *New York Times Heritage Cookbook*, edited by Jean Hewitt. It's just a tad fancier than a straight chess pie, but is still quite simple. The cornmeal adds a little substance to the filling, and the lemon zest and juice make it taste almost like the lemon bars of my Midwestern upbringing. Once baked, the top of the pie should form a crust, with an oozy, lemony filling underneath.

## Nothing in the House Lemon Chess Pie

*Makes 1, 9-inch pie*

INGREDIENTS

Your favorite pie crust recipe for a 1-crust pie, unbaked
½ c. (1 stick) butter at room temperature
1 ¼ c. sugar
1 Tbsp. yellow corn meal
3 eggs
Grated zest of 1 lemon
Juice of 1 lemon
1 tsp. vanilla extract
¼ tsp. salt

DIRECTIONS

1. Prepare the pie crust per your preferred recipe, or use the Nothing in the House crust recipe (found online). Chill dough at least 1 hour before rolling out and fitting into a greased and floured 9-inch pie pan. Preheat the oven to 325 degrees F. Put the rolled and fitted crust back in the fridge while you prepare the filling.

2. Cream together the butter and sugar in a mixing bowl, using a wooden spoon or a stand mixer. Then beat in the cornmeal.

3. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Mix in the lemon zest, lemon juice, vanilla, and salt until well combined. Pour the filling into the pie shell and bake for 45–60 minutes, or until the top of the filling forms a crust and a knife inserted into the middle comes out clean. Serve with berries and whipped cream.

*Emily Hilliard writes the blog www.nothinginthehouse.com. Elizabeth Graeber is an illustrator whose work can be found at www.elizabethgraeber.com. Together, they created the book* PIE: A Hand Drawn Almanac. ILLUSTRATIONS by Elizabeth Graeber.



# TE QUIERO, LA MICHOACANA

## *Mexican paletas find a following in Memphis*

*by Mark Camarigg*

EVERY MORNING, twenty-five-year-old Rafael Gonzalez delivers coolers laden with homemade ice cream and *paletas*, or popsicles, to his three Memphis-area La Michoacana ice cream shops. His recipe is simple: fresh fruit, fresh cream, and sugar. Horchata (a blend of rice milk and cinnamon) and pine nut are the most popular flavors, along with avocado, strawberry, and vanilla. Gonzalez sources dulce de leche from his father's ice cream shop in Chihuahua, Mexico. And he imports ice cream making equipment from the tiny village of Tocumbo, in the state of Michoacan.

Ice cream making is a Gonzalez family tradition. Says Rafael, "My father is sixty-five, and he started selling paletas when he was fifteen in Tocumbo. I started when I was seven years old, and my dad taught me how to make them. He gave me my recipes, and I'll show them to my kids."

The history of paletas is tangled in a seventy-year-old ice cream making tradition that originated in Tocumbo. In the 1940s, cousins Agustín Andrade and Ignacio Alcázar left behind field work in