

Henry Ward Beecher

Apple-Pie

“I don’t have time to cook” is a common enough complaint among busy people; we would like to have more time for food, but life’s other demands interfere. And yet for the Beechers—that astonishingly overachieving Yankee family—accomplishment in the ministry, in politics, in education, and in the arts seems to have gone hand-in-hand with an abiding interest in eating well and everything that entails. Sister Catharine, founder of colleges and advocate of reform in the education of women, also wrote one of her century’s leading home-ec manuals, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841). Sister Harriet, the famous novelist, published extensively on cookery as well. And here, brother Henry (1813–1887), the most celebrated preacher of his day, turns his formidable attention to one of the humbler icons of the American kitchen, apple pie.



How often people use language without the slightest sense of its deep, interior meaning! Thus, no phrase is more carelessly or frequently used than the saying, “*Apple-pie order*.” How few who say so reflect at the time upon either apple-pie or the true order of apple-pie! Perhaps they have been reared without instruction. They may have been born in families that were ignorant of apple-pie; or who were left to the guilt of calling two tough pieces of half-cooked dough, with a thin streak of macerated dried apple between them, of leather color, and of taste and texture not unbecoming the same,—an apple-pie! But from such profound degradation of ideas we turn away with gratitude and humility, that one so unworthy as we should have been reared to better things.

We are also affected with a sense of regret for duty unperformed; for great as have been the benefits received, we have never yet celebrated as we ought the merits of apple-pie. That reflection shall no longer cast its shadow upon us.

“Henry, go down cellar, and bring me up some Spitzenbergs.” The cellar was as large as the whole house, and the house was broad as a small pyramid.

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The north side was windowless, and banked up outside with frost-defying tan-bark. The south side had windows, festooned and frescoed with the webs of spiders, that wove their tapestries over every corner in the neighborhood, and, when no flies were to be had, ate up each other, as if they were nothing but politicians, instead of being lawful and honorable *arachnidæ*. On the east side stood a row of cider-barrels; for twelve or twenty barrels of cider were a fit provision for the year,—and what was not consumed for drink was expected duly to turn into vinegar, and was then exalted to certain hogsheads kept for the purpose. But along the middle of the cellar were the apple-bins; and when the season had been propitious, there were stores and heaps of Russets, Greenings, Seeknofurthers, Pearmains, Gilliflowers, Spitzenbergs, and many besides, nameless, but not virtueless. Thence selecting, we duly brought up the apples. Some people think anything will do for pies. But the best for eating are the best for cooking. Who would make jelly of any other apple, that had the *Porter*? who would bake or roast any other sweet apple, that had the *Ladies' Sweeting*,—unless, perhaps, the *Talman Sweet*? and who would put into a pie any apple but *Spitzenberg*, that had *that*? Off with their jackets! Fill the great wooden bowl with the sound rogues! And now, O cook! which shall it be? For at this point the roads diverge, and though they all come back at length to apple-pie, it is not a matter of indifference which you choose. There is, for example, one made without under-crust, in a deep plate, and the apples laid in, in full quarters; or the apples being stewed are beaten to a mush, and seasoned, and put between the double paste; or they are sliced thin and cooked entirely within the covers; or they are put without seasoning into their bed, and when baked, the upper lid is raised, and the butter, nutmeg, cinnamon, and sugar are added; the whole well mixed, and the crust returned as if nothing had happened.

But O be careful of the paste! Let it not be like putty, nor rush to the other extreme, and make it so flaky that one holds his breath while eating for fear of blowing it all away. Let it not be plain as bread, nor yet rich like cake. Aim at that glorious medium, in which it is tender, without being fugaciously flaky; short, without being too short; a mild, sapid, brittle thing, that lies upon the tongue, so as to let the apple strike through and touch the *papillæ* with a mere effluent flavor. But this, like all high art, must be a thing of inspiration or instinct. A true cook will understand us, and we care not if others do not!

Do not suppose that we limit the apple-pie to the kinds and methods enumerated. Its capacity in variation is endless, and every diversity discovers some new charm or flavor. It will accept almost every flavor of every spice. And yet nothing is so fatal to the rare and higher graces of apple-pie as inconsiderate, vulgar spicing. It is not meant to be a mere vehicle for the exhibition of these spices, in their own natures. It is a glorious unity in which sugar gives up its nature as sugar, and butter ceases to be butter, and each flavorsome spice gladly evanishes from its own full nature, that all of them, by a common death, may rise into the new life of apple-pie! Not that apple is longer apple! *It*, too, is transformed. And the final pie, though born of apple, sugar, butter, nutmeg, cinnamon, lemon, is like none of these, but the compound ideal of them all, refined, purified, and by fire fixed in blissful perfection.

But all exquisite creations are short-lived. The natural term of an apple-pie is but twelve hours. It reaches its highest state about one hour after it comes from the oven, and just before its natural heat has quite departed. But every hour afterward is a declension. And after it is one day old, it is thenceforward but the ghastly corpse of apple-pie.

But while it is yet florescent, white or creamy yellow, with the merest drip of candied juice along the edges, (as if the flavor were so good to itself that its own lips watered!) of a mild and modest warmth, the sugar suggesting jelly, yet not jellied, the morsels of apple neither dissolved nor yet in original substance, but hanging as it were in a trance between the spirit and the flesh of applehood, then, when dinner is to be served at five o'clock, and you are pivotted on the hour of one with a ravening appetite, let the good dame bring forth for luncheon an apple-pie, with cheese a year old, crumbling and yet moist, but not with base fluid, but oily rather; then, O blessed man, favored by all the divinities! eat, give thanks, and go forth, "*in apple-pie order!*"