

Baking a Leek Tart

Get hearty taste from a subtle onion
and an enriched dough

BY GUDRUN RITER



Photo: Susan Kahn

Golden crust and firm center. The tart is baked for about 30 minutes until the crust is golden brown and the custard is no longer runny.

Caraway seasoning. The strong, spicy flavor of caraway seeds blends with the sweet leeks, smoky bacon, and rich cream in the custard topping.



In the village where I grew up in Rheinland-Pfalz in southwestern Germany, the fare is simple and rustic. But it's an adaptable and variable cuisine. That's because our curious cooks love to peek into the cooking pots of our French neighbors, pilfer their recipes, adjust them to our own taste, and then call them *echt pfaelzisch*, or genuine pfaelzisch.

One of these adaptations is the leek tart, a flat yeast bread topped with a moist, creamy leek-and-bacon custard. I think of it as a hybrid of Alsatian Flammkuchen, quiche Lorraine, and German Zwiebelkuchen, or onion tart. Leek tarts remind me of my childhood: we'd eat them after the grape harvest with a tangy, fizzy, new, white *Federweisser* wine.

To make the soft, bread-like crust that's characteristic of German tarts, you simply add eggs, butter, and milk to enrich the yeast dough. The custard filling isn't difficult to make, but inattention at two points can ruin the topping. First, the leeks must be thoroughly cleaned so that no grit gets into the custard. Second, the cooked leeks, bacon, and cream must be cool when the eggs are added. Otherwise, the eggs cook immediately and make the custard lumpy.

Now that I live in California, I find many occasions to bake a leek tart. It's good warm or at room temperature. It makes a wonderful lunch dish,



Rolling in place. The dough is rolled right in the baking sheet. You could roll the dough on a floured work surface and then transfer it to the sheet, but rolling in place saves a step and keeps the counter clean. The dishtowel under the pan prevents it from sliding around.

served with a soup or green salad. My American friends enjoy it as a party food with a cool glass of Pilsner or a dry white wine, and my children like to take it to school for lunch.

THE CRUST

- 1 cup milk
- 2 eggs
- 2 tablespoons butter
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 package dry yeast or cake of compressed yeast
- 4 cups flour

THE CUSTARD TOPPING

- 6 leeks
- ½ pound bacon
- 1 cup cream
- 1 teaspoon caraway seeds
- Salt and pepper
- 3 eggs
- 1 egg yolk

MAKING THE CRUST

Since a warm dough rises faster than a cool dough, you should warm the milk, eggs, and butter before putting them in the dough. Submerge the eggs in hot water for about 10 minutes. Heat the milk on the stove or in the microwave until it's lukewarm. Soften the butter by letting it sit at room temperature, or zap it for a few seconds in the microwave.

Mix the batter. Pour the milk in a large bowl and dissolve the sugar and salt in it. Sprinkle or crumble the yeast on top of the milk and wait 2 or 3 minutes for the yeast to rehydrate. I don't bother to proof the yeast before I add it. I check the package to make sure it hasn't passed its expiration date, and I've seldom had problems with the dough not rising. For cake yeast, I make sure it's moist and has a pleasant old-beer smell.

Add the eggs, the butter (cut into small pieces), and 1 cup of flour, and beat with a wooden spoon or an electric mixer. Add the second cup of flour and continue to stir. When the flour is absorbed, pour in the third cup. At this point, the dough will be stiff and heavy. Mix it with your hands, or if you're using an electric mixer, change to the dough hook. Gradually sprinkle on more flour and work it in until the



Egg wash. Egg yolk painted on the rim varnishes the crust as it bakes. The crust's edges are raised to contain the custard filling.

dough is no longer sticky and it pulls away from the sides of the bowl.

Knead the dough until it's smooth and satiny, which by hand takes about 15 to 20 minutes. For years, I always kneaded by hand to defy an old woman in my village who baked the most wonderful yeast breads. Once when I asked her the secrets of her breads, she said, "It's no use trying, girl. Young women don't have the patience to knead dough properly." Today, my defiance has given way to convenience, and I use the dough hook on my Kitchen-Aid mixer, which does the job in about 3 minutes.

Let the dough rise. After kneading, turn the dough over in a greased bowl. Cover and let it rise in a warm place until it doubles in size, which should take about an hour. Punch down the dough and knead it again briefly to release trapped air.

Roll and shape the dough. I like large, rectangular tarts, so I use a 12- by 18-inch baking sheet. You can make several small, round tarts or two pizza-size tarts with this recipe. Lightly oil whatever baking sheet you use to help brown the bottom of the crust and to prevent sticking.

Roll the dough on a lightly floured surface until it's slightly larger than the baking sheet and about ½-inch thick. Rolling is easier if you let the dough first sit for about 10 minutes to let the gluten relax. If your rolling pin fits inside your baking sheet, you can roll the dough directly on the sheet instead. Use your fingers to form a 1-inch-high lip around the rectangle so the liquid in the custard topping can't run out. Cover the baking sheet with a damp cloth and let the crust rise again in a warm place for 20 minutes.

PREPARING THE CUSTARD TOPPING

I like the mild flavor of the leek, a relative of the onion. It has all the onion's flavoring attributes without the bite and the tears, but they are a nuisance to



Getting the grit out. Leeks often have dirt between their leaves. To clean a leek quickly, first slice halfway through the stem. Make sure you keep your fingers clear of the blade.

clean. To grow leeks with white, mild-tasting bulbs, the soil has to be mounded around the stems, and dirt usually lodges between the leaves. Whether you grow them or buy them, you'll find soil inside the folds.

Clean and slice the leeks. Cut off the roots, the bottom ¼ inch of the stalk, and ⅔ of the dark-green tops. Starting from the root end, cut lengthwise halfway through the stem. Now you can easily pull apart and fan out the leaves. Wash them under fast-running water. Holding them by the leaves, slice the leeks into thin rounds, about ⅛-inch thick. The white part is the more tender and flavorful part, so use all of it. I like to use a bit of the dark-green leaves to give the topping some color. If the leeks are particularly gritty, I'll wash them again after they're sliced, soaking them in two or three changes of water in a salad spinner, and then spin them dry.

Fry the bacon and leeks. Cut the bacon into small pieces, about ¼ inch square, and fry it in a large pot until crisp. Then drain the bacon pieces on a paper towel and remove all but about 1 tablespoon of the fat from the pot. Sauté the leeks in the bacon fat over low heat for 3 to 5 minutes until the slices are soft. Put the bacon back in the pot with the leeks.

Add cream, caraway, and seasoning. Stir in the cream and caraway seeds and season with salt and pepper to taste. Simmer over low heat for about 5 minutes to blend in the smoky flavor of the bacon and the strong taste of the caraway seeds. Some people find the taste of caraway overbearing. I happen to love it, so I sometimes add even more than a teaspoon to my topping. If you don't like caraway, don't be discouraged from making leek tarts. They're delicious prepared with just salt and pepper as seasoning, or with a dash of nutmeg, mild paprika, or curry powder. Any flavoring that works well with onions will probably work well with leeks.

Cool before adding the eggs. When the cream has blended with the leeks, bacon, and caraway



Pull the leek open and run it under water to flush out the dirt.

seeds, let the mixture cool, and then stir in the eggs. It's very important not to add the eggs while the mixture is still hot, because they'll cook right away and make tough lumps. The topping is now ready to be spread onto the risen dough.

BAKING THE TART

Brush the rim of the crust with a beaten egg yolk so that the exposed crust turns a rich brown as it bakes. Spread the topping on the crust and bake in a 350°F oven until the custard is set and the crust is golden brown, for 25 to 35 minutes.

VARIATIONS

Although I often make this rich, thick-crust version, there are other ways to make a leek tart. For a lighter custard, I substitute milk for the cream and add another egg to the custard. The tart is also good without the custard—with just leeks, bacon, and caraway seeds. For a change of pace, I'll make it with a thin, pizza-like crust by leaving out the eggs and substituting water for the milk and oil for the butter. Or if I don't have time to wait for the yeast dough to rise, I'll bake the custard filling in a pastry crust.

Everyone had a vegetable garden in the village where Gudrun Riter grew up in southwestern Germany. Now a landscape designer and recipe tester in Los Altos, California, Riter continues to grow and cook the vegetables prominent in German cuisine. ♦



If the leeks are particularly gritty, slice them for use and clean them in water in a salad spinner. Change the water a couple of times until there's no more dirt, and then spin them dry.