

# Sing a Song of Sixpence

...four and twenty black birds baked in a pie...



by Pamela Manley

Like the nursery rhyme says, "Sing a song of six pence, a pocket full of rye. Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie."<sup>i</sup> It is a reference to the love affair with the pie. The poem actually makes a reference to the more 'entertaining' history of pies. During the fifteenth century, pies were all the rage when it came to dining for the King. Often small animals, such as rabbits and turtles, and, on occasion, even dwarfs would be encased in



a pastry crust (but not baked!) and presented to the king.<sup>ii</sup> Once the pie was cut open, the 'contents' would be released. In the case of the dwarfs, they would burst from the cake performing poetry or some form of entertainment. (Should we consider this the predecessor to the dancer encased inside a giant birthday cake?)

Before we go devising the progress of the pie, let's take a look at where it originated. There is some debate as to who created the piecrust. Some historians claim that the Egyptians are responsible, while other side with the Greeks. But regardless of who created the pastry, the pie, as we know it today was most likely born in Rome. Conquerors, these Romans, brought their delicacies with them on the road to battle. As they traveled Europe, so did the pie.

Pies of this time were both savory and sweet. Meat pies were most popular as they developed

into the first millennium. Strangely enough, the pie of these days could be considered the first disposable cookware. In many instances, a thick crust was constructed in the shape of a coffin (as they were often called) and it contained fillings of meat and sauce. Once the entrée was to be served, the crust was discarded.<sup>iii</sup>

The next evolution in the pie was animation. Which brings us back to the fifteenth century and the pies of the English court. However, they were not the first to introduce such innovation in the culinary arts. In the fourteenth century, during the reign of Charles V, it is reported that the chef to the Duke of Burgundy made an extremely large pie in which twenty-eight musicians were placed. They performed until a girl, said to represent the captive church in the Middle East, jumped out of the pie.<sup>iv</sup>

But along with the pastry-encrusted delicacies of the time, there were other pies (or pyes) that were simply baked in vegetable shells. Many contained mincemeat and other savory dishes.<sup>v</sup> However, it is the double-crust fruit pie that first comes to mind when we think of pie. The predecessor of this pie came to the New World first from the Italian Christopher Columbus followed quickly by the pies of the Pilgrims. Throw in a few touches from the Pennsylvania Dutch and you have the modern pie as well as a few of it's closest cousins.



The *cobbler*, which is similar to a pie in a casserole, started when leftovers were 'cobbled' together. In colonial times, a cobbler was an alcoholic punch that was made with fruit, rum and

sugar. This was eventually topped with a sugar crust as it evolved into today's version.<sup>vi</sup>

Closely related to the cobbler is the *pandowdy*. Named so for its 'dowdy' appearance in the pan. Having a filling of some type of custard, it is closely related to custard pies.<sup>vii</sup>

Pie, in any form, is very much a part of our culture. The American Pie Council ([www.piecouncil.org](http://www.piecouncil.org)) celebrates the art of pie with a National Pie Day each January.<sup>viii</sup> As representatives of the pie industry, they promote the awareness and heritage of pie.

So it's true. The pie has come a long way from its roots. You can even order a fully cooked pie in a jar from [www.pieinajar.com](http://www.pieinajar.com). But for me, I still prefer mine on a plate.

American Pie image from:

<http://www.whatscookingamerica.net/History/PieHistory.htm>

Six Pence image from:

[http://www.bobstaake.com/mg\\_sixpence.shtml](http://www.bobstaake.com/mg_sixpence.shtml)

Split pie image from:

<http://graphics.jsonline.com/graphics/entree/img/jan03/piebig0119.jpg>

<sup>i</sup><http://www3.sympatico.ca/cottagecountry/songs/s-sing.htm>

<sup>ii</sup><http://www.whatscookingamerica.net/History/PieHistory.htm>

<sup>iii</sup><http://www.whatscookingamerica.net/History/PieHistory.htm>

<sup>iv</sup><http://www.whatscookingamerica.net/History/PieHistory.htm>

<sup>v</sup><http://www.globalgourmet.com/food/foodday/fd0197/fd012097.html>

<sup>vi</sup> "American Fruit Classics", *Cooking Pleasures*, June/July 2003, p. 44.

<sup>vii</sup> "American Fruit Classics", *Cooking Pleasures*, June/July 2003, p. 44.

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.piecouncil.org/national.htm>



Be sure to look for the  
**Great American Pie Festival**  
coming soon to your neighborhood!

For more information visit the  
**American Pie Council** at  
[www.piecouncil.org](http://www.piecouncil.org)

The American Pie Council



American Pie Council  
P.O. Box 368  
Lake Forest, IL 60045

For more information:  
Phone: 847-371-0170  
Fax: 847-371-0199