

CLASSIC TARTE TATIN

Tarte Tatin is a classic French dessert, found in any patisserie or salon de thé. It is rustic, yet elegant; and it couldn't be any easier to make.

The keys to turning out a good one are crisp, tart apples and getting the sugar deeply caramelized. Don't be afraid to go dark. The flavor will be far more complex and the caramel matrix will be solid enough to provide the necessary structural integrity. You'll need a good, heavy, ovenproof pan – Yoo-Mi and I use cast iron.

There are two elements to the Tarte Tatin, neither complicated: the simple puff pastry (pâte brisée) base and the apple-and-caramel body. The latter element is deceptively complex, given the ultra-minimalist ingredient list: butter, sugar, salt, apples. Because the apples are cooking (and caramelizing) along with the sugar, they are rapidly giving-up juice to the bubbling braise. This infuses the resulting caramel with an intense apple perfume and intricate depth of flavor.



Pâte Brisée

Ingredients

1 cup (250 ml) cold unsalted butter
1-2/3 cups (400 ml) all-purpose flour
3/4 tsp (4 ml) salt
1/3 cup (75 ml) ice-cold water

Method

Our method is no better or worse than any other. Our only rule is this: we love good technique, but loathe fussiness; and the problem with pastry chefs is that they do far too much hand-wringing over the fragility of pastry dough. Don't overwork it, to be sure, but ignore their whining and their complicated methodologies. We use a food processor, and the entire process takes less than three minutes. You really cannot fuck-up a pâte brisée.

Start by cutting the butter into smallish chunks (1 cm).

In food processor, blend flour with salt with a quick pulse. Add 1/4 of the butter and pulse until it disappears into the flour and is indistinguishable. Add the remaining butter and pulse to cut into pea-size pieces.

Pour water evenly over mixture (not through feed tube). Pulse until loose, crumbly ragged dough forms. Do not over-process.

Pour-out dough crumbs onto a cool surface, gather, and press together. Dust with flour and roll-out into 1cm thick rectangle. You can do this on the plastic wrap you'll use in a minute, or just on the flour-dusted surface. Then fold into thirds, roll-up lengthwise, and squash into a chubby disk. Wrap and refrigerate until firm, about 1 hour.

Note: You'll use roughly half of this dough for one tarte tatin. But it freezes well, and we usually pâte brisée dough on-hand in the freezer for "pastry emergencies" – when you just gotta have it.

Tarte Tatin

Ingredients

For an 11 inch pan (serves 8):

7 tart apples
1 stick (4 ounces, 125ml) butter
1-1/2 cup (375ml) sugar
1/2 teaspoon (1.5ml) sea salt

Half the pâte brisée dough

For a 9 inch pan (serves 6):

5 tart apples
2/3 stick (85ml) butter
1 cup (250ml) sugar
1/4 teaspoon (1ml) sea salt

One-third the pâte brisée dough

Method:

Peel, core, and quarter the apples.

Over low heat in a heavy, ovenproof skillet, melt the stick of butter. Remove from heat, add the sugar, and stir until blended. Distribute the butter-sugar mixture evenly across the bottom.

Arrange apple quarters in pan, first nesting them in a circle against the edge of the pan. Place them on their sides and overlap them so you can fit as many as possible. Then fill the center of the pan; you may have some apple left over. You'll use these as the arranged apples shrink during cooking. For now, place the apple quarters on top. They won't get super-well caramelized, but will get a bit cooked from the butter/sugar bubbling through the cracks. When you turn the apples over (see below), slot-in the extra pieces within the spiral to tighten-up the arrangement.

Preheat oven to 375° F.

Return your pan to the stovetop on medium-high heat. Let boil until the juices in the pan turn from golden in color to dark amber, perhaps 10 minutes or more. Remove from heat. With chopsticks or the tip of a knife, turn apple slices over, keeping them in their original places. Add the extra slices of apple to keep your arrangement intact.

Return to the stovetop on high heat and cook another 10 minutes or so to get a deep caramelization of the butter/sugar and to let the apples caramelize. Then remove from heat.

Roll-out the crust while the apples go through their final stove-top cooking. You want to make a round the size of the top of your pan – not smaller.

Place the crust on top of the apples. Tuck edges under slightly, along the inside of the pan.

Bake in oven until the top of the crust is golden-brown in color, about 25-35 minutes. Remove from oven and allow to cool on a rack about 35 to 45 minutes. The balance is that the pan must still be a bit warm (to release to caramel cleanly), but the caramel must be starting to cool enough that it hangs together instead of running.

Run a sharp knife along the inside edge of the pan. Place a plate or other serving dish on top of the pan and quickly flip over the whole shebang so the Tarte Tatin drops down onto the plate. (We often flip onto a cutting board, because it is easy to handle, then transfer the righted tarte to a cake-plate.) A little banging on the pan helps. If there are any pieces of apple left behind in the pan or otherwise out of place, carefully put them back where they are supposed to be. And *voilà!*

MBJ