

## **PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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### Mincemeat Pies – Love or Hate

For some they're a wonderful tradition, for others mincemeat pie is more like torture. Some love them, others hate them, with equal passion. No matter which camp you're in you might wonder about how a mixture like that was ever invented. Meat, suet or lard, sugar, fruit, spices, vinegar, wine, brandy – that's not a common combination. Then put it in a pie too? For some it's only the brandy that makes it edible!

But mincemeat pies have a long, very long tradition. As early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, (that's pushing 700 years ago) there are recipes for mincemeat pies. These were mostly meat and fat, fruits and alcohol. Made with Royal pastry, with egg yolks in the pie crust, it was food fit for a king. Spices were added after the Crusades brought cinnamon, cloves and other flavors to Europe. Some traditions say they were included to represent the gifts of the Magi to the Christ Child. By the Victorian era mincemeat had become associated mostly with Christmas, as a tradition even then.

Early mince pies were large, and longer than they were wide. Some historians think they might have been made that way to represent the crib or manger. But they gradually shrank in size, until they were more like individual sweet treats. They were eaten the way sweet empanadas or Amish fried pies are, out of hand. Each one was not more than a couple of bites. And the meats became more varied too. Instead of just using beef or mutton, some were made with goose or duck.

In those long-ago years mincemeat was always and only home-made. Often the mixture was made well in advance of the holidays and allowed to ferment. In addition to the brandy or wine that was added, it made its own, more power to it! The alcohol was not only a preservative. It softened the often tough meat and blended the flavors of the fruits into it. Fermented mincemeat could keep for months, even years if it was sealed well enough.

Eventually of course, with all the changes in our food systems, mincemeat too became a commercial product. Now you can buy it in jars, ready to dump into the pie shell. You can buy little blocks of dehydrated mincemeat that must be soaked and heated to soften. Your choices include with or without brandy, and with or without real meat, although you have to read the ingredient list to

figure that out. Some products today use vegetable shortening rather than beef suet, to make them completely vegan.

And of course we have completely changed the shape of the pie again. Now it is neither a big long pastry nor a little individual one. Our pies usually serve 8 to 10 people, enough for a piece for dessert and a piece or two to snack on later. And we now have dozens of other ways to use mincemeat as well – cookies and bars, combined in pies with pumpkin, apples, cranberries or pecans, cakes and breads, as stuffing for meat, or as stuffing for raviolis. You can probably invent a few more yourself too!

Plus, people are making their own mincemeat again too. There are plenty of recipes on the web. I wish I could (I will some day) find my mother's recipe for venison mincemeat. Today's recipes may or may not use meat or fat, it might be beef or venison, or goose too. I've found at least one recipe for green tomato mincemeat.

So as teachers tell their youngest students, maybe you like, or maybe you just don't like it yet. Give mincemeat a try, for tradition's sake. And for those of us who don't have the time to start from scratch, here's a recipe for cookies that starts with dried mincemeat. Leave some out for Santa!

#### Mincemeat Oatmeal Cookies

3 C quick oatmeal	1 ½ C pack brown sugar
1 ½ C all purpose flour	1 tsp baking soda
½ tsp salt	½ C vegetable oil
3 eggs	3 Tbsp water
1 (9 oz) box condensed mincemeat	

Heat oven to 350°F. Spray cookie sheets with non-stick spray. Crumble mincemeat into raisin-size crumbs. Combine oatmeal, flour, sugar, salt, baking soda in large bowl. Add oil, eggs and water and mix well. Stir in crumbled mincemeat. Drop by rounded teaspoonfuls onto cookie sheets. Leave about 2 inches between drops. Bake 8 to 10 minutes until lightly browned. Remove from cookie sheet and allow to cool on racks. Makes about 60 cookies.

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