



# one tart

# to rule them all

**BOUGHT FROM YOUR LOCAL GAS STATION  
OR MADE FROM YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S RECIPE,  
THE BUTTER TART IS THE MOST  
ROYAL OF COTTAGE TREATS**

By EMMA WAVERMAN *Photography* LIAM MOGAN



## Controversy #1

### WHO INVENTED THE BUTTER TART?

The origin of the iconic tart is unknown. Some credit the *filles du roi*, while others look to the Scottish border counties. However, culinary historian Liz Driver, author of *Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825–1949*, suggests that perhaps homemakers who had dairy, eggs, flour, lard, and brown sugar put them together into a humble tart to feed to farmhands, family, and visitors year round. She thinks that explains similarities to Quebec's sugar pie (which contains whipping cream): that the butter tart is a parallel invention born of necessity and similar circumstances. "Why is it," she asks, "that Canadians can't just accept that we made something ourselves?"

## THE BUTTER TART IS NOT JUST ANY DESSERT.

Within its fragile pastry shell, it holds a country's memories of long weekends, country bakeries, recipes handed down through generations, and an eternal debate over raisins.

Though they are made from pantry staples, the alchemy of a butter tart's ingredients makes for something all its own. And their simplicity means you'll usually have what you need on hand to whip up a dozen for a crowd at the cottage. Plus, they freeze well (some say they taste even better frozen, especially when you're sitting dockside).

Why do butter tarts and the cottage seem so inseparable? For me, it's the memory of eating oozing tarts on the deck in the midday sun, followed by a dive into the lake to wash off all the sticky residue.

Whatever your own experience, we know that the butter tart is tied to many Canadians' memories of leisurely cottage dinners or sneaking one as you dash out the screen door. People become lifelong devotees to the tart, pledging undying loyalty to the local bakery in town or their mother's version. Let's take a deep dive into the (surprisingly controversial) story of this sweet 'n' little cottage treat.

## Controversy #2

### A NATIONAL DESSERT?

Does the butter tart deserve icon status in our broad and diverse country? If nostalgia and history are reason enough, then the answer is yes.

But if that's not enough, then consider age and geographic supremacy: butter tarts date back to at least the late 1800s and are popular from Newfoundland to B.C. But what about Nanaimo bars, latecomer to the handheld dessert scene originating in the 1950s? In fact, a recent voting bracket created by *Day-break North*, a CBC radio show in B.C., crowned butter tarts the champion holiday treat over Nanaimo bars.

Okay, so they're nationally revered, but are they a Canadian icon? South of the border, Americans have largely been ignorant of our beloved tart—their loss. In classic Canuck fashion, we find their ignorance more reason to propel the tart to Canadian icon status.



## Controversy #3

### TOURS, TRAILS & TENSION

Across the country, there are no less than 15 festivals, trails, and tours that celebrate the not-so-humble butter tart. It seems every small bakery, especially in rural Ontario, sells them—some displaying ribbons and awards from taste-offs and festivals. The largest is Ontario's Best Butter Tart Festival, which has been running since 2013 in Midland. More than 65,000 people come for one butter tart-filled day in June every year.

Canada's first trail dedicated to these treats began in 2006 when bakeries and businesses in Wellington County, Ont., created a self-guided route. Five years later, the Kawarthas Northumberland tourism board started a butter tart tour through the Kawartha Lakes District, Northumberland County, and Peterborough, Ont. The Wellington trail team was not pleased and sent a cease-and-desist letter to the new tour. Things calmed down after the two sides met over butter tarts (yes, really) and decided to coexist. The Wellington tour returned as the Butter Tarts and Buggies tour, while the Kawarthas tour is still going strong with more than 50 stops.

## Controversy #24

### THE PERFECT BUTTER TART

**Raisins or no raisins?** Our passion over the addition of dried fruit has elevated this debate to the national level. Perhaps it's what keeps our country together: we love to bicker over something so small and so sweet.

**Nuts vs. no nuts:** While some (including me) feel that nuts take the tart into pecan pie territory, others prefer a little crunch.

**Other add-ins:** Formerly restricted to raisins, currants, and nuts, fillings have started to reflect the diverse tastes that are becoming part of Canada's exciting modern cuisine. For creative bakers the tarts are a canvas to experiment with flavours such as cardamom, Nutella, ginger, and even miso. Some tarts definitely push the classic recipe—there are some filled with cheesecake or that taste like poutine. Bacon is becoming a popular add-in and, for non-purists, bolsters the case for eating butter tarts at breakfast.

**Runny or firm?** Do you like them so gooey that you'll need a swim after or firm enough to eat one-handed in cottage traffic? Until you find your favourite, maybe you'll just have to keep testing them all out.



1663-1673

The filles du roi—the young women who travelled from France to marry voyageurs—arrive in New France. They soon combine their knowledge of pastry with the ingredients on hand and, according to the Canadian Encyclopedia at least, create butter tarts.

1900

A recipe called Filling for Tarts, submitted by Mrs. Malcolm (Mary) MacLeod, of Barrie, Ont., appears in *The Royal Victoria Cook Book*.

1913

*Five Roses Cook Book* publishes the first butter tart recipe.



1931

The *Chatelaine* magazine prints its first butter tart recipe (called Butterscotch Tarts).

1950s

Eaton's places butter tarts in their popular picnic lunch boxes.



1815-1870

Settlers from the "border counties" between Scotland and England arrive in Canada toting Ecclefechan tarts, also called border tarts. Food writer Elizabeth Baird believes the treat, filled with dried fruit and made in a pie tin, evolved into the butter tart. Further proof? Immigrants from the same region also settled in Georgia, home to pecan pie.

2006

The Butter Tart Trail is established in Wellington County, Ont., by community bakers.



2001

Quebec company Vachon launches Granny's tarts, in four flavours: pecan, butter and raisin, sugar, and (gasp!) lemon.

## Oh no! Competition?

2011

The Kawarthas Northumberland Butter Tart Tour is founded.

2013

The trail in Wellington County sends a cease-and-desist letter to the new tour.

2013

Ontario's Best Butter Tart Festival is born, selling out of 10,000 tarts by 11 a.m.

2016

Back on the scene: Wellington County reopens its tour as Butter Tarts and Buggies, showcasing tarts and Mennonite heritage.

2018

The *New York Times* publishes an article on Canada's love of butter tarts. It's so popular they run another, on memories and recipes from Americans with Canadian ties.



2019

Canada Post puts the butter tart on a stamp (now out of print). It did not, sadly, taste like a butter tart.

2019

CL Editor-in-Chief Michelle Kelly judges butter tarts at the Royal Winter Agricultural Fair, where she eats a "poutine butter tart." And never will again.

## WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN?

### CottageLife

1991

*Cottage Life* magazine sends writer Max Burns to find the best butter tart in Ontario cottage country.

## tips for pastry

1 You can make the pastry by hand or in a food processor.

2 As with all pastry, keep everything cold—the bowls, utensils, and your hands (if they get hot, run them under some cold water and dry them quickly).

3 To keep the pastry from sticking, roll it out on a silicone mat.

4 Use a 4-inch pastry cutter. Food writer Elizabeth Baird favours a 28 oz tomato can.

5 The pastry should be rolled to approximately ¼-inch thick. Anything too thin will crack under the pressure of the filling.

6 The mix of butter and shortening gives the pastry flavour and texture, but you can use all butter if you like.

## THE RECIPE

Here's the family recipe from my mother, the food writer and author of many cookbooks Lucy Waverman. It's as classic as it gets.

### PERFECT FLAKY PASTRY

3 cups all-purpose flour  
1 tsp salt  
¾ cup butter, diced  
¼ cup shortening, diced  
½ cup very cold water  
1 tbs vinegar or lemon juice

1 In a large bowl, sift together flour and salt. Cut in butter and shortening until mixture resembles coarse bread crumbs.

2 Combine water and vinegar in another bowl. Sprinkle liquid over flour mixture. With your fingers, work in liquid and gather dough into a ball and divide into two equal pieces. Wrap in plastic, and let chill in fridge for 30 minutes.

3 Lightly flour work surface and roll out dough to ¼-inch thick. Use 4-inch rounds to cut, re-rolling bits to use all the dough.

### BUTTER TART FILLING

½ cup butter, at room temperature  
1 cup brown sugar  
½ tsp salt  
1 tbs white vinegar  
1 tsp vanilla  
2 eggs, beaten  
1 cup corn syrup  
½ cup raisins (optional, obviously)

1 Cream together butter, brown sugar, and salt with a whisk or a wooden spoon. Stir in vinegar, vanilla, eggs, and corn syrup just until combined. Don't over mix. Let chill in fridge for 30 minutes.

2 Preheat oven to 350°F. Fit pastry rounds into tart tins or muffin cups. It's okay to have a slight overhang, or fold back in a little bit of pastry.

3 Place 1 tsp raisins (if using) in each shell.

4 Stir filling mixture. Spoon filling into shells until about three-quarters full.

5 Bake tarts for 25-30 minutes or until filling is set. Cool slightly in pan on a rack. Remove while still warm. Tarts will take about 2 hours to firm up.

6 Loosen tarts with a small, sharp knife and ease carefully out of pan. Eat any broken ones.

## and filling

1 Make sure you don't over mix and create a frothy filling; the bubbles will create uneven texture.

2 If you want a runny centre, the filling needs some white vinegar or lemon juice, but no more than a tablespoon. You can also try apple cider vinegar.

3 Corn syrup gives a sweet taste and firmer texture, but feel free to try different ratios of corn syrup and maple syrup. Adding in maple syrup will give a more distinctive maple taste and make the filling a bit runnier.

4 Soak the raisins (if using) in hot water or even whisky or bourbon to plump them up.

5 Don't worry about the filling looking goopy around the edges of the tart. (Some people love when the filling caramelizes on the pastry.)

6 Bake tarts in a silicone baking tray that has a wired rim. Even the tarts that ooze over the top during baking will come out every time.

7 Use a thin paring knife to remove tarts from the tin while they are still warm, no more than 30 minutes after they come out of the oven. If you wait too long, the tarts won't come out of the tin without breaking.

THIS PAGE: LIAM MORGAN, OPPOSITE: LIAM MORGAN (CRUMBS), SHUTTERSTOCK (ECCLEFECHAN TARTS), CHATELAINE ARCHIVES (MAGAZINE COVER), VACHON (GRANNY'S TARTS), CANADA POST (STAMP)