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➤ PÂTE FEUILLETÉE ➤

There is nothing more gratifying for a baker than to master the art of pâte feuilletée, puff pastry. If you have the time, I strongly recommend making a big batch and storing it in the freezer for later use. Homemade is simply the best. If you choose to use frozen puff pastry, make sure you buy an all-butter pastry. If you know a good bakery that makes their puff pastry in-house, they might be willing to sell you a small portion.

TRADITIONAL PÂTE FEUILLETÉE

⇒ Prep Time: 2 to 3 hours - Makes 2¾ pounds (1.2 kg) of pastry ⇐

Pâte feuilletée can be laborious, but the result is absolutely worthwhile. While you can find good-quality store-bought pastry, it simply can't beat a well-made homemade one. It is amazing how five ingredients can transform into a buttery and delicately layered pastry. Allowing enough time to let the pastry rest in between turns is the key to success. This recipe yields a big batch. The time it takes to make a small and a large batch of pastry is roughly the same, so I usually make more than I need, which I can freeze and save for later use.

A Note on Butter

If making your own puff pastry, use a butter containing at least 82 percent milk fat, such as European-style butter. Generally speaking, butter with a higher fat content is easier to laminate (see page 149) and will result in a flakier pastry. Puff pastry puffs because the butter gives off steam during the baking process, so the more even layers of butter, the better the pastry is. Since a large portion of the pastry is made with butter, make sure you use the best quality you can find.

On Using Puff Pastry

To use frozen puff pastry (homemade or store-bought), thaw the pastry several hours in the fridge. Never store it at room temperature because the butter might become too warm and the layers will not be defined as it melts out.

Depending on the size of your frozen pastry, you may need to combine sheets if they are too small for what you want to use it for. To combine them, brush the top of one sheet lightly with water, stack another sheet on top, then roll it to the desired thickness and size.

Always roll your puff pastry cold from the fridge; this way the butter and layers will stay intact. Resting is always necessary after you roll your pastry as the gluten bonds will shrink when they are tight. If you skip this step, the pastry may shrink and deform in unexpected ways. The pastry also may not be tender or puff up as much as it should.

Most of the recipes require docking the pastry after it is rolled out, that is, piercing the dough with small holes using a fork or docking wheel. The holes let the steam escape in the baking process so the pastry rises in an even layer. This is especially important when making Mille-Feuille (page 107) because you want the dough to be one level sheet before you assemble the pastries.

1½ cups (500 g) all-purpose flour
1 tbsp + 1 tsp (20 g) fine salt
5 tbsp (75 g) unsalted butter, softened
1 cup (250 g) cold water
1 tbsp (15 g) white vinegar
1¾ cups + 2 tbsp (425 g) unsalted butter

In a mixing bowl, whisk together the flour and salt. Add the butter, water and vinegar. Mix on low speed for 5 minutes, until a cohesive dough forms. Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and let it rest in the fridge for at least 4 hours before proceeding with the turns.

To prepare the butter, make a pack using parchment paper. Fold the paper into a roughly 6-inch (15-cm) square and place the butter in the center. You will be rolling the butter into a 6-inch (15-cm) square pack. Fold in the edges around it and roll it into an even sheet. Chill the butter in the fridge until you are ready to use it.

In pastry lamination (layering pastry dough with butter, see page 149), a “turn” is whenever we fold a sheet of pastry. There are two types of folds—single or letter folds, and double or book folds. Traditional puff pastry takes a total of 6 single folds. In between every 2 folds, the pastry needs to rest so the gluten bonds can relax, which makes it easier to work with. After all these folds and turns, the finished pastry will have more than 700 layers!

When you are ready to laminate, make sure the butter consistency is as close to the dough as possible. You may need to bring it to room temperature for 15 minutes, and roll it with a rolling pin to soften it.

I do not recommend heating butter in the microwave oven for lamination; it overheats too easily. Lamination is all about temperature; the butter and dough should be cool, but not so firm that it is difficult to roll or that the butter cracks. If it is too warm, the butter may leak out of the dough, which will yield poor lamination.

(continued)

TRADITIONAL PÂTE FEUILLETÉE (CONTINUED)

Roll the dough into a 10-inch (25-cm) square, and turn it 45 degrees so it faces you as a diamond shape. Unwrap the softened butter from the parchment pack, and place it in the center, leaving triangles of dough on four sides. Fold the triangles of dough around the butter and pinch the edges closed to make a sealed pack.

Dust the dough and work surface with flour if necessary. Roll the dough and butter out to roughly 9 x 18 inches (23 x 43 cm). Fold it into thirds like a business letter. Make the first turn: turn the dough 90 degrees, and repeat the rolling and folding process. You have now finished the second fold. Wrap the dough in plastic, and let it rest in the fridge for at least an hour.

Repeat the rolling and folding steps above two more times, which will be a total of 6 folds and turns. Mark the number of folds with a piece of tape so you know how many folds you have completed.

After the final turn, wrap the dough in plastic and chill it overnight. At this point the gluten bonds in the dough are very tight from the turning and rolling, so it needs to relax before you can use it for pastries. Without adequate resting time, the pastry may shrink or turn out flat.

The finished puff pastry dough is best kept in the freezer, well wrapped, for 1 to 2 months. Let it thaw in the fridge before using it. Never store puff pastry at room temperature.

Tips: Vinegar increases the dough's malleability as well as slows down its oxidization and discoloration.

The main reasons to rest the dough are the gluten and the butter. Rolling and folding the dough makes the gluten bonds stronger. The butter inside will also become softer. Without time to chill, the dough will be very tough to roll, and the soft butter will make the layers less defined.



Allow the dough to rest before proceeding with two turns.



Make a butter pack by wrapping it in parchment paper and rolling it.



Roll out the corners of the dough and place the butter in the center.



Make a single fold (letter fold).



Turn the dough 90 degrees before making the second roll and fold.



Make the second single fold (letter fold). Let the dough rest before making more turns.



PALMIERS

⇒ Prep Time: 30 minutes - Makes 12 to 18 palmiers ⇐

Palmiers are one of my favorite puff pastry “cookies.” They are simply puff pastry rolled in sugar and folded. As they bake they puff up and turn into palm leaf shapes. Another name for these is elephant ears. These crispy, caramelized, thin pastries are so irresistible. I like to bake them to an amber color for the caramel flavor, but keep an eye on them during the last few minutes of baking, as they burn quickly.

¼ batch Traditional Pâte Feuilletée (page 95), or 1 sheet (300 g) frozen puff pastry
½ cup (100 g) granulated sugar, divided

Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C). Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

If your puff pastry is frozen, thaw it in the fridge for 2 hours or overnight before using it. Sprinkle sugar on your work surface and on the puff pastry, sprinkling more as needed.

The final size should be about 8 x 16 inches (20 x 40 cm). If you are using homemade pastry, roll it to roughly 9 x 18 inches (23 x 46 cm), and trim it to the desired size. If you are using frozen puff pastry, it is usually already trimmed, so you just need to roll it to the final size.

It is important that the thickness of the pastry is about 2½ to 3 millimeters, otherwise the palmiers tend to unravel as they bake. You may roll it to a wider width (not length, as this would change the shape), depending on how big your pastry is. Make sure the thickness is even. If your pastry sheet is large, you will get more palmiers.

Once the dough is rolled to the desired size, spread the remaining sugar evenly on the pastry, as you want each palmier to have similar sweetness and caramelization.

Mark the halfway point in the dough, lengthwise, either by measuring (about 8 inches [20 cm]) or folding the sheet in half and then unfolding it. From the edges, fold each half of the pastry sheet in thirds, toward the center. Try to roll the pastry as evenly as you can for the most consistent shape and baking.

Finally, fold the pastry in half, with the folds inside. With a sharp knife, cut the pastry into about ¼-inch (6-mm)-thick pieces, trimming off the two ends if necessary.

Place the pastries cut-side up on the baking trays, about 2½ inches (6 cm) apart; the palmiers expand quite a bit as they bake.

Bake them one tray at a time for 15 minutes, take them out and carefully flip each one with an offset spatula. Return them to the oven and bake them for 5 to 8 more minutes, until they are evenly caramelized and golden. If they brown too quickly, lower the heat to 325°F (160°C) to finish baking. Cool them completely before storing them. They keep well in an airtight container for up to a week.

Tip: Palmiers are one of those simple pastries that can be hard to master. When you roll out the pastry, the size and thickness might make them turn out perfectly or unravel completely. I have experimented with store-bought and homemade puff pastry, and they yield completely different results. You may have to do a bit of experimentation to see what works. Regardless, they will all turn out to be delicious caramelized, buttery pastries!