



My friend
Meg stands in
her sunny
backyard and
admits that she's
nervous. I grab
the first
projectile while
she takes a
couple of deep
breaths and
settles in.

PIE AS PROTEST

BY LAUREL RANDOLPH

After a quick countdown, I plant a whipped cream pie right in the center of her face. An amazing amount of whipped topping stays mounded on there, frozen in time, with shards of cookie crust attached, completely covering her eyes and nose. I know that she's uninjured because, underneath all that mess, she's cracking up.

As I throw more pies in Meg's face (thanks, Meg) I realize there is a method to the madness. Del Lord explained that pie throwing "requires a sense of balance and a definite follow-through," and Moe Howard warned that "if you throw it you'll miss your mark." In reality, you should push a pie, not throw like a baseball. Even when trying to land one across the room, it should be shoved straight forward with control. And even though, for the sake of Meg's lovely backyard, I never toss one farther than a few feet, you can feel how shoving makes all the difference.

It's the same tactic used by The Biotic Baking Brigade, an organization whose tofu cream pie recipe I'm using as one of my tests. While neither of us were big fans of the flavor, it made a definite cruelty-free splatter and got the job done.

Their vegan pies were usually reserved for the faces of political and industrial leaders, including heads of state, oil and lumber company executives, and economists. Individuals that were, as they saw it, corrupt. It served as a form of public protest, a way to directly shame their behavior for all the world to see. As the BBB put it, "When the people pie, the leaders will swallow."

Formed in 1997, the Biotic Baking Brigade operated as a loose assemblage of like-minded anarchists who were tired of marching in mass protests and wanted their voices to be heard. This was a time of large-scale anti-globalization and anti-capitalist protests, and it also happened to be when writer Audrey Watters was working on her graduate thesis.

Inspired by the politics of the time, she wrote her thesis about political pranks and managed to meet with one of the BBB's leaders, Agent Apple. She found him smart and funny, always ready with a pastry-related pun, and especially interested in how to use the media to his advantage. "That's sort of the brilliance of the prank. The media will talk in shock terms about this stuff, but in the background it is this form of classic humor," Watters explained. How can a news outlet resist showing footage of a prominent figure with pie all over their face?

In their heyday, the Brigade pied economist Milton Friedman, Monsanto CEO Robert Shapiro, the head of the World Trade Organization, and many, many more. The group was inspired by Noel Godin, a Belgian pie tosser that threw pastry at figures he deemed worthy of humiliation for nearly 50 years. This included an impressive ambush of Bill Gates in 1998 that was widely reported and helped to reignite pieing passions like the Brigade, other anarchist pastry groups, and PETA, who tossed a few pies at fur-loving designers like Michael Kors and Calvin Klein. They even pied an actor playing Ronald McDonald.

The Zippie movement of the 1970s also provided plenty of inspiration for the BBB. An offshoot of the anti-war and free speech Yippie movement [Youth International Party] of the 60s, the Zippies used their love of old slapstick movies and TV to launch "Operation Pieman." "Pie Man" Aaron Kay and his crew of pastry-yielding operatives hit everyone from the New York City mayor to Andy Warhol.

They even ran a for-profit arm called "Pie Kill Unlimited." You could call and hire an agent to pie whomever you wanted, from your boss to your friend to a nun (and two unruly Catholic school girls did just that). One founder claims the group threw over 600 pies in just a couple of years and made good money doing it.

The Biotic Baking Brigade took this inspiration and turned it on their ideological opponents, all while attempting to utilize the media to spin their message. While the organization distrusted the media to get it right, they hoped that some of their intentions would get through and make an impact. To get maximum coverage, they would pie in very public spaces, making their encounters more likely to be broadcast but also increasing the danger of running into security.

The risk proved all too real when the BBB pied San Francisco mayor Willie Brown. The mayor was giving a speech at a "Great Sweep" event, which the Brigade and other critics called "The Great Homeless Sweep." Three agents heaved their store-bought pies at the mayor, one of which was cherry and looked entirely too much like blood, and security pounced. One agent, Rahula Janowski, was tackled so aggressively her clavicle was broken. The mayor insisted that an example be made, and the "Cherry Pie Three" were sentenced to six months in prison—a whole new level of punishment for pieing.

In the Biotic Baking Brigade cookbook, Janowski shared some lessons she learned from the grueling experience:

- Use a cream-based pie
- If at all possible, don't get caught
- If faced with the choice of a relatively short jail sentence (under a year) or probation, go to jail.
- Remember, jail sucks. But inaction sucks more. If you take no risks, you gain nothing.

The harsh sentence did slow the tide of pie protest and the BBB eventually disbanded. Audrey Watters notes that, in addition to assault and battery punishments, 9/11 really changed how security was handled around politicians and celebrities. "A lot of the activists found that they were suddenly facing serious jail time and even getting swept up under the label of terrorism. It becomes less of a joke and becomes deadly serious when you're being called a terrorist."

She did note that, despite all this, every once in a while a public figure still gets pied.

REQUIRED EATING



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Pieing Plan of Action

Don't get me wrong, I'm not advocating that you should throw a pie at a powerful figure. I care too much about you, dear reader, to suggest doing something that can result in jail time. I will, however, pass along some of the BBB's tips for delivering just desserts since they are easily applicable to a less political situation. I've added lots of tips and tricks I've accumulated from research, interviews, and hands-on experimentation. Should you gather some fun friends and lay down a big tarp outside and whack each other with pies? You shouldn't not do it.

Choose Your Pie Carefully

The Brigade recommends that pie agents use high-quality pies, preferably homemade from good ingredients. They wisely note that, should your mission go south and you don't get to toss your pastry, you'll still have a delicious pie to eat.

For a picture-perfect pie toss, you'll want to get the consistency just right. During my pie tests, I worked my way through a number of different fillings and crusts and ended up with a couple of unanimous favorites. I had the most success with a store-bought frozen pie crust, baked until nicely browned and crisped all the way through. They also come in light-weight aluminum pans with rounded edges, unlike store-bought graham cracker crusts which have a sharp lip on the edge for securing the plastic lid.

Aim to break the crust up into large chunks across the bottom—this will help pieces of crust stick to your victim's face without the filling seeping underneath the crust. A can of goopy blueberry pie filling made for a fruity, colorful filling and stuck to the face and the crust really well. Whipped topping is optional. For a splashy, creamy result, top your prepared pie crust with colorful instant pudding (we used pistachio-flavored for a pop of green). Add a layer filling up the pie crust halfway. Top with whipped topping or homemade stabilized whipped cream (skip the canned stuff which has too much air and deflates immediately). Use immediately.

The BBB also recommends keeping your pies nice and soft to avoid hurting anyone. Injuries distract from the message and violence is unnecessary. Apple pies, while delicious, weigh far too much to be throwing at someone's head. Double-crust pies, pecan pies, pumpkin pies, and the like are all too heavy and could cause damage. Think squishy!

And avoid cherry pie unless you're going for a macabre look—the Brigade learned their lesson during the Willie Brown episode, realizing too late that red fruit can be mistaken for a real injury.

Get Up Close and Personal

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The Brigade advised getting as close to your target as possible since pie tossing is an inexact science and a long list of things can go wrong. Hurling a pie across the room can end up with pastry on the wrong person or way off target and lead to a swift boot from the venue without accomplishing your goal.

During my tests, I was never more than a few feet away and my accuracy was spot on. Even in that close a range, you can feel when hurling the pies that maintaining accuracy farther away would be tricky. Buster Keaton claims he hit George Givot with a pie from 27 feet away. If true, it was pure luck. Del Lord, a real pro, declared that six or eight feet is the limit for an "artistic performance." And don't forget to push, not throw.

Other Considerations

The Biotic Baking Brigade offered up a few more tips specific to the act of political pieing and less applicable to a playful pie fight. For one, be careful with optics. A group of men pieing a woman or a group of white activists pieing a person of color isn't a great look. You want humiliation for the target and sympathy for the pie thrower.

And while this trick might not work as well today as it used to, the BBB recommended wearing a suit and carrying the pie in an attache case. Looking professional allowed members of the Brigade access to all sorts of places, and no one eyed their briefcases for pastry. Heightened security measures and a real concern about guns make this tip a bit out-dated, but consider having your next pie fight in formal attire. If you're going to have to pay a dry cleaning bill, why not get your money's worth?

One last piece of pieing advice: have a clean-up plan. Pie debris, especially cream and pudding, turns smelly amazingly fast once it hits the body. Only about 10 minutes passed between the first pie hitting Meg and the last pie leaving my hand, and we already reeked.

While I won't be hosting regular pie fights, I now see the appeal. There is something completely freeing about nailing someone in the face with a SPLAT, and something equally freeing about being hit with one. I can see how political figures took offense when a pie came hurling at their face out of nowhere, but it feels great. Or, as my pie-covered friend Meg said, "A++, would pie again."

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