

# PIEROGI LOVE

NEW TAKES ON AN OLD-WORLD COMFORT FOOD



CASEY BARBER



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# **PIEROGI LOVE**

## **NEW TAKES ON AN OLD-WORLD COMFORT FOOD**

**Written and photographed  
by Casey Barber**



**GIBBS SMITH**

TO ENRICH AND INSPIRE HUMANKIND

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*To Pittsburgh, which always has my heart*

# Pierogi Love

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# INTRODUCTION



Growing up in western Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains, my culinary touchstones were as provincial as a city slicker would imagine. Nigiri, tom yum, and injera were completely unfamiliar to me for the first fifteen years of my life. But what I lacked in culinary sophistication, I atoned for with my unintentionally immersive studies in the foods of Pittsburgh's immigrant population: Italian red sauce rich with pork fat; anise-scented pizzelles; kielbasa and sauerkraut bubbling in the Crock-Pot during the holidays; and plates of pierogis at weekend church fairs.

Even if you don't think you know what a pierogi is, chances are you've laid eyes on one at least once in your life. Quite simply, a pierogi is an Eastern European dumpling. A soft but slightly chewy half-moon of dough traditionally filled with potatoes, cheese, meat, sauerkraut, or fruit, then boiled and served with butter, pan-fried onions, or sour cream, a pierogi is its own special breed of comfort food.

The pierogi goes by different names depending on which country it's being eaten in and what it's filled with: Russians, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Lithuanians, and Romanians have all historically chowed down on pelmeni, vareniki, varenyky, piroṣti, or kalduny. Even in Poland, it might be known as a pierogi, pirogi, perogi, perogy, pieroshki, or piroshky. No wonder the uninitiated might be confused—for such a humble food, it gets around.

And though I'll admit we western Pennsylvanians like to think of our region as the epicenter of pierogi pride in America—I mean, the Pittsburgh Pirates *do* have a pierogi mascot race at every home baseball game—we can't take all the credit. From Chicago, which boasts an immigrant history as rich and plentiful as Pittsburgh, to neighborhoods in New Jersey and Brooklyn settled by Slovak and Ukrainian families, to pockets of Polish populations in Wisconsin, Michigan, and even Nebraska, pierogi lovers pop up throughout the United States.

But there's one problem: most people, even ardent pierogi noshers, associate pierogies with old-world sensibilities and peasant food. With this cookbook, I'm rescuing the pierogi from its purgatory in fluorescent-lit, wood-paneled community halls and church basements and bringing it into the modern world. *Pierogi Love* takes that familiar wrapping and stuffs it with a host of unconventional, innovative, and decidedly non-traditional fillings. If Korean BBQ and tacos can happily co-exist, so can Indian rice pudding and Polish dumplings—or French onion soup, for that matter, or Southern pecan pie, or surprisingly elegant rosé-poached pears.

What I'm saying is that you might need to sit your grandma down before showing her this book.

Pierogies are unbelievably versatile and malleable. The modern pierogi is a party host's best friend and a simple freeze-and-serve appetizer; a pop-in-your-mouth game-watching snack that rivals your favorite bar food; a kid-friendly weeknight dinner that boils up in minutes with enough left over for the next day's lunch. It's most definitely dessert, especially when there's caramel and chocolate sauce in the mix. And I'd venture that some of the sweet versions could give donuts a run for their money.

when there's a deep fryer involved. (Move over, beignets!)

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Once you get started, you won't be able to stop the flood of new filling ideas pouring into your brain. Pierogi dough is a blank canvas for whatever you choose to stuff inside—don't stop with the recipes here! I can envision a slew of worldly pierogies, from tikka masala to picadillo. And my jam- and pickle-making friends are already having a field day filling the dough with their own inventive preserves from their pantries.

I hope *Pierogi Love* encourages you to see this classic food in a new light and inspires you to spread the pierogi love in your own lives.

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# THE BASICS

## EQUIPMENT AND INGREDIENTS

You honestly don't need much to make pierogies; after all, cooks around the world have been doing it for centuries without high-tech tools. And while there are molds and presses for assembly line-perfect pierogies, I like to do it the old-fashioned way: by hand. Here's what I use for pierogi-making missions:

### NEED-TO-HAVE EQUIPMENT

**MIXING BOWLS:** Have at least three, with one bowl big enough to knead in. A stainless steel bowl is key for the chocolate sauces and marshmallow fluff in the Sweet Pierogies chapter.

**ROLLING PIN:** Pick one that feels comfortable in your hands; I love the heft of my silicone-coated rolling pin, but plain wood works just as well.

**3-INCH COOKIE CUTTER:** Pierogies should be small enough to eat in one or two bites. A 3-inch cutter gives the perfect dough-to-filling ratio without being too small to stuff. (And it's more precise than the Polish grandma method of using an overturned juice glass.)

**RIMMED BAKING SHEET:** A 9 x 13-inch rimmed baking sheet fits a batch of 24 pierogies snugly and keeps frozen pierogies in place while chilling.

**TEASPOON:** Though a full complement of measuring spoons comes in handy, the 1-teaspoon measure specifically makes it much easier to get the right amount of filling into each pierogi.

**SILICONE SPATULAS:** A few quality silicone spatulas (and thicker rounded spoonulas) will serve you well for mixing both dough and fillings.

**SMALL SAUCEPANS:** A 1-1/2- to 2-quart high-sided saucepan is the workhorse for most of the fillings in the book, as well as for boiling up to 8 pierogies at a time. A very small 1- or 2-cup saucepan is the perfect size for melting the dough's 3 tablespoons of butter as well as for simmering small amounts of liquid and reheating single servings of chocolate sauce.

**POTS FOR BOILING AND SKILLETS FOR FRYING:** For boiling full batches of pierogies, grab a 4-to 6-quart stockpot. You'll also need a good, heavy-bottomed skillet—like a 10-inch cast iron frying pan—for pan-frying pierogies.

**KITCHEN SCALE:** Trust me when I say a kitchen scale is truly essential and not a fussy tool. It's actually a lifesaver for messy cooks and those who quail at the "exact science" of baking. Dump an ingredient (flour, nuts, cheese, whatever) into a bowl set on the scale; zero the scale out; dump the next ingredient in; repeat. Because everything goes into one bowl, you won't have to search for—or wash—a sinkful of measuring cups, and it's much more accurate to boot!



Every recipe in the book includes weight measurements in ounces and grams as well as volume. Use what you're most comfortable with, but I encourage you to give the kitchen scale a go—OXO and Salter models are affordable and widely available.

**ROUL'PAT:** If you love washable silicone baking sheet liners (AKA Silpats), you'll adore the Roul'Pat. This large countertop mat provides a smooth, nonstick work surface for rolling out dough, no matter what kind of crappy Formica you might be saddled with.

**BENCH SCRAPER:** Completely optional, but a bench scraper is convenient for dividing dough and transferring chopped ingredients from cutting board to saucepan or bowl. It won't slice through a Roul'Pat like a sharp knife could, and makes picking up sticky bits of scallions or garlic a breeze.

**MINI FOOD PROCESSOR:** Because all the filling recipes make small batches (1 to 1-1/2 cups), you'll be dealing with small ingredient quantities. For chopping and grinding, I grab my 3-cup food processor, though the small bowl of a regular food processor works equally well in most cases.

**ELECTRIC HAND MIXER:** Nope, you don't need a stand mixer for this book. When blending fillings or making homemade marshmallow fluff (page 126), this is all it takes to get the job done.

**CANDY/OIL THERMOMETER:** You'll need one for making Caramello pierogies (page 102) or sweet potato pie-rogies (page 124), unless you can accurately determine the temperature of boiling sugar syrup by sight (I know I can't!). Get a dual-read candy and oil thermometer and you might not need that deep fryer I'm about to mention.

**DEEP FRYER:** I'm fully aware this is a hard sell. But you haven't lived until you've tasted a truly deep-fried apple pie-rogi (page 87) or crab Rangoon pierogi (page 37). If you don't want to buy an electric fryer, you can use a candy/oil thermometer and a deep, heat-retaining pot like an enameled Dutch oven. I swear it's not as complicated or life-threatening as you think.



## INGREDIENTS

Across the board, I subscribe to the ethos that great ingredients guarantee great food. And while I'm all about value, I do recommend a few specific brands for consistent quality and unparalleled flavor:

**VALHRONA COCOA POWDER:** This fancy French cocoa powder gives cocoa dough (and all your desserts) a richer chocolate flavor than regular Hershey's can offer. If you're feeling flush, you can

also use Valrhona baking chocolate in your sauces, though Callebaut or Scharffen Berger baking blocks work well too.

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**NIELSEN-MASSEY VANILLA BEAN PASTE:** I don't think I exaggerate when I say this stuff is life-changing. It's got the intensely pure flavor of a whole scraped vanilla bean combined with the ease of vanilla extract—you may never return to a regular bottle again.

**FLOURS:** For all-purpose and whole-wheat flours, I use King Arthur exclusively—their products have rigorously consistent protein levels that eliminate the chance of ending up with tougher dough in one batch and soft, sticky dough in the next.

For specialty flours in the dough variations on page 17, I've noted my preferences for each.

# ASSEMBLING PIEROGIES

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## To make 24 pierogies:

Line a rimmed baking sheet with waxed paper or parchment paper.

Divide rested dough into 4 equal pieces with a bench scraper or knife. Set aside 3 dough pieces and cover with the mixing bowl. Roll remaining dough as thinly as possible into a rough 8 x 12-inch rectangle.

Using a 3-inch round cookie cutter, cut out 6 rounds of dough. If the dough isn't quartered evenly, you may get 5 rounds from one piece and 7 from another. Resist the temptation to re-roll dough scraps for additional rounds. It seems wasteful, but the dough won't be as tender the second time around.

Spoon filling into the center of dough rounds. Be judicious with soft fillings like fruit jams—if they spread to dough edges, it will be difficult to pinch shut, so take care not to overfill those varieties!

Using your finger, swipe a *very scant* amount of egg wash—just a light touch—around the dough edge.

Fold into a half-moon shape: Either fold the dough over the filling on the work surface—I call this “the blanket”—or gently cup the pierogi in your hand in a U shape—I call this “the taco.”



**The Blanket Fold**



### The Taco Fold

Gently but firmly seal the pierogi by pinching and squeezing the edges together with your thumb and pointer finger. Start with one pinch at the top, then move to one “corner” of the pierogi and pinch along the edge back to the top. Repeat on the opposite side to finish sealing the pierogi.

Transfer to the baking sheet and repeat with remaining dough rounds and filling.

### A NOTE ON FILLINGS:

Each recipe makes enough filling for 24 pierogies, with a few extra spoonfuls for good measure. What to do with leftover filling? Add savory fillings to omelets, use them as sandwich spreads or toppings, or toss with noodles and grains for a quick meal. Swirl sweet fillings into oatmeal, cottage cheese or yogurt, or spoon them on breakfast toast.

# COOKING AND STORING PIEROGIES

## To boil fresh or frozen pierogies

Boil a pot of water over medium-high heat (fill approximately 1 quart water for every 6 pierogies). Add pierogies and cook until floating, 2 to 3 minutes for fresh and 4 to 5 minutes for frozen.

## To pan-fry fresh or boiled pierogies

Heat 1 tablespoon neutral oil (like canola or vegetable) or melt 1 tablespoon unsalted butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add as many pierogies as will fit in a single layer without crowding. Cook until pierogies are brown and crispy, about 2 minutes per side. Repeat with additional oil or butter and pierogies.

To cook large batches for parties, you can also pan-fry pierogies on an electric or two-burner stovetop griddle.

## To deep-fry fresh or frozen pierogies

Use an electric deep fryer or a large, high-sided pot filled with at least 2 inches of vegetable or canola oil (fill the pot no more than 1/3 full). Heat oil to 350 degrees. Add pierogies and cook until golden brown; frying time varies based on equipment, about 3 minutes for fresh and 5 minutes for frozen.

Line a baking sheet with paper towels. Transfer pierogies to the baking sheet and cool for 1 minute.

## STORING AND REHEATING PIEROGIES

After making nearly 2000 pierogies for this book (really!), I've come to the conclusion that pierogies are pretty much the perfect make-ahead food. It's so easy to freeze a batch of freshly filled pierogies then pull out and cook as needed—it's my favorite quick and satisfying meal!

If not freezing or cooking immediately, cover pierogies with plastic wrap or a non-terrycloth kitchen towel, then store at room temperature for 1 hour or refrigerate up to 3 hours before cooking.

### To freeze pierogies:

Line a rimmed baking sheet with waxed paper or parchment paper (can be the same sheet as used when assembling pierogies). Place pierogies in a single layer on the sheet and freeze at least 30 minutes or until hard. Transfer frozen pierogies to a zip-top freezer bag or FoodSaver-style bag for vacuum sealing. Store up to 3 months.

### To reheat cooked pierogies:

Reheat pierogies in a 350-degree oven or a skillet over low heat with melted butter or oil, or microwave in 1-minute increments until warm.

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Keep large quantities of pierogies warm at parties by tossing with butter or oil and storing in a covered casserole dish in a 300-degree oven.



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