



Caitriona Cullen

Picking the perfect apples for baking

AT THE FOOT OF THE ROLLING HILLS of Hacketstown, beautifully bushy shrubs and leafy trees stretch to the horizon in neat green rows. Here at Cullen Nurseries, generations of talented growers have carefully nurtured and tended their crops from seed to maturity. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine-approved nursery in Ballasalla supplies Carlow-grown native trees and hedging to spots across the island of Ireland, with their nationwide delivery service taking them from the Sheep's Head peninsula in Cork right up to the shores of Strangford Lough.

Hailing from Hacketstown himself, co-founder Robert Cullen began his career as a young boy, enthusiastically helping his father Peter in the local nursery on sunny Saturdays. That early love for growing things led to horticultural college, then Robert beginning his own landscaping business (returning the favour by bringing his father on board). He and wife-to-be Caitriona met in 2008, and a year later the couple bought 11 acres of land in the area; they set down roots, made a home, and established the nursery together. Today they continue to look after Cullen Nurseries' day-to-day activities, but now they have a little help from the next generation — their three boys, Bobby, Rory, and Joe.

With expertise in combining agriculture with horticulture, Caitriona Cullen has a degree in biochemistry as well as being co-founder of the nursery. Coming from a farming family, she "was reared with sheep and spent years standing in the wrong gap; it is always the wrong gap with sheep!".

Though no longer particularly keen on the animals after her youthful misadventures minding them, Caitriona still holds a great fondness for the childhood delights of

her family's farmhouse kitchen. For her, a remembrance of apple tarts past "takes me back to Saturday mornings in the kitchen with my mam, the apples browning if you peeled them too early, the flour-dusted aprons, and Mam trying to teach us that the best bakers always tidy up after themselves".

Caitriona's Nanna was also on hand to supervise and join in the baking; "Mam and Nanna would each do this their own way. And though they produced their own distinct versions, I loved eating them both".

The steps of making this weekly treat usually followed a set pattern. "We often made the pastry on Saturday and then finished assembling the tart the next morning, ready for baking. It would be fresh out of the oven after dinner on Sunday."

Eager to help step up tart production, Caitriona spied opportunity hanging from the neighbourhood's branches. "I remember picking fruit from crab apple trees near our home when younger, but obviously as they weren't cooking apples, they went unused for the tart. I recall Mam bringing us to do the shopping in Duffy's in Hacketstown to get cookers instead, showing us the difference between the two. Duffy's is long gone now, but it's one of my earliest memories and one that's stayed with me."

Decades later, the taste of deliciously juicy fruit in tender pastry is still something special. "My mam is a great baker, seldom measures anymore but always gets it right; her apple tarts are a real treat for us even now in our late 30s. After hurling training is over for our children on Thursday evening — they're all on the same team — we convene at Mam's house where she has two apple tarts at the ready. Though they are intended especially for the grandkids we all tuck in, sometimes even fighting over the last slice! My siblings and I often joke that while the appearance of the tart at our childhood table was an event, a weekly highlight — for our kids, it's just another Thursday night."

Caitriona Cullen with
her son Rory.

Difficulty: Easy (great for casual bakers)

Prep: 15 mins / Chill: 1hr to overnight / Cook: 30 mins

Makes: 6 servings



Apple Tart

“The pastry can be made the day before to chill overnight. Though my mam and nanna made this differently—Nanna’s pastry was thicker in depth and a bit fluffier—no matter whose it was, we looked forward to it all week!”

Ingredients

- 225g plain flour
- 125g butter
- ¼ pt/150ml cold water
- 4 large cooking apples
- 2 tbsp caster sugar, to sweeten apples
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon (optional)

icing sugar for dusting
if desired

cream or hot custard
for serving

Method

- 1 Preheat the oven to 200°C / 180°C (fan oven) — we had an old gas cooker, but I can't remember the setting for that.
- 2 Sieve flour into a mixing bowl.
- 3 Rub the butter into the flour with the tips of your fingers until the mixture gets crumbly.
- 4 Add the water and mix to a soft dough.
- 5 Turn out onto a floured board and knead lightly. Wrap the dough in cling film and refrigerate (for an hour minimum or as long as overnight).
- 6 Grease an oven-proof dinner plate (or low-lipped ceramic dish of the same size, about a 10-11" diameter) with butter.
- 7 Cut the chilled pastry in half; roll out each half to the rough size of the plate.
- 8 Place one rolled-out piece of pastry onto the plate.
- 9 Slice the apples onto the pastry base. Sprinkle the apples with caster sugar (and ground cinnamon, if desired).
- 10 Place the other rolled-out piece of pastry over the apples.
- 11 Press the edges of the two layers of pastry with a damp fork to join them together, then trim off any overhanging edges with a dampened knife.
- 12 Poke holes in the pastry with the fork to let steam out during cooking.
- 13 Bake for 30–35 minutes.
- 14 Allow to cool slightly, then dust with icing sugar if you like.

Serve warm—lovely with hot custard or cream. The finished tart can be cooled completely and refrigerated for two to three days, or kept in the freezer wrapped well in airtight packaging for up to six months, though it doesn't hang around long enough to need storing in our house!