

Food & Drink
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Your guide to the best store-bought pie crusts

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By [Rebekah Denn](#) 

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We know it's not easy for everyone to make great homemade pie crusts.

But here's a secret: Some of the pre-made purchased crusts aren't so great either.

Looking for the best, we gathered a panel from The Seattle Times food team (plus one visiting grandmother with decades of pie-making experience) to taste-test a half-dozen frozen or refrigerated pre-made crusts. We found tremendous variability in their flavors, textures, ease of use and appearance. We filled the crusts with pumpkin-pie batter from the recipe on the back of the Libby's can, figuring it's a standard on Thanksgiving tables and would provide more uniform results than fruits.

It was, we have to say, easy as pie to find the winner: Grand Central Bakery, which sells frozen U-Bake crusts at its Seattle-area stores, was the overwhelming favorite for its fresh and rich taste ("Butter in this crust, I'll bet!" one taster correctly commented), distinctive layers, and a lovely ruffled edge that was neat and yet clearly formed by hand.

"It's the same crust I would make if I was just going home to make an apple pie tonight," said bakery culinary director and co-owner Piper Davis. The company began selling them a few years back, she said, when they realized that their staff of professional bakers was sneaking extras from the bakery pies home to their own freezers.

Our No. 2 crust was the far more inexpensive and more readily available Safeway house brand, which won near-universal approval and was one panelist's favorite. In decisive last place, to our surprise, was traditional go-to brand Pillsbury, which didn't even win on price.

Here are our full results in order of preference, with one additional warning: The “Eco-Foil” disposable aluminum pans we purchased for the DIY discs were far flimsier than the versions that came with the preformed frozen crusts. The tins sagged under the pies’ weight and had to be placed on a sheet pan and eased into the oven. We’d recommend buying a sturdier brand.

- 1. Grand Central Bakery (\$5.95 for preformed pie shell in tin, \$7.95 for two discs of dough):** Davis said the strong yet tender crust is “halfway between what people call Scotch puff, or rough puff, and classic pie dough.” It also had the most basic ingredients list of any contestant: Flour, butter, salt, water, and a pinch of sugar to round out the flavor and add to the coloring. We’d eat it even with no filling inside.
- 2. Safeway brand (\$2.99 for two crusts):** The house brand won big points for its flavor and thickness, its crisp edges and sturdy bottom, and a crumbly texture that was almost “more cookie than flaky.” The only drawback: The decorative uniform edge was clearly machine-pressed, “a little too perfect.” The ingredients include lard, corn syrup, and artificial colors.
- 3. Trader Joe’s (\$3.99 for two rolled-up discs):** These generously sized crusts (we trimmed the edges to fit in our 9-inch pans) came out crisp-edged and with a classic, balanced flavor, though one tester called it “not buttery.” It’s actually made with a mix of butter and palm oil. The bottom crust stood up well to the filling, with one caveat: The dough became so soft when it reached room temperature that we briefly re-refrigerated it. Enclosed wax paper helped us arrange the crust into the pan, though the beauty of the final product will depend on the crimping skill of the baker.
- 4. Wholly Wholesome (\$4.99 for two crusts),** a brand sold at both Whole Foods and PCC Natural Markets, is certified organic, made with palm oil and labeled “suitable for vegans.” An entirely acceptable option. Panelists liked its crisp edge and toasty flavor, though it got dinged for a thin bottom and grayish color.
- 5. Marie Callender’s (\$5.99 for two crusts):** The “pure vegetable shortening” crust “needs salt” and had a flat, almost chemical taste, panelists said. “Not much going on,” one commented. “Not flaky at all,” said another. It did brown nicely and managed to look good without being too cookie-cutter. The ingredient list includes dextrose and sodium metabisulfite.
- 6. Pillsbury (\$3.99 for two rolled-up discs):** The refrigerated crust came out of the oven oily and with an “almost rancid aftertaste.” It was well-browned, but “the hardest on

top and the mushiest on the bottom” of all contestants. The instructions say to use a glass pie pan for best results, which could have affected the texture. The ingredients included partially hydrogenated lard, wheat starch, xanthan gum, preservatives and artificial colors.

Rebekah Denn writes about food at [seattletimes.com/allyoucaneat](https://www.seattletimes.com/allyoucaneat)

Rebekah Denn: rebekahdenn@gmail.com; on Twitter: [@rebekahdenn](https://twitter.com/rebekahdenn). Denn, a two-time winner of the James Beard Award, writes about food for several local and national publications.