

Cooking with lard

March 7, 2010 by Jennifer

Yes, you read that right. We've been experimenting with lard, on and off, for a few months now. We've cut really, really far back on most processed foods in our lives, but there was one thing we still needed ye olde tub of shortening for: pie crust. Adam is semi-famous for his pie crusts, and was reluctant to trade in something that he knew worked well for the unknown.

Now the results are in: he finally made a pumpkin pie crust with lard instead of vegetable shortening, and I am telling you: it was the most delicious crust I've ever eaten. Light, flakey, and the kids went crazy for it.

We also made some ginger cookies with a half lard/half butter combination last week: They too were delicious.

I was really nervous about using lard in baked goods because when you open up the container it smells like, well, it smells like what your kitchen smells like about 4 hours after frying bacon. Not so appetizing. Furthermore, we tried frying with it a few times – once for popcorn and once for fish — and it really made the kitchen smell icky. I have to say, though, that both the popcorn and the fish tasted really good, with no hint of bacon flavor. Strange, yes?

Adam was reading his [Ratio cookbook](#) and Ruhlman recommends using lard only in highly-spiced baked goods — apparently that bacony flavor can come through if you make, say, simple short-bread cookies with lard. That makes sense to me.

But what about the health implications of all this? Well, it never would have occurred to me to seek out lard until I read about it in [Nourishing Traditions](#) last year. You will not be surprised to learn that Fallon and the [Weston A. Price Foundation](#) recommend using lard in cooking, as well as duck fat, chicken fat, and beef tallow. But what about the saturated fat? Well, let's talk about that for a minute.

First, let's look at this simple breakdown of Crisco shortening, Spectrum Organic Shortening (which we have been using in pie crusts), and lard. Behold, the first-ever New Home Economics *TABLE*:

Name	Total Fat	Saturated	Mono-unsaturated	Poly-unsaturated	“Trans”
Crisco	12g	3g	3g	6g	0g

Spectrum Organic	13g	6g	5g	2g	0g
lard	12g	4.8g	5.76g	1.4g	0g

Now, keep in mind: the amounts for the lard can vary depending on the pig's diet. I got these amounts from [Nourishing Traditions](#), which most likely assumes that you're getting lard from pastured/grass-fed/free-range (whatever) pigs. I bought mine from [the co-op](#), and it comes from [Grass Run Farm](#) in Iowa.

Why the difference in saturated fat between the Crisco and the Spectrum? Spectrum bases their shortening on palm oil, which is highly-saturated tropical oil. Crisco is more of the "we're afraid to raise our saturated fat profile" line of thinking, so they rely instead on polyunsaturates.

Which leads me to my next question: **what are they replacing trans-fats with, anyway?** It's not like food processors can just remove trans fat and have all their food still taste just as good. It's got to be replaced with something. Searching around trying to find the answer to this led me to, among other places: [a super creepy article](#) from the "Homepage of the Food and Beverage Industry" that describes "The Four Paths to Sans Trans" — among them are replacing trans fats with *interesterified fats* and genetically modifying soy beans to get a soy-based oil that is friendlier to food processing. NICE. If the name alone doesn't scare you, check out [more info on interesterified fats](#).

Even if you are not a pie-making, cookie-baking fool, all of this should still concern you if you eat ANY PROCESSED FOOD AT ALL.

So yeah, you might say that I am now a lard convert. Never thought I'd hear myself say that. And it's not like I'm going to start slathering it on everything I eat. But in certain situations, it works really well, and it is MUCH less scary than the alternatives (although the Spectrum shortening is a bit less scary than the Crisco — that high polyunsaturate number in Crisco is a red flag to me).

To the people living in fear of saturated fat, think about this: our bodies *need* a little bit of saturated fat. Many vitamins, such as E and D, are much easier for our bodies to assimilate if they accompany a bit of the good stuff. On the other hand, our bodies most definitely do NOT need ANY amount of interesterified, trans, and whatever other highly-processed thing food processors want to tempt us with. Did I mention that lard is high in vitamin D? (So is butter, FYI.)

Finally, there are several sustainability aspects to this. Palm oil, like that found in my Spectrum shortening, [is a major contributor to deforestation in tropical areas](#). Not to mention it has to be shipped all the way to the U.S., processed, and then shipped to me. Lard is a byproduct, yo. The lard I bought came from Iowa. I could conceivably make lard myself, if I had the inclination.

So what do you think? Are you willing to take the plunge and try it? It took me a long time of staring at that container before I took a deep breath and used it, but now a little research both online and in the kitchen has turned me into a believer.