

Los Angeles Times

FOOD

Wednesday, November 21, 2007

DISH TO GO

Fall apples' essence, American-style crust

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COME on. It's Thanksgiving — you've got to have pie. Pumpkin is the pie of the season, of course, but apple comes next in the hit parade: a toasty brown crust bursting with fall apples, sweet and aromatic with a hint of spices. It's a great counterpoint to all that Thanksgiving richness.

Ironically, the apple pie of the heart's desire isn't so easy to find — in bakeries, anyway. But a number of great ones are out there. What makes them great? You can vary the top crust — go streusel or crumble — but somewhere in that pie there has to be a layer of American-style flaky crust, and that's something that can't be accomplished with shortcuts.

Most important, the character of the apples has to come through, and the filling can't be too cloyingly sweet.

We've found four excellent examples, each within the grand tradition while showing a distinctive flair. It's too late to order ahead for Thanksgiving, of course, but these bakeries are stocking holiday pies for pickup on a first-come, first-served basis.

Fresh find: The crust is ultra-flaky, the topping is a crunchy brown-sugar crumble, but the real star here is the memorable filling, which tastes more like a fresh apple than any other pie filling we've ever had.

\$24.95 at SusieCakes, 11708 San Vicente Blvd., Brentwood, (310) 442-2253. Open 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. today; closed Thanksgiving.

