



# Sweet Potato vs. Pumpkin: The intense Thanksgiving pie rivalry you never knew existed

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We ask people at The Star to do a blind taste test: Sweet potato pie or pumpkin pie? The Two sweet dishes, one bitter rivalry.

A distinct line will be drawn this Thursday at Thanksgiving tables around Kansas City: by those who prefer pumpkin pie as the holiday's dessert du jour and those who prefer sweet potato pie.

Call it pie-tisanship.

Yes, the pies are much more similar than different. Both come in various shades of orange and brown, are custard-based and seasoned with spices like nutmeg, cloves, allspice and cinnamon.

Yet it's the slight contrasts — pumpkin is nuttier and lighter with a more muted taste, while sweet potato tends to be denser with a more redolent flavor profile — that appear to make a world of difference.

In the South, sweet potato pie has ruled the holiday table while in the North, pumpkin has been preferred. Our country's pie preference also seems to be as much divided by race as by geography.

But what about the Midwest, The Star wondered? What about the smack-dab middle of the country — in Kansas City?

To find out, we asked our readers to vote on [which pie they preferred this Thanksgiving](#). After more than 200 votes, results were split down the middle with 50 percent of our readers saying they preferred pumpkin, and the other 50 percent voting for sweet potato.

Among voters who added comments, The Star found overwhelmingly that black pie eaters had a fierce loyalty to sweet potato pie while white pie eaters couldn't imagine anything but pumpkin pie.

"I can't believe this is a real question," said one white pumpkin pie voter from Nebraska.

"Is this really a question?" commented another voter, a black Kansas City man who chose sweet potato.

The cultural dissonance was so strong that some voters, despite being adults, admitted to rarely, if ever, being exposed to the other pie.

One voter, a black woman from Kansas City, said she had “never heard of pumpkin pie until third grade.” Another voter, a white student at the University of Missouri who voted for pumpkin, said she had “never even seen a sweet potato pie.”

Another white voter said: “I imagine if I were to ever make a sweet potato pie, my kids would think I had lost my mind. They would sadly stare at the thing that looks like a pumpkin pie, with confused looks on their faces, wondering why anyone would use potatoes instead of pumpkin.”

Another voter, a black woman from Kansas City, put it this way: “White friends house: pumpkin. Black friends house: sweet potato.”

Food historian Adrian Miller says this dichotomy isn’t surprising.

“Our national pie divide is deepest when people choose between pumpkin pie and sweet potato pie on Thanksgiving Day,” Miller [wrote in the Washington Post](#).

The pie’s affinity in the South and with black Americans, historians agree, stems from the sweet potato’s history as a major crop in the South and a common go-to option for slaves when preparing food for both themselves and the white families they served. Indeed, a [Google Trends search found](#) the most interest in sweet potato pie was in the deep south: Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina.

Meanwhile, the pumpkin is one of the most plentiful growing indigenous squash fruits found in North America, one that was adopted early and fervently into everyday cuisine by colonial American settlers in the northeast.

Mark Boyer, president of [Tippin’s pies](#), says he had heard of the sweet potato pie vs. pumpkin pie debate before, but had no idea the divide had reached this level. “This is the Hatfields and the McCoys,” Boyer said with a laugh.

Boyer says that Tippin’s, [the KCK-based pie making brand](#) that sells pies in 13 states, will make just over 600,000 pumpkin pies this holiday season — 15 percent of its total pie sales for the year. Sweet potato pie, Boyer says, represents about 5.5 percent of the company’s sales.

“Sweet potato’s especially got a strong presence in the South,” Boyer says. “If you take Louisiana and go east, stopping at Florida, there’s a band right there, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, that prefers sweet potato pie.”

Yet despite the deep lines being drawn in the crust, Boyer says ultimately, any conversation about pie is a good conversation.

“One thing I’ve learned about pie is that it brings people together,” Boyer says.  
“When you think of pie, you think about having it around other people.”

“Maybe, especially in the current climate” Boyer said, “what we really need is more pie, not less.”