SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

COOK'S ILLUSTRATED

2020 ANNUAL

Every Recipe from a Full Year of America's Most Trusted Food Magazine

Cranberry Curd Tart

CooksIllustrated.com
$12.95 U.S. & $14.95 CANADA

87>

0 71486 02745 4

Display until February 22, 2021

COOK'S ILLUSTRATED

2020 ANNUAL

AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN

America's Test Kitchen has been teaching home cooks how to be successful in the kitchen since 1993. Our mission is to empower and inspire confidence, community, and creativity in the kitchen. Millions watch our two shows on public television; read our two flagship magazines (*Cook's Country* and *Cook's Illustrated*); and rely on our books, websites, videos, podcasts, and educational products for children. America's Test Kitchen is located in a state-of-the-art Boston facility with 15,000 square feet of test kitchen and studio space. Learn more at AmericasTestKitchen.com.

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN; STYLING: LAN LAM

EDITORIAL STAFF

Chief Executive Officer David Nussbaum
Chief Creative Officer Jack Bishop
Executive Managing Editor Todd Meier
Deputy Editor, Special Issues Megan Ginsberg
Lead Copy Editor Rachel Schowalter
Copy Editors Christine Campbell, April Poole
Assistant Editors, Special Issues Tess Berger, Sara Zatopek

Editor in Chief Dan Souza
Editorial Director Amanda Agee
Deputy Editor Rebecca Hays
Executive Food Editor Keith Dresser
Managing Editor Elizabeth Bomze
Deputy Food Editor Andrea Geary
Senior Editors Lan Lam, Annie Petito
Associate Editor Steve Dunn
Associate Content Editor Alyssa Vaughn
Photo Team Manager Alli Berkey
Lead Test Cook, Photo Team Eric Haessler
Test Cooks, Photo Team Hannah Fenton, Jacqueline Gochenouer
Assistant Test Cooks, Photo Team Gina McCreadie, Christa West
Senior Science Research Editor Paul Adams

Executive Editors, ATK Reviews Hannah Crowley, Lisa McManus
Deputy Editor, ATK Reviews Kate Shannon
Associate Editors, ATK Reviews Miye Bromberg, Riddley Gemperlein-Schirm, Carolyn Grillo
Assistant Editor, ATK Reviews Chase Brightwell

Creative Director John Torres
Photography Director Julie Cote
Art Director Jay Layman
Graphic Designer Charlotte Allen
Senior Staff Photographers Steve Klise, Daniel J. van Ackere
Photographer Kevin White
Photography Producer Meredith Mulcahy

Senior Director, Creative Operations Alice Carpenter
Deputy Editor, Culinary Content & Curriculum Christie Morrison
Senior Manager, Publishing Operations Taylor Argenzio
Imaging Manager Lauren Robbins
Production & Imaging Specialists Tricia Neumyer, Dennis Noble, Amanda Yong
Test Kitchen Director Erin McMurrer
Assistant Test Kitchen Director Alexxa Benson
Test Kitchen Manager Meridith Lippard
Test Kitchen Shopping & Receiving Lead Heather Tolmie
Senior Kitchen Assistant Shopper Avery Lowe

BUSINESS STAFF

Chief Financial Officer Jackie McCauley Ford
Senior Manager, Customer Support Tim Quinn
Customer Support Specialist Mitchell Axelson

Chief Digital Officer Fran Middleton
VP, Marketing Natalie Vinard
Director, Audience Acquisition & Partnerships Evan Steiner
Director, Social Media Marketing & Emerging Platforms Kathryn Przybyla
Social Media Manager Charlotte Errity,
Social Media Coordinators Sarah Sandler, Norma Tentori

Chief Revenue Officer Sara Domville

Director, Public Relations & Communications Brian Franklin

Senior VP, Human Resources & Organizational Development Colleen Zelina
Human Resources Manager Jason Lynott

Circulation Services PubWorX ProCirc

PRINTED IN THE USA

A YEAR OF HOME COOKING

I didn't realize just how much cooking I'd do at home this year. But in early spring after the test kitchen closed and my favorite restaurants shuttered their doors, I found myself orbiting about my home kitchen throughout the day, every day—breakfast, lunch, dinner, repeat. I leaned on my favorite recipes from the Cook's Illustrated archives and on the brand-new ones my team created from their home kitchens. I'm sure many will remember this year largely for what they missed, from graduations and weddings to travel and time with family. In a display of optimism and hope, this annual compendium offers just the opposite: a record of what we created, savored, and shared, despite the challenges. Here are a few of my favorite recipes from the year.

Dan Souza

Lan Lam's recipe for Smashed Burgers (page 19) proudly proclaims that crust is king. She smashes small beef patties firmly into a hot skillet to create loads of surface area for maximum browning and crisping. Topped with melty American cheese and sandwiched in a pillowy-soft potato bun along with classic fixings, these burgers are world-class comfort food.

One of my favorite things to cook is fish. I fry it, sear it, roast it, and, thanks to Steve Dunn's recipe for Butter-Basted Fish Fillets with Garlic and Thyme (page 35), I now often butter-baste it. The classic French technique of spooning hot butter over the top of a piece of fish (or steak or chop, for that matter) in a skillet provides rich browning, a heady aroma, and a ready-made sauce. But fair warning: Once you start butter-basting at home, you may not be able to stop.

Like many, I ate a lot of legumes this year. Lentils were a real fixture of my weeknight cooking, and I returned countless times to Steve Dunn's palak dal (page 47). The warm mix of red lentils and tender spinach, embellished with ghee, mustard seeds, cumin seeds, aromatics, and chiles, is at once deeply satisfying and lively.

And then, of course, there were the doughnuts. Anne Petito's recipe for Yeasted Doughnuts (page 85) delivers pro-caliber, yeasty rounds with a plush, tender chew. Whether finished with a glossy glaze or filled with jelly and dusted in sugar, they are proof positive that the best doughnuts are the freshest doughnuts, and the freshest doughnuts are the ones you make yourself.

These are only a handful of the foolproof, kitchen-tested recipes included in this special edition. If you're among the million or so home cooks in the know who subscribe to the magazine, this issue provides an easy go-to resource for the year in recipes. If you're new to *Cook's Illustrated* (perhaps you, too, found yourself cooking at home a lot more this year) and are ready for some great new recipes, welcome. We've been waiting, and cooking, for you.

Cook your best,

Dan Souza
Editor in Chief

Chicken Schnitzel

Austrian schnitzel elevates the humble breaded chicken cutlet to an elegant dish fit for entertaining.

BY STEVE DUNN

Loosely defined, schnitzel is a piece of meat that's been pounded thin, breaded, and fried—but frankly, that undersells it. This Austrian classic is more delicate than thicker, crunchier Japanese tonkatsu and more distinct than workaday Italian breaded cutlets such as Milanese and scaloppine. There's an elegance to its svelte profile, and even more so to its unique crust: The crumb is particularly fine and closely packed, and instead of hugging the meat the way most breadings do, it puffs away from the cutlet as it fries, forming an airy, wrinkly shell that's not at all greasy. Serving it with a squeeze of lemon and a bright-tasting salad accentuates its lightness. Done well, it manages to be both casual comfort food and dinner party fare.

Austrians typically prepare schnitzel with veal or pork, but plenty of recipes swap in other proteins that are comparably tender and mild, especially chicken breast. The switch sounded appealing to me—who doesn't need more ideas for preparing boneless, skinless breasts?—and I figured it would be as easy as slipping chicken into our existing recipe for pork schnitzel.

Frying in 2 cups of oil helps produce schnitzel's wrinkled, puffed appearance, but the cutlets absorb just 2 teaspoons of it.

Through Thick and Thin

Making schnitzel is a lot like breading and frying any other cutlet: Pound the meat, dredge it in flour, dip it in egg wash, coat it in bread crumbs, and fry it. But in this case, you're making a few targeted changes that all work together to create thinner cutlets coated in a delicate, puffy crust. First, the bread crumbs are fine, not coarse, so they sit very close together and form a compact coating that can trap steam. Second, there is a little oil in the egg wash, which makes the crust slightly flexible and therefore capable of expanding. Third, the cutlets are fried in just a couple of cups of oil in a deep pot, which is gently agitated during cooking so that the hot oil washes over the meat and quickly sets the crust. When this happens, that compact, stretchable breading traps steam and inflates, puffing away from the meat. (For more information, see "What Makes It Puff?")

I began to go through the motions, pounding four chicken breasts to the same ⅛-inch thickness that I would have with pork. But the amount of pounding required to flatten a plump chicken breast caused the meat to tear and become ragged. I tried halving the breasts horizontally, hoping that would minimize the number of strokes needed to thin them out, but the meat still tore. Eventually, I learned that chicken is actually more tender than pork (among other reasons,

What Makes It Puff?

One distinguishing feature of any schnitzel is the way the crust—made by dipping the meat in flour, beaten eggs, and bread crumbs—separates from the meat. Here's how we achieve it.

1 ADD OIL Whisking oil into the eggs for the coating helps lubricate the proteins so that they don't bind to each other as readily, increasing the egg's pliability for a crust that puffs but doesn't break.

2 USE FINE BREAD CRUMBS While we normally reach for coarser panko bread crumbs for a coating, finer conventional bread crumbs form a more compact, cohesive coating that traps steam and puffs.

3 SWIRL OIL OVER CUTLETS We cook the cutlets in a Dutch oven in 2 cups of oil, shaking the pot continuously to wash hot oil over the meat, which quickly sets the breading, traps steam, and puffs the crust.

FINE BREAD CRUMBS
Lots of puff

PANKO BREAD CRUMBS
No puff

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

most chickens are much younger than pigs when they're processed, so their meat has less time to build up tough connective tissue), which meant I didn't need to pound the meat quite as thin to make delicate cutlets. Instead, I halved the breasts and pounded them to a more modest ¼-inch thickness.

I seasoned the cutlets with salt and pepper and coated them one at a time in flour, followed by egg wash and homemade bread crumbs. After each step, I made sure to shake off excess flour and allow some of the egg wash to drip back into the dish so that the coating would be sheer. Next I heated 2 cups of oil to 350 degrees in a Dutch oven and laid two or three cutlets at a time in the oil, being careful not to overlap them. Then I continuously agitated the pot—which had just enough oil to wash over the cutlets but not enough to splatter over the sides—for the minute or so that it took the crust to turn puffy, wrinkly, and golden brown.

After fishing the cutlets out of the oil, I blotted them dry and took a quick taste before frying the second batch. They were great: tender, crisp, and delicate in a way fried chicken never is. My only grievance was the homemade bread crumbs, which had taken longer to make than the schnitzel itself. Fine, even crumbs were a must, but was it really necessary to cube, dry, and process sandwich bread to make my own?

Crumby Results

Coarse, crunchy panko bread crumbs were exactly what I didn't want for schnitzel, but since I always keep a container on hand, I tried blitzing them in the food processer to see if they would work as a coating. They were a disappointment, frying up hard and crunchy. But there was some good—and surprising—news: When I tried regular store-bought bread crumbs, they produced a coating that was even more delicate, puffy, and golden than one made from homemade crumbs.

With the time I saved, I put together two bright salads: one with cucumbers and lots of dill, made creamy and tangy with Greek yogurt, and a rémoulade of fennel, celery, and apple. Either one turns the schnitzel into a complete package that's easy and quick—and more refined than your everyday cutlet dinner.

CHICKEN SCHNITZEL

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

Use fine, unseasoned store-bought bread crumbs for this recipe; substituting panko bread crumbs will produce a crust that lacks the proper texture and appearance. We used Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt in this recipe; if using Morton Kosher Salt, sprinkle each cutlet with only ½ teaspoon. The oil must wash over the cutlets in waves to achieve the desired wrinkles and puff, so the ample space provided by a large Dutch oven is necessary; do not attempt to use a smaller pot. Our recipe for Chicken Schnitzel for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/apr20.

Give It a Shake

To help oil flow over the cutlets, grip the handles of your Dutch oven (with dish towels or pot holders) and gently move the pot back and forth over the burner.

- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 cups plain dried bread crumbs
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 2 cups vegetable oil for frying
- Lemon wedges

1. Spread flour in shallow dish. Beat eggs and 1 tablespoon oil in second shallow dish. Place bread crumbs in third shallow dish. Set wire rack in rimmed baking sheet. Line second rimmed baking sheet with double layer of paper towels. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 200 degrees.

2. Halve chicken breasts horizontally to form 8 cutlets of even thickness. Place 1 cutlet between 2 sheets of plastic wrap and pound to ¼-inch thickness. Repeat with remaining cutlets. Sprinkle each cutlet on both sides with ¾ teaspoon salt and ⅛ teaspoon pepper.

3. Working with 1 cutlet at a time, dredge cutlets thoroughly in flour, shaking off excess, then coat with egg mixture, allowing excess to drip back into dish to ensure very thin coating. Coat evenly with bread crumbs, pressing on crumbs to adhere. Place cutlets on prepared wire rack, taking care not to overlap cutlets. Let coating dry for 5 minutes.

4. Add 2 cups oil to large Dutch oven and heat over medium-high heat to 350 degrees. Lay 2 or 3 cutlets (depending on size) in oil, without overlapping them, and cook, shaking pot continuously and gently, until cutlets are wrinkled and light golden brown on both sides, 1 to 1½ minutes per side. Transfer cutlets to paper towel–lined sheet, flip to blot excess oil, and transfer sheet to oven to keep warm. Repeat with remaining cutlets. Serve immediately with lemon wedges.

On the Side

Bright, creamy, and lightly acidic salads pair nicely with the mild cutlets.

CUCUMBER-DILL SALAD

SERVES 6 TO 8

TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 30 MINUTES SALTING

The fat percentage of the Greek yogurt doesn't matter here; use what you prefer.

- 2 English cucumbers, halved lengthwise and sliced thin
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- ⅓ cup plain Greek yogurt
- 4 teaspoons cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- 1 large shallot, halved through root end and sliced thin
- ¼ cup chopped fresh dill

1. Place cucumbers in colander and toss with salt. Set colander in sink and let stand for 30 minutes. Whisk yogurt, vinegar, oil, and mustard together in large bowl and set aside.

2. Gently shake colander to drain excess liquid, then blot cucumbers dry with paper towels. Add cucumbers, shallot, and dill to bowl with dressing and toss gently to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve.

APPLE-FENNEL RÉMOULADE

SERVES 6 TO 8 TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

Any variety of apple can be used here, but we recommend a crisp-sweet variety such as Fuji, Gala, or Honeycrisp. Our favorite capers are Reese Non Pareil Capers.

- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons whole-grain mustard
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed, plus 1 tablespoon brine
- 4 celery ribs, sliced thin on bias
- 1 fennel bulb, 1 tablespoon fronds minced, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and sliced thin crosswise
- 1 apple, cored and cut into 2-inch-long matchsticks

Whisk mayonnaise, mustard, lemon juice, and caper brine together in large bowl. Add celery, fennel bulb, apple, and capers and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Top with fennel fronds and serve.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/APR20

Malaysian Chicken Satay

This deeply aromatic grilled chicken dish is gorgeously charred, fast to cook, and paired with a peanut sauce you'll want to eat by the spoonful.

BY STEVE DUNN

Imagine the most flavorful bite of grilled chicken you've ever had: robustly seasoned, gorgeously charred, and crisp at the edges. That's what you get with every bite of satay, one of the world's proudest examples of meat on a stick and quintessential street-food fare all over Southeast Asia. The proteins and flavors vary from region to region, but the gist is more or less the same across the board: Small pieces of chicken, pork, beef, goat, or various types of seafood are coated in a flavorful liquid or paste; threaded onto skewers; and grilled hot and fast and very close to the coals so that almost every inch of their surfaces singes and picks up savory, smoky grill flavor. As soon as the food comes off the fire, it's embellished with a condiment—often a potent dipping sauce—that ups its already strong appeal.

Whereas Thai satay tends to be relatively sweet and rich, the Malaysian version skews more herbal and savory.

Two of the most familiar versions of chicken satay are native to Thailand and Malaysia, but they're notably different. Whereas Thai satay tends to be relatively sweet and rich thanks to coconut milk and sugar both in the paste that coats the meat and in the peanut-based dipping sauce, the Malaysian version skews more herbal and savory. Its paste typically includes loads of fragrant lemongrass, ginger, galangal, garlic, and shallots; dried chiles; and spices such as turmeric, coriander, and cumin. And while the dipping sauce is also peanut-based, it's usually leaner and less sweet.

That vibrant, herb-forward profile is precisely what I find so appealing about the Malaysian kind (called satay ayam), especially the savory depth that develops when the aromatics char. But as with any grilled meat, it can be tricky to deeply brown the exterior before the interior dries out. I wanted to look carefully at that challenge and at the prep work: Pounding the large volume of aromatics and spices into a paste in a mortar and pestle requires multiple batches, and many recipes call for marinating the meat in the paste for hours. Maybe there were ways to shortcut those steps and make this dish.

In the Dark

Satay ayam can be made with either white or dark meat, but I pivoted directly to boneless, skinless thighs. Their abundant collagen and fat would keep the meat succulent over the fire while the surface browned and crisped.

Double-skewering the chicken stretches it to create maximum surface area for applying the paste and charring; it also secures the meat during flipping.

I cut 2 pounds of thighs into chunks, coated them in a paste that I'd pounded together, and let the meat marinate for a few hours. Then I skewered the chicken and set it over a hot fire so that the meat would char quickly. And it did—but only in the few spots where it made direct contact with the grate. The chunks didn't offer much surface area, and they spun around when I flipped the kebabs.

Going forward, I cut each thigh into wide strips that created loads of surface area for coating with the paste and charring. Then I threaded the strips onto double skewers so that the meat stretched over the grate and stayed secure. I also brushed both sides of the meat with oil to prevent the paste from sticking to the grate. Within 10 minutes, the chicken was nicely browned with deep char marks—but its surface was downright mushy.

Paste Pointers

After some thought, I recognized the culprit: An enzyme in the ginger called zingibain had broken down the meat's surface proteins. My first instinct was to eliminate the marinating time, since we know that marinades don't penetrate much beyond the surface of meat anyway. But the mushy texture persisted even when I coated the meat just before grilling, so I took a more radical approach and microwaved the paste for 1½ minutes before applying it. The heat deactivated the enzyme, meaning I could coat every inch of the chicken with the paste without compromising its texture. In fact, deactivating that enzyme allowed me to apply the paste ahead of time and store the chicken in the refrigerator until I was ready to grill.

A mortar and pestle is my go-to tool for pounding aromatics into a uniform paste, but given the large volume required for this recipe, it was easier to use the food processor. I minced the lemongrass and galangal and sliced the ginger into coins before

It's All About Char

Smoky, crisp char is as integral to satay as the fragrant paste that coats the meat. The typical grill that a street hawker uses—a shallow, trough-like vessel with a grate set very close to the coals—maximizes that effect by bringing the food as close to the fire as possible so that the meat cooks quickly and chars deeply.

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE (TOP), SIMON LONG/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)

Streamlining Malaysian Satay

The aromatics and spices that give Malaysian satay its distinctly fresh, herbal, and savory profile set it apart from other styles of this dish. Many of these ingredients are used in both the paste that coats the meat and the peanut-based dipping sauce that accompanies it, so we simplified the prep work by grinding a big batch of the paste in the food processor (or in a mortar and pestle) and using a portion of it as a fragrant foundation for the dipping sauce.

PASTE INGREDIENTS
Lemongrass, shallots, garlic, ginger, galangal, red pepper flakes, coriander, turmeric, cumin, brown sugar

grinding them in the food processor with shallots, garlic, and red pepper flakes (they mimicked the heat of whole dried chiles but didn't require stemming and seeding). Adding a few tablespoons of water and a little oil to the mix helped the paste come together.

Not Your Average Peanut Sauce

Next I studied up on the peanut sauce. In addition to being leaner and less sweet than Thai satay sauce, this style is coarser and more rustic; underscored by a fruity, sour tang from tamarind; packed with many of the same aromatics that are in the paste; and often briefly simmered to mellow any sharp flavors and reduce the mixture to a thick consistency.

That overlap between the paste and sauce ingredients seemed like an obvious place to further streamline my method, so going forward I simply made a bigger batch of the paste and set aside ⅓ cup of it for the sauce. The first step was to brown it in a little oil, and after a few tries I discovered that getting it good and dark—essentially creating a rich fond—gave the final sauce nice savory depth. Then I added an equal amount of peanuts (dry-roasted) that I'd coarsely ground in the food processor, along with water and a tablespoon each of tamarind paste and brown sugar, and gently simmered the mixture until it thickened. I seasoned it with salt and had a taste: Fragrant, nutty, and bright, it was the ideal complement to the smoky, savory chicken, and it was so well-balanced that I was tempted to eat it by the spoonful.

In fact, the whole package is so flavor-packed, flexible to prepare, and fast to cook that it's turned into one of my default grilled chicken dishes. No doubt, it will become the same for you.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20

GRILLED CHICKEN SATAY

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1¾ HOURS

You will need eight 12-inch metal skewers for this recipe. If galangal is unavailable, increase the ginger to one 1½-inch piece. The aromatic paste can also be prepared using a mortar and pestle. For a spicier dish, use the larger amount of red pepper flakes. Lime juice can be substituted for the tamarind paste.

Aromatic Paste

- 2 lemongrass stalks, trimmed to bottom 6 inches
- 3 shallots, chopped (⅔ cup)
- 3 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon packed brown sugar
- 3 garlic cloves, chopped
- 1 (1-inch) piece galangal, peeled and minced
- 1 (1-inch) piece ginger, peeled and sliced into ⅛-inch-thick coins
- 2 teaspoons table salt
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- ½–¾ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ½ teaspoon ground coriander
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin

Peanut Sauce

- ⅓ cup dry-roasted peanuts
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- ¾ cup water, plus extra as needed
- 1 tablespoon tamarind paste
- 1 tablespoon packed brown sugar

Chicken

- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed and cut crosswise into 1- to 1½-inch-wide strips
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1. FOR THE AROMATIC PASTE: Halve lemongrass lengthwise and, using meat pounder, lightly crush on cutting board to soften. Mince lemongrass and transfer to food processor. Add shallots, water, oil, sugar, garlic, galangal, ginger, salt, turmeric, and pepper flakes and process until uniform paste forms, about 2 minutes, scraping down sides of bowl as necessary. Measure out ⅓ cup paste and set aside. Transfer remaining paste to bowl and stir in coriander and cumin. Cover bowl and microwave paste for 1½ minutes, stirring halfway through microwaving. Transfer bowl to refrigerator and let paste cool while preparing sauce.

2. FOR THE PEANUT SAUCE: Place peanuts in now-empty processor and process until coarsely ground, about 15 seconds. Heat oil and reserved ⅓ cup paste in medium saucepan over medium-low heat until fond begins to form on bottom of saucepan and paste starts to darken, about 5 minutes. Stir in water, tamarind, sugar, and peanuts and bring to boil, scraping up any browned bits. Reduce heat to maintain gentle simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until sauce is reduced to about 1 cup, 8 to 10 minutes. Season with salt to taste, cover, and set aside.

3. FOR THE CHICKEN: Add chicken to cooled paste and toss to combine. Thread chicken onto 4 sets of two 12-inch metal skewers. (Hold 2 skewers 1 inch apart and thread chicken onto both skewers at once so strips of chicken are perpendicular to skewers.) Do not crowd skewers; each set of skewers should hold 7 to 8 pieces of chicken. Transfer kebabs to large plate and refrigerate while preparing grill. (Kebabs can be refrigerated for up to 4 hours.)

4A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open bottom vent completely. Light large chimney starter mounded with charcoal briquettes (7 quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour evenly over grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

4B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all burners to high; cover; and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Turn all burners to medium.

5. Clean and oil cooking grate. Brush both sides of kebabs with oil. Place kebabs on grill and cook (covered if using gas) until browned and char marks appear on first side, about 5 minutes. Using large metal spatula, gently release chicken from grill; flip; and continue to cook until chicken registers 175 to 180 degrees, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Transfer to large platter. Gently reheat peanut sauce, thinning with extra water, 1 tablespoon at a time, to desired consistency. Serve chicken, passing peanut sauce separately.

PEANUT SAUCE INGREDIENTS
Aromatic paste plus tamarind paste, peanuts, brown sugar

All-Purpose Grilled Chicken Breasts

A brine keeps boneless, skinless chicken breasts juicy over the fire. But with the aid of a couple extra ingredients, that liquid can add savory depth and encourage browning, too.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Boneless, skinless chicken breasts are not the easiest cut to grill, but they might be the most practical. Without skin, bones, and fat, they lack the insulation and succulence of dark meat or bone-in, skin-on parts, but they cook much faster and more evenly and don't tend to flare up. Plus, neutral breast meat goes with anything—bold sauces, sandwiches, salads, taco fixings—and the grill gives it a savory character that roasting and sautéing can't match.

I started by pounding four breasts ½ inch thick so that they'd cook evenly. Then I thought carefully about how to treat them to ensure well-seasoned, juicy meat. Instead of brining them in plain salt water, I spiked the solution with fish sauce. The soak would help the chicken cook up juicy over the hot fire, and the glutamate-rich fish sauce (I added 3 tablespoons per ⅓ cup water) would add salinity and umami depth without imparting a distinct flavor (as soy sauce would) or making the chicken taste fishy.

I knew the one drawback of brining was that the water would thwart browning, so I added a couple tablespoons of honey. The readily browned glucose and fructose would add complexity and encourage color before the lean meat overcooked. After soaking the chicken breasts for 30 minutes (to save refrigerator space and ensure full contact between the chicken and the liquid, I brined in a zipper-lock bag and pressed out as much air as possible), I let the excess liquid drip off and placed them over a hot fire. Deep, attractive grill marks developed within minutes. But then I tried flipping the breasts—and tore them ragged because they stuck to the grates. Oiling the chicken before cooking it helped ensure a clean release; once flipped, the breasts needed just a few more minutes to hit their 160-degree target.

The results were juicy, tender, deeply but neutrally savory, and so versatile that I found myself grilling double batches (you can easily fit eight breasts on the grill) just so that I could have chicken on hand for quick, easy meals all week long.

GRILLED BONELESS, SKINLESS CHICKEN BREASTS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

Serve this chicken with a sauce (see "Maximize the Fire"), pair it with a vegetable, use it in sandwiches or tacos, or slice it and add it to a salad. This recipe can easily be doubled. Red Boat makes our favorite fish sauce. Our recipe for Grilled Boneless, Skinless Chicken Breasts with Poblano-Pepita Sauce is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/jun20.

- **4** (6- to 8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- **⅓** cup water
- **3** tablespoons fish sauce
- **2** tablespoons honey
- **1** teaspoon table salt
- **⅛** teaspoon pepper
- **1** tablespoon vegetable oil

Adding honey to the highly seasoned brine helps the chicken brown deeply and quickly.

1. Cover chicken breasts with plastic wrap and pound gently with meat pounder until ½ inch thick. Whisk water, fish sauce, honey, salt, and pepper together in bowl. Transfer mixture to 1-gallon zipper-lock bag. Add chicken, press out air, seal bag, and turn bag so contents are evenly distributed. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

2A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open bottom vent completely. Light large chimney starter filled with charcoal briquettes (6 quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour evenly over grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

2B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave all burners on high.

3. Remove chicken from brine, letting excess drip off (do not pat dry), then toss with oil in second bowl until evenly coated.

4. Clean and oil cooking grate. Place chicken, skinned side down, on grill and cook (covered if using gas) until chicken develops dark grill marks, 3 to 5 minutes. Gently release chicken from cooking grate, flip, and continue to cook until chicken registers 160 degrees, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Transfer chicken to cutting board and tent with aluminum foil. Let rest for 5 minutes before serving.

Maximize the Fire

One of the biggest perks of grilling boneless, skinless chicken breasts; steaks; chops; or fish fillets is that they cook quickly. So when you have extra time and ingredients—and especially when you're grilling over charcoal and don't want to waste the still-hot coals—you might as well grill something to serve on the side. This can be a quick-cooking vegetable (asparagus, summer squash, corn) or an ingredient that you turn into a garnish or sauce. The peppers in this recipe can be grilled over the same hot fire that we use to grill the chicken, and turning them into a flavor-packed sauce takes just seconds in the food processor.

RED PEPPER–ALMOND SAUCE

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

Combine 5 teaspoons sherry vinegar, 1 minced garlic clove, and ¾ teaspoon table salt in bowl. Toss 2 stemmed, seeded, and quartered red bell peppers with 1 tablespoon vegetable oil. Grill bell peppers, skin side down, over hot fire (covered if using gas), until well charred. Flip and cook until lightly charred on second side. Transfer to bowl and cover with foil. Finely chop ¼ cup toasted whole almonds in food processor. Add 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil, ½ teaspoon smoked paprika, pinch cayenne pepper, vinegar mixture, and bell peppers and process until smooth. Loosen with water as needed and season with salt to taste.

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE

Poulet au Vinaigre

This French chicken dish makes its own sauce—and vinegar is the light that helps it shine.

BY STEVE DUNN

When I was a culinary student in France, my most enduring food memories were made in the rustic bouchons of Lyon. That's where I experienced poulet au vinaigre, a dish that exemplifies the simple and stellar everyday French cooking known as "la cuisine traditionnelle française."

As you might guess, the sauce for poulet au vinaigre features vinegar—the bright, tangy red wine type—but it also includes white wine, chicken broth, fresh tomato, anise-y tarragon, and a bit of heavy cream. White wine is used so as not to impart too much color to the chicken; the red wine vinegar adds tannic intensity and sharpness to the creamy, satisfying sauce.

The dish comes together easily. Bone-in, skin-on chicken pieces (usually both light and dark meat) are first browned in a skillet, and then one of two avenues is taken: The chicken is either pan-roasted before being removed so that the sauce can be built in the empty skillet, or the liquid ingredients are added to the browned chicken and used as a braising medium that is later reduced into a luxurious sauce.

Red wine vinegar and dry white wine team up in a sauce that is scented with tarragon.

For my version, the braising method was the way to go. It was more convenient than pan roasting and building a separate sauce, and it essentially created a ready-made sauce as the dish simmered. I also opted to use only thighs, as dark meat would turn luscious and tender during braising, not to mention that the rich meat was well suited to the lively sauce.

I started by arranging the thighs skin side down in a hot, oiled skillet. Once the fat was rendered and the skin was deeply browned, I flipped the chicken and browned the other side before removing it. In went some minced shallot and sliced garlic to soften, followed by chicken broth. Most recipes call for a 2:1 ratio of wine to vinegar, so I added 1 cup of the former and ½ cup of the latter along with the broth. I nestled the chicken into the liquid skin side up and slid the pan into a 325-degree oven to gently braise. After about 40 minutes, the chicken hit 195 degrees, the temperature at which dark meat is silky and succulent because its collagen has turned to supple gelatin.

I kept the thighs covered on a plate while I reduced the braising liquid, which was now reinforced with chicken juices. When the sauce was nicely thickened, I finished it with fresh tarragon; a peeled, seeded, and diced tomato; and a drizzle of cream.

The chicken was incredibly moist and tender, but the sauce was too sharp. An extra pour of cream mellowed the tanginess, but then the sauce seemed overly rich. To bring things into balance, I dropped the vinegar to ⅓ cup. And finishing the sauce with a couple pats of butter instead of cream enriched it without the dulling effects of excess water and creamy dairy.

The dish now embodied la cuisine traditionnelle française: It was full of flavor, uncomplicated, and unfussy. Well, there was one minor annoyance: having to peel, seed, and dice a tomato. To eliminate that step, I turned to one of my favorite flavor enhancers, tomato paste. Just a tablespoon whisked into the reducing sauce was a fuss-free way to add sweet-tart umami notes without having to mess with a tomato.

As I poured the vibrant, savory sauce around a platter of bronzed, juicy chicken, I smiled, knowing that I now had the means to enjoy one of my favorite French dishes whenever the mood struck.

Make It Your Way

Fresh tarragon is traditional for poulet au vinaigre, but parsley can be substituted. Likewise, dry vermouth can stand in for the wine. Leftovers reheat well, but the recipe can also be halved: Use a 10-inch skillet and keep the cooking times the same.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/OCT20**

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

POULET AU VINAIGRE (CHICKEN WITH VINEGAR)

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1½ HOURS

Use an inexpensive dry white wine here. Our recipe for Poulet au Vinaigre (Chicken with Vinegar) for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/oct20.

- 8 (5- to 7-ounce) bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed
- 1¼ teaspoons table salt
- ¾ teaspoon pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 large shallot, minced
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 cup dry white wine
- ⅓ cup red wine vinegar, plus extra for seasoning
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, chilled
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh tarragon

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and sprinkle both sides with salt and pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch ovensafe skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add chicken, skin side down, and cook, without moving it, until well browned, about 8 minutes. Using tongs, flip chicken and brown on second side, about 3 minutes. Transfer chicken to large plate.

2. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons fat from skillet. Add shallot and garlic and cook, stirring frequently, until garlic is golden brown, about 1½ minutes. Add broth, wine, and vinegar; bring to simmer, scraping up any browned bits. Return chicken to skillet, skin side up (skin will be above surface of liquid). Transfer skillet to oven and bake, uncovered, until chicken registers 195 degrees, 35 to 40 minutes.

3. Using tongs, transfer chicken to clean serving platter and tent with aluminum foil. Place skillet over high heat. Whisk tomato paste into liquid and bring to boil. Cook, occasionally scraping side of skillet to incorporate fond, until sauce is thickened and reduced to 1¼ cups, 5 to 7 minutes. Off heat, whisk in butter and tarragon. Season with salt, pepper, and up to 1 teaspoon extra vinegar (added ¼ teaspoon at a time) to taste. Pour sauce around chicken and serve.

In Defense of Turkey Burgers

Think turkey burgers are dry, tough, or bland? Then you haven't tried these.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Confession time: I genuinely enjoy turkey burgers. If you've encountered a truly bad version (plenty exist) or consider it a punishment to eat a burger made from anything but beef, hear me out: There's a lot to like about a well-made turkey burger. Think a light, juicy texture; savory meat; and a tender, well-browned crust.

For turkey burger success, you must first make peace with the obvious: Ground turkey isn't ground beef. It's very wet—71 percent water versus 66 percent for beef—which makes it hard to work with, yet it can easily cook up dry. That's because ground turkey must be cooked to 160 degrees. At that temperature, nearly all the turkey's abundant moisture will have been squeezed out by contracting proteins. Thorough mixing also causes the myosin (a sticky protein) in the ground turkey to link up tightly, so the burger turns dense.

Many recipes mitigate dry, compact patties by adding mix-ins such as vegetables, beans, and grains that either contribute or trap moisture or break up the texture of the patty. Unfortunately, with too many additions, the result often resembles a veggie burger, perpetuating the idea that ground turkey makes a laughable meal for a meat lover. It's true that to make an extraordinary burger, ground turkey needs a little help. The key is to choose the right mix-ins and use as little of them as you can get away with.

Our deep knowledge of poultry and ground meat helped us take turkey burgers to a new level.

Let's Talk Turkey

Pulsing a whole cut of turkey in the food processor would have allowed me to produce a coarse grind for a loose-textured patty, but that was too much trouble for an everyday recipe, so I set my sights on improving the preground stuff. Just like packaged ground beef, packaged ground turkey is blended to have a range of fat contents. I knew that the 99 percent lean type was a nonstarter; the greater amount of fat in 93 percent lean turkey (more widely available than 85 percent lean) would provide more flavor and moisture.

To address the dense consistency that the sticky myosin produces, I added panko bread crumbs, which physically disrupted the proteins and made the meat feel coarse and light (rather than tough and dense) on the tongue. For 1 pound of turkey, 3 tablespoons of panko did the job without making the burgers taste bready.

But panko wasn't a panacea. Kneading and squeezing the turkey to evenly incorporate the bread crumbs created too sturdy a myosin gel, resulting in a springy, sausage-like consistency. To get around this, I broke the slab of ground turkey into ½-inch pieces prior to adding the panko. This exposed more surface area for even dispersal of the crumbs, reduced the amount of mixing required, and kept the meat loose.

Now the turkey had a pleasant texture, but after reaching 160 degrees, it still wasn't juicy. A couple test kitchen tricks took care of that. First, I bathed

Turkey Needs Help

Ground turkey is full of moisture—more so than ground beef—but since you have to cook it to 160 degrees, it's virtually impossible to keep the juices in the meat unless you give it some help. Here's how we deliver all the qualities that make a turkey burger taste good—really good.

SAVORY FLAVOR
Glutamate-rich soy sauce and Parmesan cheese contribute savoriness.

LIGHT, LOOSE CONSISTENCY
Panko bread crumbs prevent proteins from bonding too tightly.

JUICINESS
Baking soda helps the meat retain moisture; gelatin adds juicy richness.

RICH TASTE AND TEXTURE
Just 1 tablespoon of melted butter adds fat and richness to lean turkey.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

the meat in a solution of baking soda dissolved in a teaspoon of water. The baking soda solution raised the pH, changing the protein structure and enabling the meat to better retain moisture. (It also sped up the Maillard reaction, providing better browning.) Second, I added a bit of unflavored gelatin to hold moisture, creating a juicy mouthfeel.

Fat and Flavor Boosters

A satisfying burger needs some richness, so next I added a bit of melted butter. A single tablespoon solidified when it hit the cold meat, creating tiny particles of fat throughout the patties that remelted during cooking to produce a rich taste and texture.

To augment the meat's savoriness, I experimented with glutamate-rich soy sauce, Parmesan, and ground shiitake mushrooms separately and in combination. The mushrooms overwhelmed the meat, but 1½ tablespoons of soy sauce together with 3 tablespoons of grated Parmesan packed a solid umami punch without being overpowering. When shaping the patties, I used a gentle hand to keep the burger mix coarse and loose.

Cold Turkey

We often cook burgers by searing the patties in a sizzling-hot skillet. The outside of the meat quickly browns while the interior stays cooler. But the interior of a turkey burger needs to be cooked thoroughly, and in a hot skillet the exterior is likely to overcook and turn leathery by the time the interior is done. Unless I wanted to negate all the advances I had already made, I needed to come up with a new method.

I made a couple of bold decisions. First, I would start the patties in a cold oiled skillet. Once they were in place, I turned the heat to medium, and then, when I started to hear sizzling, I covered the pan. The lid trapped the moisture that escaped from the turkey, enveloping the burgers in steam so they cooked quickly and evenly. After about 2½ minutes, I flipped the patties (which were nicely browned on the bottom), covered them, and continued to cook them until they reached 160 degrees and the second side was golden brown. These burgers hit all the right notes: deep browning; a tender crust; a pleasantly coarse and juicy texture; and rich, savory flavor.

I melted cheese onto the burgers and then sandwiched them between soft buns with the works: lettuce, tomato, ketchup, and mayonnaise. And for those times when I wanted to go all out, I created a recipe for my new favorite burger topping: quick-pickled avocado slices. Almost any fruit or vegetable can be pickled, including fatty avocados. The result is both creamy and tangy—the ideal crown for a turkey burger worth bragging about.

RECIPES TO MAKE IT A MEAL

Find these sides in our archive: Easier French Fries (July/August 2009), Pan-Roasted Broccoli (March/April 2006), Roasted Sweet Potatoes (November/December 2008).

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

DON'T COOK TURKEY LIKE BEEF

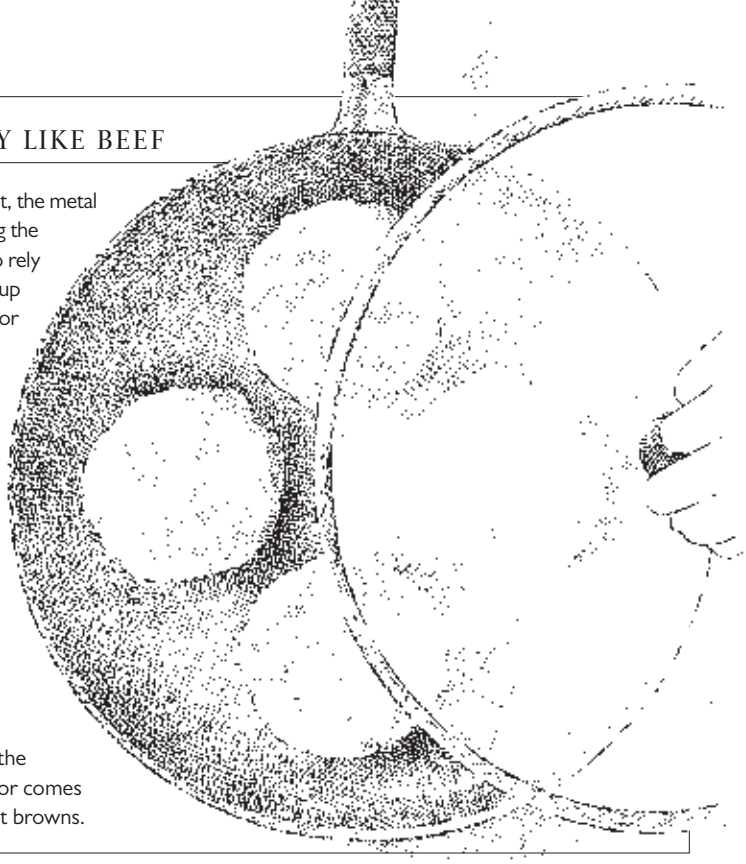
When you cook a burger in a skillet, the metal heats the part of the patty touching the skillet, but the rest of burger has to rely on the meat itself to conduct heat up through the patty. But meat is a poor conductor of heat, so when you need to cook a burger all the way to 160 degrees, the exterior will almost certainly overcook before the interior is done.

START COLD

Starting turkey burgers in a cold pan means that the exteriors of the patties will slowly start to brown while the interiors have time to cook through.

COVER THE SKILLET

Putting a lid on the skillet bathes the patties in steam so that the interior comes up to temperature while the crust browns.



SKILLET TURKEY BURGERS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES

When mixing and shaping the patties, do not overwork the meat, or the burgers may become dense. A pair of fish spatulas works well for flipping the burgers. Serve with your favorite burger toppings and Pickled Avocado (recipe follows), if desired. Our recipe for Skillet Turkey Burgers for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/feb20.

- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon water
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 pound 93 percent lean ground turkey
- 1½ tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted
- 3 tablespoons panko bread crumbs
- 3 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
- ½ teaspoon unflavored gelatin
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon table salt
- 4 slices American cheese (optional)
- 4 hamburger buns

1. Place oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet and set aside. Combine water and baking soda in small bowl. Place turkey in large bowl. Using your hands, break up meat into rough ½-inch pieces. Drizzle baking soda mixture evenly over turkey, followed by soy sauce and melted butter. Evenly sprinkle panko, Parmesan, gelatin, pepper, and salt over turkey mixture. Using your hands, gently toss to combine.

2. Divide meat into 4 lightly packed portions, about 4 ounces each. Gently flatten 1 portion into patty about ½ inch thick and about 4 inches in diameter. Transfer patty directly to prepared skillet and repeat with remaining portions.

3. Heat skillet over medium heat. When patties start to sizzle, cover skillet and cook until patties are well-browned on bottom, about 2½ minutes (if patties are not browned after 2½ minutes, increase heat). Carefully flip patties, cover, and continue to cook until second side is well browned and burgers register 160 degrees, 2½ to 3 minutes longer. If using cheese, place 1 slice on each burger about 1 minute before burgers finish cooking. Transfer burgers to plate and let rest for 5 minutes, then transfer to buns and serve.

PICKLED AVOCADO

SERVES 4

TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES, PLUS 30 MINUTES CHILLING

Use a relatively firm avocado for this recipe.

- ½ cup distilled white vinegar
- ½ cup water
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons table salt
- 1 ripe but firm avocado, halved, pitted, and sliced ¼ inch thick

Combine vinegar, water, sugar, and salt in medium bowl and whisk until sugar and salt are dissolved, about 30 seconds. Add avocado (avocado should be submerged) and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes or up to 2 hours. Drain and pat dry before using.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20**

The Best Turkey You'll Ever Eat

The hands-off, naturally make-ahead confit technique transforms turkey thighs into a silky, dense, and savory revelation.

BY LAN LAM

I know a lot about turkey—I've roasted hundreds of birds while developing two previous recipes for this magazine. I'm adept at keeping the delicate breast meat moist while ensuring that the longer-cooking legs and thighs turn tender. I have tricks for seasoning the flesh all the way to the bone, producing crackling brown skin, and maximizing the flavors of herbs and spices. But if I really wanted to wow you with a single unadorned bite—no drizzle of gravy, no sprinkle of flaky salt, no dollop of cranberry sauce—I wouldn't bother with any of those techniques. I'd make turkey confit.

The term "confit" is derived from the French verb "confire," which means "to preserve." Before refrigeration, confit was used as a simple and effective way to prolong the shelf life of foods, including duck or goose parts. The poultry was cured in salt and then gently poached in its own fat before being buried beneath the fat and stored in an airtight crock. At serving time, all that was needed was a blast of heat to crisp the skin. Today, all types of dark-meat poultry, pork, and game are given the treatment (tender white meat breaks down too much with this method), though regardless of the protein, duck fat is a classic choice for the poaching step.

But the most important thing you need to know about confit is that its benefits go far beyond preservation. In fact, the method is a near miracle for turkey, producing satisfyingly dense, silky meat and concentrated savory flavor with very little effort. In other words, Thanksgiving dinner just got a lot better.

In Search of a Cure

I decided to work with bone-in, skin-on turkey thighs, since turkey drumsticks have multiple tendons that can be unwieldy to navigate during carving. Curing the thighs would be similar to brining or salting; it just involves more time and a higher concentration of salt. But there's no standard approach: In my research, I came across a wide variety of times and salt amounts.

Instead of gravy, we serve the turkey with a bright sauce of orange marmalade, lime, and mustard.

What Makes Confit So Darn Good?

A few simple ingredients and a bit of patience are all that's required to produce turkey with extraordinary flavor and texture.

DEEP, COMPLEX FLAVOR During a four-day cure, salt; sugar; and some water-soluble compounds in onions, fresh thyme, and black pepper make their way into the turkey, seasoning it to the bone.

TENDER MEAT Melted fat heats the turkey gently, evenly, and efficiently, giving its collagen time to break down into gelatin and turning the meat remarkably tender.

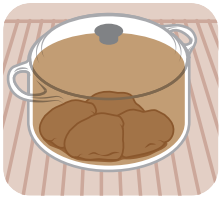
MOIST, FIRM, DENSE TEXTURE A low oven temperature means little water escapes during cooking, so the turkey stays moist. In addition, chloride ions from the salt push the muscle fibers apart from each other, causing them to draw in and retain moisture. After a while, the chloride also starts to denature and "cook" some of the proteins, giving the meat the satisfying firm, dense texture that is a hallmark of confit.

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE

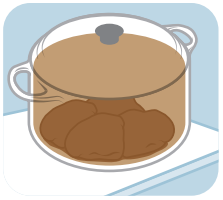
Confit at a Glance

One more reason to love turkey confit is its terrific make-ahead potential. The process takes at least five days, but almost all the preparation time is unattended.

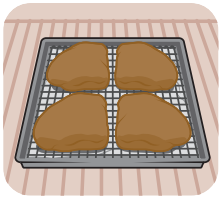
1. CURE Salt turkey (along with aromatics) for 4 to 6 days.



2. COOK Oven-poach turkey in fat for 4 to 5 hours.



3. HOLD Refrigerate for up to 6 days. (This step can be skipped.)



4. BROWN Warm through on stovetop, then brown in hot oven.

TECHNIQUE

CHECKING FOR DONENESS

Don't wait until the meat is falling off the bone, which is an indication that it's overdone. Instead, gauge the turkey's doneness by inserting a metal skewer straight into the thickest part of the largest thigh. If the skewer can be easily removed without lifting the thigh with it, the meat is ready.

After several experiments, I landed on a four-day cure using 5 teaspoons of table salt for 4 pounds of thighs. Shorter cures didn't give the salt enough time to fully penetrate, producing thighs that were salty at the exterior and underseasoned near the bone.

When the curing time was up, I rinsed the salt from the thighs, patted them dry, and slowly oven-poached them in 6 cups of duck fat along with bay leaves and a head of garlic. (A 250-degree oven was preferable to the stovetop since it didn't require babysitting. Sous vide cooking is also a great option; see "Sous Vide Confit" for the details.) After an hour, the thighs were hovering in the 140-degree range, which allowed their collagen to break down into gelatin. At the 3½-hour mark, the thighs were tender, so I transferred them to a foil-lined baking sheet, cranked the oven up to 500 degrees, and slid them in. Fifteen minutes later, the thighs were beautifully browned and the meat was evenly and deeply seasoned, with a firm, dense texture.

Bonus: On serving day, all you need to do is briefly brown the thighs in the oven.

Seasonings were my next consideration. When salting or brining meat, we don't normally add extra flavorings, because they take too long to penetrate the flesh. But with a cure, water-soluble ingredients actually have time to travel deep inside, so many recipes recommend mixing some combination of fresh herbs (parsley or thyme), spices (black pepper, allspice, or juniper berries), and alliums (onion, garlic, or shallots) with the salt.

To help everything stick to the thighs and to ensure even distribution, I processed the salt with chopped onion, fresh thyme leaves, and black pepper, plus a touch of sugar for complexity. I increased the salt to 2½ tablespoons because the onions would capture some of it, preventing it from seasoning the turkey's interior. I spread a portion of the green-and-black-flecked mixture in a baking dish, arranged the thighs in the dish, and packed the remaining mixture on top before refrigerating the assembly for four days.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/DEC20**

(After a few more tests, I concluded that for the sake of convenience, the thighs could sit for up to six days.)

When I cooked the thighs, I was delighted to find that the aromatics had worked their way into the turkey, giving it a rich, deeply savory taste; the sugar rounded out the flavors. This was far better than the salt-only turkey. In fact, it was the finest turkey I'd ever eaten. A colleague described it best, proclaiming, "It tastes like turkey, gravy, and stuffing all in one delicious bite!" (For a deeper dive into the benefits of curing and poaching in fat, see "What Makes Confit So Darn Good?")

Beware of Bubbles

The turkey's flavor was top-notch, but I couldn't help wishing that the meat were a little more moist. I had noticed a thin stream of bubbles rising through the poaching fat from the thighs as they cooked, indicating that moisture was escaping the meat. Would the turkey be juicier if I dropped the oven temperature?

Sure enough, when I reduced the oven to 200 degrees, the bubbles disappeared. Actually, it didn't look like anything was happening at all. But 5 hours later, the results were well worth the wait. This was the moistest turkey yet, because the ultralow-and-slow approach forced less water out of the meat.

Finally, many recipes call for transferring the protein to a clean container; separating the fat from the perishable juices; and refrigerating the meat, submerged in the fat, for a "ripening" period. I didn't want to bother separating the fat from the jus, so I tried six days of refrigeration (the longest I could go without the jus turning sour) directly in the pot of fat and jus. Ultimately, this waiting time had no effect on flavor or texture. That said, it was great to know that I had such a wide window for making the confit in advance.

Beyond Gravy

Gravy, of course, is traditional with Thanksgiving turkey. But this turkey was anything but traditional, and a meaty sauce would only mimic the rich, decadent flavor of the meat. For a bold, fresh accompaniment, I combined citrus and mustard in the form of sweet orange marmalade, tart lime, and whole-grain mustard. A few spoonfuls of the concentrated turkey juices provided a savory backbone, and a pinch of cayenne added subtle warmth. It was bright and cheery—which is exactly how I felt when I served this turkey.

Why You Should Invest in Duck Fat

Some confit recipes call for vegetable oil or chicken fat instead of duck fat, and we found that all three fats produce confits that brown beautifully and taste similar—even though the fats taste very different on their own. That's because the meat doesn't absorb fat during the confit process; it emerges with just a bare coating on its surface. But I still recommend using duck fat (chicken is my second choice) if you can swing it. The fat absorbs flavors from the meat as it cooks, making it even more complex-tasting, and I find duck fat to be particularly delicious. The upshot is that you end up with a fantastic by-product that can be reused in a variety of ways. Strain the leftover fat; freeze it; and then use it as the fat for gravy or to make more confit, sauté vegetables, or drizzle over a simple soup for depth.

FLAVOR BOOSTER
Leftover duck fat from making confit gives richness and depth to a variety of foods.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

TURKEY THIGH CONFIT WITH CITRUS-MUSTARD SAUCE

SERVES 6 TO 8 TOTAL TIME: 5½ HOURS, PLUS 4 DAYS SALTING

Start this recipe at least five days or up to 12 days before serving (almost all the time is hands-off). The proper measurement of salt is crucial here. Be sure to use table salt, not kosher salt, and to measure it carefully. To ensure proper seasoning, make sure that the total weight of the turkey is within 2 ounces of the 4-pound target weight; do not use enhanced or kosher turkey thighs. Though duck fat is traditional, we found that chicken fat or even vegetable oil will work nicely. Reserve the duck fat or chicken fat and remaining stock in step 5 for further use; used vegetable oil should be discarded. It is convenient to split up the cooking over several days, but if you prefer to do all the cooking in one day, go straight from step 2 to step 5 without letting the turkey cool.

- 3 large onions, chopped coarse (4¾ cups)
- 12 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2½ tablespoons table salt for curing
- 4½ teaspoons sugar
- 1½ teaspoons pepper
- 4 pounds bone-in turkey thighs
- 6 cups duck fat, chicken fat, or vegetable oil for confit
- 1 garlic head, halved crosswise
- 2 bay leaves
- ½ cup orange marmalade
- 2 tablespoons whole-grain mustard
- ¾ teaspoon grated lime zest plus 2 tablespoons juice
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper

1. TO CURE: Process onions, thyme sprigs, 2½ tablespoons salt, sugar, and pepper in food processor until finely chopped, about 20 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Spread one-third of mixture evenly in bottom of 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Arrange turkey thighs, skin side up, in single layer in dish. Spread remaining onion mixture evenly over thighs. Wrap dish tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 4 to 6 days (whatever is most convenient).

2. TO COOK: Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 200 degrees. Remove thighs from onion mixture and rinse well (if you don't have a garbage disposal, do not allow onion pieces to go down drain). Pat thighs dry with paper towels. Heat fat in large Dutch oven over medium heat to 165 degrees. Off heat, add turkey thighs, skin side down and in single layer, making sure thighs are completely submerged. Add garlic and bay leaves. Transfer to oven, uncovered, and cook until metal skewer inserted straight down into thickest part of largest thigh can be easily removed without lifting thigh, 4 to 5 hours. (To ensure that oven temperature remains steady, wait at least 20 minutes before retesting if turkey is not done.) Remove from oven.

3. TO MAKE AHEAD: Let turkey cool completely in pot, about 2 hours; cover pot; and refrigerate for up to 6 days.

4. Uncover pot. Heat pot over medium-low heat until fat is melted, about 25 minutes. Increase heat to medium, maintaining bare simmer, and continue to cook until thickest part of largest thigh registers 135 to 140 degrees, about 30 minutes longer. (If turkey has been cooked in vegetable oil, heat pot over medium heat, maintaining bare simmer, until thickest part of largest thigh registers 135 to 140 degrees, about 30 minutes.)

5. TO SERVE: Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 500 degrees. While oven heats, crumple 20-inch length of aluminum foil into loose ball. Uncrumple foil, place in rimmed baking sheet, and top with wire rack. Using tongs, gently transfer thighs, skin side up, to prepared wire rack, being careful not to tear delicate skin. Set aside. Strain liquid through fine-mesh strainer into large bowl. Working in batches, pour liquid into fat separator, letting liquid settle for 5 minutes before separating fat from turkey stock. (Alternatively, use bulb baster to extract turkey stock from beneath fat.) Transfer 4 teaspoons turkey stock to small bowl; add marmalade; and microwave until mixture is fluid, about 30 seconds. Stir in mustard, lime zest and juice, salt, and cayenne. Transfer to serving bowl.

6. Transfer thighs to oven and roast until well browned, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer thighs to cutting board, skin side up, and let rest until just cool enough to handle, about 15 minutes.

7. Flip 1 thigh skin side down. Using tip of paring knife, cut along sides of thighbone, exposing bone. Carefully remove bone and any stray bits of cartilage. Flip thigh skin side up. Using sharp chef's knife, slice thigh crosswise ¾ inch thick. Transfer to serving platter, skin side up. Repeat with remaining thighs. Serve, passing sauce separately.

TECHNIQUE | HOW TO CARVE TURKEY THIGHS

1. Place thigh skin side down. Using tip of paring knife, cut along sides of thighbone, exposing bone.

2. Carefully remove bone and any stray bits of cartilage. Flip thigh skin side up.

3. Using sharp chef's knife, slice thigh crosswise ¾ inch thick.

Sous Vide Confit

Confit is well suited to sous vide cooking: You need only 1 cup of fat or oil instead of the 6 cups required for the oven method; it allows you to precisely control the cooking temperature; and as with traditional confit, the timing is flexible.

SOUS VIDE TURKEY THIGH CONFIT WITH CITRUS-MUSTARD SAUCE

SERVES 6 TO 8 TOTAL TIME: 17½ HOURS, PLUS 4 DAYS SALTING

Start this recipe at least five days or up to 12 days before serving (almost all the time is hands-off). We double-bag the turkey thighs to protect against seam failure, so you will need four 1-gallon zipper-lock freezer bags. If preferred, use a vacuum sealer and skip the double-bagging. This recipe calls for the same ingredients as Turkey Thigh Confit with Citrus-Mustard Sauce, with two exceptions: You need only 1 cup of fat or oil and ½ teaspoon of granulated garlic instead of a head of garlic.

1. Follow recipe for Turkey Thigh Confit with Citrus-Mustard Sauce through step 1.

2. Using sous vide circulator, bring 4 inches (about 6 quarts) water to 158 degrees in 12-quart stockpot or similar-size heatproof container. Remove thighs from onion mixture and rinse well (if you don't have a garbage disposal, do not allow onion pieces to go down drain). Pat thighs dry with paper towels. Fold back top of 1-gallon zipper-lock freezer bag. Place 2 thighs skin side up in single layer in bag. Add ½ cup fat, ¼ teaspoon granulated garlic, and 1 bay leaf. Seal bag, pressing out as much air as possible. Gently lower into prepared water bath until thighs are fully submerged, allowing air bubbles to rise to top of bag. Open 1 corner of zipper, release air bubbles, and reseal bag. Repeat bagging and resealing with second zipper-lock bag and remaining thighs, ½ cup fat, ¼ teaspoon granulated garlic, and bay leaf.

3. Seal each bag inside separate 1-gallon zipper-lock freezer bag. Gently lower 1 bag into prepared water bath until thighs are fully submerged, then clip top corner of bag to side of container, allowing remaining air bubbles to rise to top of bag. Open 1 corner of zipper of outer bag, release air bubbles, and reseal bag. Repeat with second bag. Cover container with plastic wrap and cook for at least 16 hours or up to 20 hours. Remove bags from water bath and let cool completely, about 1 hour. Refrigerate, still double-bagged, for up to 6 days.

4. TO SERVE: Using sous vide circulator, bring 4 inches (about 6 quarts) water to 140 degrees in 12-quart stockpot or similar-size heatproof container. Fully submerge each bag in water bath, cover container with plastic, and cook for at least 1½ hours.

5. Continue with recipe for Turkey Thigh Confit with Citrus-Mustard Sauce from step 5.

Mastering Beef Wellington

Culinary triumph awaits: I'll guide you through wrapping beef tenderloin in earthy mushrooms, savory prosciutto, and buttery pastry—and cooking it to rosy perfection.

BY STEVE DUNN

Your holiday centerpiece can be prepared entirely in advance. On serving day, simply pop it into the oven.

Of all the recipes I've developed, none has made me as proud as beef Wellington. That's not to say I wasn't intimidated at first: The ingredients are expensive, there are multiple components to consider, and success is notoriously elusive. But over time, I figured out how to orchestrate the steps into a foolproof process to produce a stunningly beautiful—and delicious—dish.

Most beef Wellington recipes come together like this: Coat a well-seared beef tenderloin in duxelles (finely chopped sautéed mushrooms), wrap it in crepes or thinly sliced prosciutto, top it with smears of liver pâté or slabs of foie gras, and encase everything in fancifully decorated pastry. Then slide it into the oven, fingers crossed that the beef emerges juicy and pink inside a crisp, golden crust.

I spent three days (and a staggering $600) evaluating five such recipes, and none fully justified the time or expense. However, there were bright spots: One Wellington featured deeply savory duxelles; another boasted medium-rare, juicy beef; and yet another had a beautifully crisp, golden crust.

Coming up with my own version was a tall mountain to climb, so I tackled the easy stuff first. I salted the beef overnight to enhance its flavor and ditched the dull crepes in favor of umami-rich prosciutto. I fortified the duxelles with shallots and a splash of Madeira and cooked it long enough to drive moisture from the mushrooms, concentrating their earthiness. Finally, I jettisoned the pâté, since its liver-y taste competed with rather than complemented the beef, and instead brushed the beef with Dijon mustard to add a complex kick. In the end, the package was so improved that I found I could skip the usual step of searing the meat.

Next, the pastry. Most modern recipes call for store-bought puff pastry, but the frozen dough often emerged from its package cracked where it had been folded and, as it warmed, was easy to tear. Once cooked, it slumped in spots and never fully crisped. However, one recipe from the innovators at ChefSteps promised success with pâte brisée, an all-butter dough often used for tarts. Sure enough, this dough was easy to work with, even as I decorated the top of the Wellington with slender dough strips arranged on an elegant diagonal. Unlike the doughs of many other recipes I tried, which crumbled when sliced, this buttery, flaky crust was just sturdy enough to pass the slicing test.

My last challenge was simple to understand but hard to solve. Here's the deal: Pastry requires high heat to set its shape, crisp, and brown. A beef roast, on the other hand, benefits from a low-and-slow approach to produce medium-rare meat from edge to center. A sample cooked in a 425-degree oven yielded a crisp, golden crust but overdone beef; 325 degrees produced rosy beef but slack, pale pastry.

It wasn't until I called a side-by-side tasting that I had a breakthrough. I served the first roast while the other one waited nearby, and a lengthy discussion kept me from promptly returning to the second roast. When I finally sliced into it, the meat was gray, not pink. I had expected a certain amount of carryover cooking, but I was surprised at how significant the effect was here: This meat had been pushed to 150 degrees, well beyond my 130-degree target.

So why not make carryover cooking work for me instead of against me? Thus began a series of tests in which I pulled the Wellington from the oven at progressively lower temperatures. In the end, I landed on a technique in which I blasted the Wellington in a 450-degree oven for 45 minutes until the crust was crisp, flaky, and golden and then removed it when the meat registered a mere 85 degrees. During a

BEEF WELLINGTON FOR FOUR

For the recipe, along with **nutrition information and more**, visit **CooksIllustrated.com/DEC20**

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

45-minute rest on the counter, the temperature of the roast steadily climbed to 130 degrees.

It was Wellington perfection: When sliced, the roast exuded hardly any juice, and the well-seasoned, medium-rare tenderloin encased in savory duxelles, salty prosciutto, and crisp pastry was a sight to behold. I beamed as I served it with a luxe sauce of heavy cream, brandy, and piquant green peppercorns, knowing that it had been well worth the effort.

BEEF WELLINGTON

SERVES 8 TO 10 TOTAL TIME: 3 HOURS, PLUS 1½ HOURS RESTING AND 12 HOURS SALTING

We recommend using a probe thermometer for this recipe. Center-cut beef tenderloin roasts are sometimes sold as Châteaubriand. Request a Châteaubriand from the thicker end of the tenderloin; some butchers refer to this as the "cannon cut." Dry sherry can be substituted for the Madeira. Use packaged prosciutto rather than freshly sliced deli prosciutto, as the slices will be easier to handle. Although the timing for many of the components is flexible, we recommending making the Wellington over a three-day period: Prepare the components on the first day, assemble it on the second day (remember to reserve your leftover egg wash so that you can give the pastry a final coat before roasting it), and bake and serve it on the third day. For an alternative decoration using a lattice pastry cutter, see page 30. Serve with Madeira Sauce (our recipe is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/dec20) or Creamy Green Peppercorn Sauce.

Beef

- 1 center-cut beef tenderloin roast, 3 pounds trimmed weight, 12 to 13 inches long and 4 to 4½ inches in diameter
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon pepper

Pastry

- 3¼ cups (17¾ ounces) bread flour
- 22 tablespoons (2¾ sticks) unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch cubes and chilled
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- ½ cup plus 1 tablespoon ice water

Duxelles

- 8 shallots, chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 2 pounds cremini mushrooms, trimmed and quartered, divided
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon table salt
- 1 tablespoon Madeira
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme

Assembly

- 12 slices prosciutto
- 1 large egg plus 1 large yolk

Easy, Elegant Sauce

The sauce can be made as the roast is resting; alternatively, prepare it up to three days ahead and warm it right before serving.

CREAMY GREEN PEPPERCORN SAUCE

SERVES 8 TO 10 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ¼ cup jarred green peppercorns
- 2 tablespoons minced shallot
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups beef broth
- ¼ cup brandy
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 cup heavy cream

1. Melt butter in medium saucepan over medium-low heat. Add peppercorns and shallot and cook, stirring frequently, until shallot is softened, 3 to 5 minutes. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 2 minutes. Increase heat to medium and whisk in broth, brandy, and soy sauce. Bring to boil. Cook, whisking occasionally, until mixture is reduced to 1½ cups, 12 to 15 minutes.

2. Add cream and cook, whisking occasionally, until reduced to 2 cups, about 10 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

DAY ONE: PREP COMPONENTS

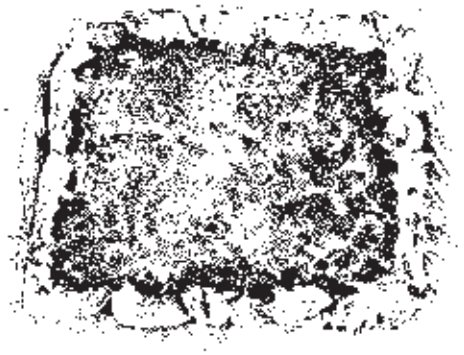
1. FOR THE BEEF: Sprinkle all sides of beef evenly with salt. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 12 hours or up to 3 days.

2. FOR THE PASTRY: Using stand mixer fitted with paddle, mix flour, butter, and salt on medium-low speed until mixture is crumbly and pieces of butter are no larger than peas, 4 to 5 minutes. With mixer running, add ice water in steady stream. Increase speed to medium and continue to mix until smooth dough comes together around paddle, 1 to 3 minutes longer. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter. Remove one-quarter (about 8 ounces) of dough and shape into 6-inch square. Shape remaining dough into 6-inch square. Wrap both pieces in plastic and refrigerate for at least 8 hours or up to 2 days.

3. FOR THE DUXELLES: Process shallots and garlic in food processor until very finely chopped, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Transfer to small bowl. Pulse half of mushrooms until mushrooms resemble couscous, about 10 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl halfway through processing (do not overprocess). Transfer to large bowl and repeat with remaining mushrooms.

4. Melt butter in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-low heat. Add shallot mixture and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in mushrooms, pepper, and salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid given off by mushrooms has evaporated and mushrooms begin to sizzle, about 45 minutes. Add Madeira to mushroom mixture and cook, stirring constantly, until evaporated, about 2 minutes. Off heat, stir in thyme. (If making duxelles ahead, let cool completely and refrigerate in airtight container for up to 3 days.)

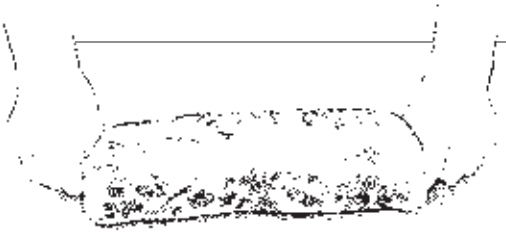
DAY TWO: ASSEMBLE



5. TO ASSEMBLE: Overlap 2 to 3 pieces of plastic on counter to form 30 by 30-inch square (it's OK if up to 2 inches of plastic hangs off edge of counter). Shingle prosciutto in center of plastic in 2 rows of 6 slices, slightly overlapping to form 14 by 15-inch rectangle, with shorter side parallel to edge of counter. Transfer duxelles to prosciutto and use offset spatula to spread in even layer, leaving 1-inch border of prosciutto on all sides (if duxelles is cold, microwave for 1 minute to soften before spreading).

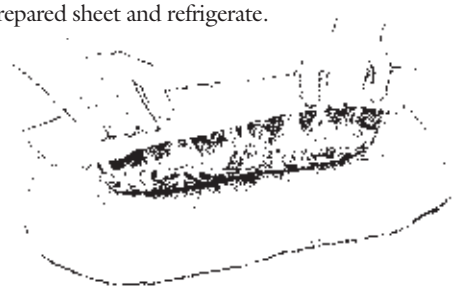
6. Unwrap beef and pat dry with paper towels. Brush all sides of beef with mustard and sprinkle with pepper. Arrange roast parallel to edge of counter, about one-third of way up duxelles. Using both hands, lift bottom edge of plastic to begin wrapping roast. Continue to roll roast, leaving plastic behind, until roast is completely wrapped in prosciutto. Tuck overhanging slices of prosciutto over each end of roast.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE



7. Tightly roll roast in plastic and twist plastic tightly at each end to seal. Continue to twist ends of plastic and roll roast on counter until formed into snug cylinder. Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes or up to 2 days before cooking.

8. Line 2 rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Roll out larger piece of dough on generously floured counter into 18 by 16-inch rectangle. Drape dough over rolling pin, transfer to prepared sheet, and refrigerate for 15 minutes. Roll smaller piece of dough into 16 by 7-inch rectangle. Transfer to second prepared sheet and refrigerate.

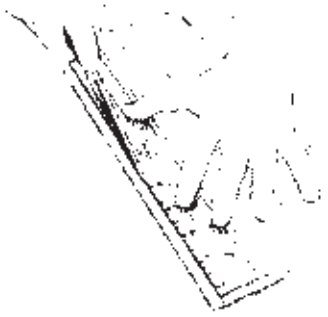


9. Whisk together egg and yolk. Lay large pastry sheet directly on counter with long side parallel to edge of counter. Brush entire surface with egg wash; set aside remaining egg wash. Unwrap beef and place on pastry, arranging it parallel to edge of counter and 2 inches from pastry edge closest to you. Wrap edge of pastry closest to you over beef. Holding edge in place, slowly roll roast away from you, keeping pastry snug to meat, until roast is covered.

10. Allow pastry to overlap by 1 inch and trim away excess. Roll roast so seam is on top. Gently press and pinch overlapping dough to seal. Roll roast so seam is on bottom.

11. To seal ends of roast, tuck sides of pastry tightly against meat as though you are wrapping a present, then fold top of pastry down, pressing snugly.

12. Using rolling pin, roll excess dough at end of roast against counter to make it thinner and longer. Trim rolled end to 2-inch length and tuck under roast. Repeat process on other end of roast. Transfer roast seam side down to lightly greased rimmed baking sheet and refrigerate for at least 15 minutes or up to overnight (if refrigerating longer than 1 hour, wrap in plastic).



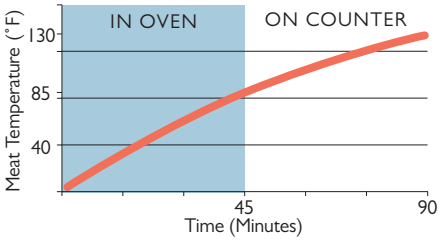
13. Transfer smaller rectangle of dough, still on parchment, to counter, with short side parallel to edge of counter. Using ruler and sharp knife or pizza cutter, cut dough lengthwise into ¼-inch-wide strips.

14. Brush top, sides, and ends of roast with some of reserved egg wash; set aside remaining egg wash. Lay strips of dough diagonally across top of roast, leaving ¼ to ½ inch between strips. Gently press strips to adhere to roast and trim excess at each end to ¼ inch. Using bench scraper, tuck ends of strips under roast. Refrigerate roast for at least 10 minutes. (Roast can be loosely covered with plastic and refrigerated for up to 24 hours.)

On-the-Counter Cooking

When you're making an elaborate dish such as beef Wellington, the stakes are high: Anything less than juicy, rosy meat and a crisp, golden crust signals a disappointing waste of time and money. The conundrum is that well-browned pastry requires high heat, whereas medium-rare meat is generally produced via a low-and-slow approach.

The solution was to cook the Wellington in a 450-degree oven just until the pastry was well browned, at which point the meat was a mere 85 degrees. As the roast rested, the temperature at its center climbed 45 degrees, reaching a perfect 130-degree medium-rare in about 45 minutes.



As the roast sits on the counter, carryover cooking causes its internal temperature to rise a full 45 degrees.

The fix relies on the phenomenon known as "carryover cooking," wherein meat continues to cook even after it is removed from a heat source. This happens for two reasons: First, the exterior of a large roast gets hot much more quickly than the interior. Second, because heat always moves from a hotter to a cooler area, as long as there is a difference in temperature between the two regions, heat will keep moving from the surface to the center. In our Wellington, the pastry also insulates the meat, so heat on its surface tends to travel toward the center rather than dissipate into the air during the carryover period.

DAY THREE: BAKE AND SERVE

15. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Brush roast thoroughly with reserved egg wash. Place thermometer probe, if using, through 1 end of roast so tip of probe is positioned at center of roast. Roast until beef registers 85 degrees and crust is well browned and crisp, 40 to 45 minutes. Transfer sheet to wire rack, leaving probe in place to monitor temperature. Let rest, uncovered, until internal temperature reaches 130 degrees, 40 to 45 minutes.

16. TO SERVE: Slide large metal spatula under roast to loosen from sheet. Use both hands to transfer roast to carving board. Using serrated knife, cut roast into 1-inch-thick slices (to keep pastry intact, score through decorative strips before cutting each slice) and serve.

The Easiest, Cleanest Way to Sear Steak

How do you pan-sear strip or rib eye without making a grease-splattered mess and setting off your smoke alarm? First, forget everything you know about steak cookery.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Searing steak on the grill is a pleasure. Outdoors, the smoke serves as ambiance and enticement to my guests, and the grill acts as a giant drip pan, requiring little cleanup beyond a quick postmeal scrub with a stiff brush. But stovetop searing inevitably causes smoke to billow and grease to splatter, so I rarely make a go of it. When I do, I use the reverse-sear method to cook the meat most of the way through in a low oven before pan searing so that the stovetop cooking can be brief. Still, that approach takes the better part of an hour and doesn't entirely avoid the smoke and splatter.

What I really wanted was the outcome of reverse searing, the speed of stovetop searing, and no mess.

I wanted a fast, mess-free stovetop method for pan-searing strip or rib-eye steaks (my favorite cuts) that would achieve the evenly rosy interior and deeply browned crust that any good steak should have.

Best of Both Worlds

Every approach to steak cookery faces the same fundamental challenge: how to ensure that the exterior develops a deeply browned crust just as the interior comes up to temperature. Pulling it off is tricky because the outside of the steak needs lots of heat to brown, while the inside can't take more than minimal heat before it overcooks.

That's why the classic approach to pan searing—blasting each side of the steak with heat in a well-oiled, ripping-hot pan—doesn't work well. While it's fast and produces a great crust, a wide band of gray, overcooked meat can form just below the crust. What's more, the combination of all that high heat and fat is exactly what causes smoke and splatter. The reverse-sear method cooks steak beautifully—the interior is medium-rare from edge to edge with only a thin gray band, and the crust is rich and dark—thanks to its combination of low and high heat, which allows the meat to heat up slowly and evenly in a low oven before it's seared on the stovetop. But this method isn't for busy weeknights. What I really wanted was the outcome of reverse searing, the speed of stovetop searing, and no mess.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/APR20**

Flipping the steaks every 2 minutes allows a deep crust to build up gradually without overcooking the meat.

Steak New Claims

As I started to rethink the stovetop method, I realized that I could minimize splatter by cutting back on the oil, since the well-marbled steaks exude plenty of their own fat during cooking. (Fat splatters when moisture being pushed out of the meat hits it and explosively evaporates, splashing the fat out of the skillet.) In fact, I had a hunch that I could get away with skipping the oil altogether.

To make it work, I moved the cooking out of a stainless-steel skillet and into a nonstick (or carbon-steel) one. That not only made sticking a nonissue but also produced a more substantial crust because the nonstick pan didn't bond much to the meat's surface proteins as they browned. That meant more of those proteins remained on the meat instead of getting stuck to the pan.

I also started cooking the steaks in a "cold" (not preheated) pan. This was a surefire way to avoid the safety hazard of overheating a nonstick skillet, since the food kept the pan cool enough, even when it was over high heat, and the slow buildup of heat mimicked the low-oven phase of the reverse-sear method, warming the steaks gently and encouraging their fat to render without smoking. But to quickly drive off moisture so that the meat would sear instead of steam, I had to immediately crank the heat to high—and by the time each side of the meat was browned over a high flame, the rendered fat had started to smoke and the dreaded gray band had developed.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

New-School Way to Pan-Sear Steak

Searing steak doesn't have to trash your kitchen. When we put every step of the conventional method under a microscope, we realized there was a less messy way to get the rich crust and rosy interior that every steak should have.

COOK IN NONSTICK OR CARBON STEEL, NOT STAINLESS STEEL

A slick surface prevents the steaks from sticking without oil and allows more savory browning to stick to the meat, not the pan.

DON'T ADD OIL TO THE PAN

Fat smokes and splatters at high temperatures; minimizing the amount in the skillet is the best way to avoid those problems. Plus, well-marbled strip and rib-eye steaks don't need extra fat added to the pan to brown; they exude plenty of their own during cooking.

DON'T PREHEAT

Adding steaks to a "cold" (not preheated) pan allows their interiors to heat up gradually and evenly.

START HIGH; THEN GO LOW(ER)

An initial burst of high heat drives off moisture so that the meat sears; lowering the heat ensures that the interior and exterior finish cooking at the same time and prevents smoking.

FLIP OFTEN

Flipping the steaks every 2 minutes cooks them from the bottom up and the top down, so their interiors warm evenly and their crusts build up gradually.

Whether or not you salt your steaks before cooking (see recipe headnote), it's always a good idea to sprinkle the sliced meat with coarse or flake sea salt before serving. The crystals add delicate crunch and ensure that every bite is well seasoned.

Clearly I had to reduce the heat, but the steaks' crusts would suffer unless I figured out a different way to get a deep sear. That's when I introduced our "frequent flipping" technique, where you flip the meat every 2 minutes instead of browning one side at a time. We've used it to brown other proteins (pork chops, swordfish steaks) without overcooking their interiors, and it works by taking advantage of heat transfer: When a protein is flipped, its hottest side is turned faceup, allowing heat to dissipate into the air while the other side gets a turn to sear. And as long as the pan is hot enough, the protein gradually develops a rich crust, like multiple coats of paint applied to a wall. (Note: This method works only with thicker cuts, which can spend more time in the pan building up a crust before their interiors overcook.) The flipping worked so well that I was able to reduce the heat to medium partway through cooking, which completely avoided the gray band and the risk of smoking without impacting the crust.

My gentler method delivered the deep crust and edge-to-edge rosiness of the reverse sear but got the job done faster and avoided the mess. Instead of scrubbing grease off the stovetop, I buzzed together a quick herb sauce that made this weeknight classic company-worthy.

PAN-SEARED STRIP STEAKS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 20 MINUTES

This recipe also works with boneless rib-eye steaks of a similar thickness. If you have time, salt the steaks for at least 45 minutes or up to 24 hours before cooking: Sprinkle each of the steaks with 1 teaspoon of kosher salt, refrigerate them, and pat them dry with paper towels before cooking. Serve with Sauce Verte (recipe follows), if desired. Our recipe for Pan-Seared Strip Steak for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/apr20.

- 2 (12- to 16-ounce) boneless strip steaks, 1½ inches thick, trimmed
- 1 teaspoon pepper

1. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and sprinkle both sides with pepper. Place steaks 1 inch apart in cold nonstick skillet. Place skillet over high heat and cook steaks for 2 minutes. Flip steaks and cook on second side for 2 minutes. (Neither side of steaks will be browned at this point.)

2. Flip steaks, reduce heat to medium, and continue to cook, flipping steaks every 2 minutes, until browned and meat registers 120 to 125 degrees (for medium-rare), 4 to 10 minutes longer. (Steaks should be sizzling gently; if not, increase heat slightly. Reduce heat if skillet starts to smoke.)

3. Transfer steaks to carving board and let rest for 5 minutes. Slice steaks, season with coarse or flake sea salt to taste, and serve.

SAUCE VERTE

SERVES 4 (MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP) TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES

If you like, omit the tarragon and increase the amounts of parsley and mint to ¾ cup each.

- ½ cup fresh parsley leaves
- ½ cup fresh mint leaves
- ½ cup fresh tarragon leaves
- 1 small shallot, chopped
- 1 tablespoon capers, rinsed
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 1 anchovy fillet, rinsed and patted dry
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest plus 1 tablespoon juice

Process parsley, mint, tarragon, shallot, capers, garlic, anchovy, and salt in food processor until coarsely chopped, about 5 seconds. Add oil and lemon zest and juice and process until sauce is uniform, about 5 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

RECIPES TO MAKE IT A MEAL

Find these sides in our archives: Pan-Steamed Asparagus with Lemon and Parmesan (March/April 2019), Roasted Potatoes with Garlic and Rosemary (May/June 1998), and Broiled Broccoli Rabe (September/October 2016).

Smashed Burgers

The best burgers usually revolve around bespoke blends that cook up ultrajuicy, but this diner staple trades on one simple truth: Crust is king.

BY LAN LAM

Behold, our meticulously composed smashed burger: double-stacked patties that just overhang the bun to accentuate their crisp edges; a slice of Kraft American cheese; bright, creamy burger sauce; lettuce; tomato; and a soft bun.

If the edge-versus-center debate were about burgers instead of brownies, my allegiances would fall squarely with Team Edge—or, in this case, Team Crust. Because as much as I appreciate the beefy, medium-rare middle of a plump, juicy burger, the savory depth of well-browned beef is simply unrivaled.

That's why I love smashed burgers. These diner icons share the same thin, verging-on-well-done profile as typical fast-food burgers, as well as their all-American array of fixings: gooey American cheese; creamy, tangy burger sauce; crisp lettuce; thinly sliced tomato; and a soft bun. But with a smashed burger, extra-special attention is paid to making the brownest, crispiest, most savory crust.

Maximizing that Maillard browning is where technique comes in, but as I discovered, there's more to it than simply searing the patty hard on each side. Furthermore, you have to get the toppings just right, because smashed burgers—more than any other style of burger—rely on the condiments to deliver the moisture and tenderness that are sacrificed in pursuit of the ultimate crust. It's a smart, sum-of-its-parts approach to burgers, and when the elements are pitch-perfect and properly assembled, each bite is absolute nirvana.

Getting Stuck

Smashed burgers are fast and easy to make. Since the patty is thoroughly cooked and the crust delivers so much flavor, there's no need to be choosy about the cut of beef or grind your own meat. In fact, commercially ground beef (80 percent lean) makes better smashed burgers than home-ground chuck does because the former is more finely ground and thus stays more cohesive when it's flattened. (Skeptical? See "When Preground Is Preferable.")

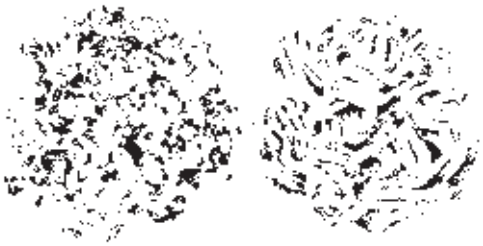
The first step is to form the meat into balls no larger than 4 ounces each (any bigger and the flattened patty will comically overhang the edges of the bun). Then you place a ball in a smoking-hot cast-iron skillet and—literally, as the name suggests—smash it so that the meat spreads out as much as possible and creates loads of surface area for seasoning and browning. It takes only a minute or two for the crust to form, at which point you flip the patty, cook it just a few seconds longer so that the meat cooks through, slide it onto the bun, and top it with cheese. Since the whole operation goes fast, it's easy to make more. Just scrape out the residual browned bits and repeat.

At least, that's how it should work, but my results have always been inconsistent. Sometimes the burgers

INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT

When Preground Is Preferable

Most burgers are best made from meat you grind yourself, but there are two reasons (in addition to speed and ease) you should make smashed burgers with commercially ground beef. First, the commercial stuff is ground finer and thus contains more free myosin, a sticky meat protein that helps the patties hold together when they're smashed. (A food processor can't produce an evenly fine grind.) Second, there's no need to be choosy about the cut of beef since the large surface area of deeply browned crust delivers plenty of savory, beefy flavor.



HOME GROUND
Coarser meat = broken burger

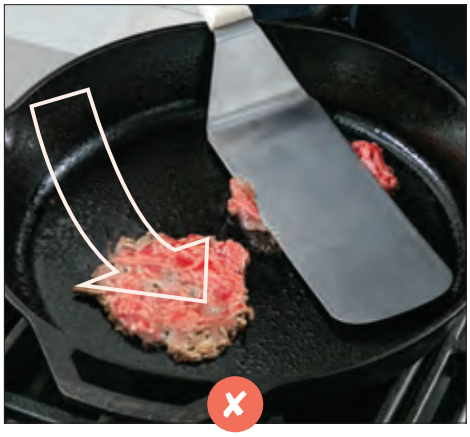
PREGROUND
Finer meat = cohesive burger

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Press Credentials

Flattening a ball of ground beef into a thin disk is as simple as it sounds, but the tool you use affects the force you exert on the meat and, consequently, how uniformly flat the patties will be. Avoid a spatula; its offset handle makes it difficult to press the meat evenly. Instead, choose an object that allows you to press the meat from the top down, such as a small saucepan (grip the sides of the pan), burger press, or 28-ounce can. And don't worry about oversmashing the meat: Even if you press really hard, the small amount of meat won't spread much beyond the diameter of the bun.



SPATULA
Indirect pressure

SAUCEPAN
Direct pressure

have stayed thin and flat against the metal, searing and crisping deeply; other times they've shriveled and cooked up with spotty, disappointing browning—and a smashed burger without its signature crust is just a disk of gray, overcooked meat.

The problem, I realized after closely observing a failed attempt, was sticking—or lack thereof. Meat contracts as it cooks, and unless the patties were uniformly stuck to the metal, they shrank as they seared, going from pancake-thin to too thick in seconds. I then understood why many recipes call for brushing no more than a few drops of oil onto the skillet's surface and why the best burgers I'd made were the ones that I'd had to scrape loose from the pan (see "The Sticking Point").

THE STICKING POINT

To flip the burgers, you'll need to scrape them loose from the pan—and that's a good thing. Sticking means that the meat has made full contact with the pan and browned deeply and uniformly. Burgers that don't stick shrink and thicken, reducing the amount of brownable surface area and thus savory flavor.

Pressing Issues

Clearly I needed to refine my smashing tactics so that the meat stuck more, and I started by reconsidering my smashing instrument. When I went at the beef with a metal spatula (the best tool for loosening and flipping the patties), its offset handle made it difficult to press with even force. I rummaged around the kitchen for a better device and eventually found an unlikely alternative: a small saucepan. By gripping the sides of the pan, I was well positioned to press straight down on the ball of meat so that it spread into a round that made stronger, more uniform contact with the skillet. The raw meat left a bit of a mess on the bottom of the saucepan, but I fixed that by wrapping the pan in a large piece of aluminum foil, which made cleanup a cinch. (A burger press and a 28-ounce can made fine substitutes for the saucepan; for more information, see "Press Credentials.")

Knowing that the meat needed to be really anchored to the skillet, I also put even more mustard behind my pressing motion than I had been, which had the added benefit of maximizing the patty's brownable surface area. The downside was that the burger now overhung the bun by a good inch or two, which looked silly and made the whole package awkward to eat. So I decided to divide and conquer: Instead of making two 4-ounce patties, I split the beef into four 2-ounce balls. Even when flattened as much as possible, two of these smaller patties fit in the skillet together, and each one extended just past the edge of the bun, accentuating the effect of their jagged, supercrispy edges in a way that I hadn't even anticipated.

The other benefit of these double-stacked patties was that they helped the cheese between them melt. By the time I topped the patties with lettuce and tomato and capped them with the buns (which I toasted and spread with a creamy mayonnaise, shallot, ketchup, and pickle sauce ahead of time to make assembly easy), the slice was starting to seep into the meat, acting almost like a rich, salty cheese sauce. It was precisely the right effect for this application, and to hammer it home, I made sure to use ultramelty Kraft Singles.

With that, I had ironed out every detail for my ultimate smashed burger and could get back to campaigning for Team Crust. Who's with me?

SMASHED BURGERS

SERVES 2 TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES

Do not use a stainless-steel or nonstick skillet here. You can use 85 percent lean ground beef, but 90 percent lean will produce a dry burger. Open a window or turn on your exhaust fan before cooking. Be assertive when pressing the patties. We strongly prefer Kraft Singles here for their meltability. To serve four, double the ingredients for the sauce and burgers and use the same amount of oil; once the burgers are cooked, transfer them to a wire rack set in a rimmed baking sheet, adding cheese to the first four burgers, and keep warm in a 200-degree oven. Place on buns right before serving.

Sauce

- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon minced shallot
- 1½ teaspoons finely chopped dill pickles plus ½ teaspoon brine
- 1½ teaspoons ketchup
- ⅛ teaspoon sugar
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper

Burgers

- 2 hamburger buns, toasted if desired
- 8 ounces 80 percent lean ground beef
- ¼ teaspoon vegetable oil
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt, divided

- 2 slices American cheese (2 ounces)
- Bibb lettuce leaves
- Thinly sliced tomato

1. FOR THE SAUCE: Stir all ingredients together in bowl.

2. FOR THE BURGERS: Spread 1 tablespoon sauce on cut side of each bun top. Divide beef into 4 equal pieces (2 ounces each); form into loose, rough balls (do not compress). Place oil in 12-inch cast-iron or carbon-steel skillet. Use paper towel to rub oil into bottom of skillet (reserve paper towel). Heat over medium-low heat for 5 minutes. While skillet heats, wrap bottom and sides of small saucepan with large sheet of aluminum foil, anchoring foil on rim, and place large plate next to cooktop.

3. Increase heat to high. When skillet begins to smoke, place 2 balls about 3 inches apart in skillet. Use bottom of prepared saucepan to firmly smash each ball until 4 to 4½ inches in diameter. Place saucepan on plate next to cooktop. Sprinkle patties with ⅛ teaspoon salt and season with pepper. Cook until at least three-quarters of each patty is no longer pink on top, about 2 minutes (patties will stick to skillet). Use thin metal spatula to loosen patties from skillet. Flip patties and cook for 15 seconds. Slide skillet off heat. Transfer 1 burger to each bun bottom and top each with 1 slice American cheese. Gently scrape any browned bits from skillet, use tongs to wipe with reserved paper towel, and return skillet to heat. Repeat with remaining 2 balls and place burgers on top of cheese. Top with lettuce and tomato. Cap with prepared bun tops. Serve immediately.

A Case for Grilled Short Ribs

With their rich marbling, intense beefiness, and satisfying chew, boneless beef short ribs can rival a rib eye on the grill—at about half the cost.

BY LAN LAM

The best steaks for searing over hot coals are those that have enough fat and beefy flavor to support the smoky, charred aromas that the meat acquires during grilling. Meaty rib eyes and strip steaks fit the bill—but they are a real splurge. So what if I told you that there is an equally flavorful cut that will run you only about half as much? Boneless beef short ribs are ribboned with fat and grill up as juicy as can be, with a satisfying chew similar to that of flank or skirt steak.

The seams of fat that run through beef short ribs are responsible for the incredible flavor that they can achieve on a grill. As with any well-marbled steak, as the beef cooks, fatty acids form aromatic compounds. It's these compounds that enhance the meat's rich, beefy taste. Meanwhile, the proteins on the surface of the ribs brown and contribute roasty flavors. Finally, the fat-laden juices drip onto the coals, creating flare-ups that impart charred savoriness to the meat.

Producing succulent ribs couldn't be more straightforward: Salt before grilling, cook to medium, and slice against the grain.

Making Short Work

To get my bearings, I reviewed several existing recipes. Many start with a marinade, which I rejected out of hand, since a marinade flavors only the surface of the meat and would be barely noticeable in a cut this thick. But I decided to give the grilling approach used by most recipes a test run. It's the same technique that is often suggested for a rib-eye or strip steak: Sprinkle with salt and sear over hot coals until the meat reaches a rosy medium-rare, flipping it halfway through searing. But although boneless short ribs grilled this way had a deeply beefy taste, the meat was unevenly seasoned and rather chewy. What's more, the short ribs' blocky shape and roughly 1½-inch thickness meant that by the time their centers were up to temperature, their exteriors were burnt. I knew that I could do a lot better.

I started by ensuring that the meat would be thoroughly seasoned, sprinkling 2½ teaspoons of kosher salt onto 2 pounds of boneless ribs that I'd cut into 3- to 4-inch lengths. I let the ribs sit for an hour—plenty of time for the sodium ions to penetrate deep into the muscle fibers. While they sat, I considered the best way to grill them.

I decided to try a method that we've used on the stovetop for other thick cuts of beef, pork chops, and even swordfish. It calls for repeatedly flipping the protein over high heat until it comes up to temperature. (Boneless short ribs are so thick and chunky that I'd need to grill them on all four sides, not just the top and bottom.) The upshot is that the interior warms evenly and gently, since each time the meat is flipped, the side not touching the pan (or the cooking grate in this case) cooks via residual heat, producing rosiness from edge to edge. Meanwhile, a rich, dark crust builds up gradually.

A Searing Success

To produce a concentrated area of heat, I spread hot coals over just one side of the grill. I then seared the ribs on each of their four sides for 2 to 3 minutes per side. But I soon realized that I wasn't flipping them often enough. Boneless short ribs are not uniformly sized and some are tapered at one end, so a few were done after just three of their sides were browned. It was better to flip them every minute until they were well seared on all sides and had come up to temperature, checking the smaller ones early and often.

Speaking of temperature, to determine how high to take the ribs, I cooked half a batch to medium-rare and the remainder to medium. A few years ago while working on a grilled skirt steak recipe, I learned that cooking tougher cuts to medium instead of medium-rare causes the muscle fibers to shrink and separate, making the meat more tender—and in a well-marbled cut, the rendered fat makes up for any loss of juices. I suspected that short ribs would also benefit from this treatment.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/OCT20

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE

Inside, after letting the ribs rest for 10 minutes, I sliced them thin against the grain to shorten the meat fibers—another trick to ensure that each bite is tender. Both samples were juicy and beefy, with deeply browned crusts, and just as I had suspected, the 130-degree ribs were more tender.

The Bright Side

I love these steaks with nothing more than a sprinkle of flake sea salt and a spritz of tart lemon juice to balance their richness, but they're also terrific with a bold, bright sauce: I whipped up two that get their backbones from fermented products. The first features kimchi combined with a hit of fresh scallions; the second marries citrus and nuts in the form of tangy, floral preserved lemon and crunchy toasted almonds. No matter how you serve these steaks, I guarantee that you'll be getting more than your money's worth.

GRILLED BONELESS BEEF SHORT RIBS

SERVES 4 TO 6

TOTAL TIME: 30 MINUTES, PLUS 1 HOUR SALTING

This recipe was developed using Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt. If you're using Morton Kosher Salt, which is denser, use only 1¾ teaspoons of salt. We like these ribs cooked to about 130 degrees (medium). If you prefer them medium-rare, remove the ribs from the grill when they register 125 degrees. Serve with lemon wedges and flake sea salt or with one of our sauces (recipes follow).

- **2 pounds boneless beef short ribs, trimmed**
- **2½ teaspoons kosher salt**
- **1 teaspoon pepper**

1. Cut ribs into 3- to 4-inch lengths. Sprinkle all sides with salt and pepper. Let sit at room temperature for 1 hour.

2A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open bottom vent completely. Light large chimney starter mounded with charcoal briquettes (7 quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour evenly over half of grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

2B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all burners to high; cover; and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Turn off 1 burner (if using grill with more than 2 burners, turn off burner farthest from primary burner) and leave other burner(s) on high.

3. Clean and oil cooking grate. Arrange ribs on hotter side of grill. Cook (covered if using gas), flipping ribs every minute, until meat is well browned on all sides and registers about 130 degrees at thickest part, 8 to 14 minutes. (Ribs will be very pale after first flip but will continue to brown as they cook. This cut can quickly overcook; start checking temperature of smaller ribs after 8 minutes.)

4. Transfer ribs to cutting board, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Slice ribs as thin as possible against grain. (Grain runs diagonally, so as long as you slice lengthwise, you will be cutting against grain.) Serve.

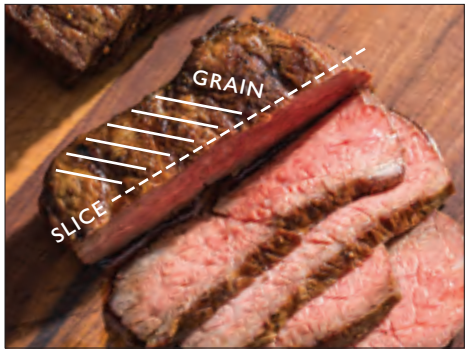
The Skinny on Boneless Short Ribs

THE VERSATILE BONELESS SHORT RIB

Most of us have enjoyed meltingly tender boneless short ribs braised to about 195 degrees. So why is the same cut also good when grilled to only 130 degrees? It has to do with its high fat and collagen contents. Both melted fat and broken-down collagen impart juiciness to meat. While long, slow braising breaks down most of the collagen, turning a short rib fall-apart tender, even quick, high-heat grilling will still break down some collagen, bolstering the juiciness of the meat.

A CONFUSING CUT

Despite its name, the boneless short rib isn't cut from the rib of a cow. Instead, it is cut from the area above the ribs closest to the chuck, or shoulder, of the animal, where most of the meat is made up of the heavily marbled serratus ventralis muscle.



SLICING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Meat is made up of bundles of muscle fibers that run parallel to one another. The fibers form a pattern that is referred to as the "grain"; it looks similar to wood grain. Slicing against the grain means cutting the fibers into shorter pieces. This makes tougher cuts such as boneless short ribs more pleasant to eat because shorter lengths of muscle fibers are easier to chew. It's easy to cut boneless short ribs against the grain because the muscle fibers tend to run diagonally. That means that as long as you slice the meat lengthwise, you'll be cutting against the grain.

KIMCHI-SCALLION SAUCE

SERVES 6 (MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP)

TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES, PLUS 15 MINUTES RESTING

Cider vinegar or seasoned rice vinegar can be substituted for the unseasoned rice vinegar.

- **6 scallions, sliced thin**
- **⅓ cup finely chopped kimchi**
- **¼ cup vegetable oil**
- **4 teaspoons soy sauce**
- **4 teaspoons unseasoned rice vinegar**
- **¼ teaspoon sugar**

Stir all ingredients together in bowl. Let sit for 15 minutes. Stir well before using. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.)

PRESERVED LEMON–ALMOND SAUCE

SERVES 6 (MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP)

TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES, PLUS 15 MINUTES RESTING

Sliced almonds provide a delicate crunch; do not substitute slivered or whole almonds.

- **5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided**
- **¼ cup sliced almonds, chopped**
- **½ cup minced fresh parsley**
- **2 tablespoons finely chopped preserved lemon plus 2 tablespoons brine**
- **2 tablespoons lemon juice**
- **¼ teaspoon sugar**

Combine 1 tablespoon oil and almonds in 8-inch skillet; toast over medium-high heat, stirring constantly, until almonds are golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes. Immediately transfer to bowl. Stir in parsley, preserved lemon and brine, lemon juice, sugar, and remaining ¼ cup oil. Let sit for 15 minutes. Stir well before using. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.)

The Science of Stir-Frying in a Wok

Cooks have briskly tossed, turned, and flipped food in this vessel for centuries. We dug deep into this ancient culinary art to understand exactly why and how it works.

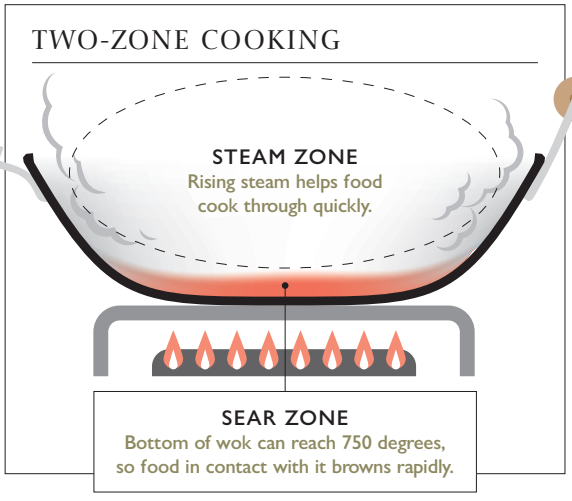
BY LAN LAM

If you want to get a sense of the gutsy, vigorous, animated nature of stir-frying, the best place to start might be with physician and writer Buwei Yang Chao's definition of ch'ao, the Chinese word for the technique. "Roughly speaking," she writes in *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese*, the seminal 1945 cookbook she produced with her husband and daughter, "ch'ao may be defined as big-fire-shallow-fat-continual-stirring-quick-frying of cut-up material with wet seasoning. We shall call it 'stir-fry' or 'stir' for short."

The main thrust of Chao's definition is that stir-frying employs high heat and constant motion to cook food so rapidly that proteins brown uniformly and vegetables lose their raw edge but retain vibrant color and fresh crunch. As soon as the food hits the wok, it's repeatedly pushed, flipped, and swirled all over the vessel's surface, which allows its moisture to evaporate quickly. When that happens, existing flavor compounds in the food become concentrated, and new, more savory compounds develop as the cooking surface gets hot enough to produce Maillard browning.

I spent weeks stir-frying rice, green beans, and beef to suss out the mechanics of both woks and the act of stirring in them, and I came away with some informative discoveries.

You'll know that the beef is done browning when its exuded juices evaporate and the meat begins to sizzle.



Woks Are Precisely Designed for Stir-Frying

One obvious benefit of cooking in a wok is that its high, sloping walls allow you to easily move food around the surface without spilling it over the sides. I also discovered that a wok's tall sides create two distinct heat zones that work in tandem to cook food efficiently and evenly.

SEAR ZONE: The bottom of a wok is the hottest part (it can exceed 750 degrees when set over a conventional gas burner) because it makes direct contact with the heat source. Food that passes through this part of the pan cooks rapidly and acquires flavorful browning.

STEAM ZONE: A couple of inches above the wok's base, a layer of steam forms as moisture escaping from the food is corralled by the vessel's tall sides. As this steam heat hits the food, it helps the food cook through quickly.

Stirring Helps Food Cook Faster and Develop More Flavor

Though it might sound counterintuitive, constantly stirring food helps it cook through faster than it would if you stirred it only periodically. The movement brings new surfaces of the food into contact with the hot pan and releases steam—both of which expedite cooking. In fact, when I compared stirring thin slices of beef constantly to stirring an equal amount of meat only occasionally, I found that the food stirred constantly cooked about twice as fast (for more information, see "How We Proved That Stirring Speeds Cooking"). (Note: This testing was done over gas burners. Woks behave differently over electric coils and induction and glass-top electric burners.)

That evaporation also improves flavor. As water is driven away, flavor compounds concentrate and the cooking surface can heat up to the temperatures necessary for Maillard browning. The solids that remain break down and form new flavor compounds that add rich savoriness to stir-fries.

Wok-Cooked Food Tastes Better

Food cooked in a well-seasoned wok can acquire wok hei, a savory, fragrant essence that is the ultimate reward of a great stir-fry. Cooks and food scientists have long struggled to precisely describe its unique flavor and aroma, but some of the terms you often hear include "smoky," "allium-like," "grilled," and "metallic."

Wok hei is most commonly encountered in dishes fresh from the flame-licked, use-blackened, blazingly hot steel woks of restaurant cooks. But I suspected it

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Stir-Fried Cumin Beef

With roots in Hunan cuisine, cumin beef typically features tender pieces of meat stir-fried with onions and/or peppers and aromatics (garlic and ginger), lightly glossed in a soy sauce–based glaze, seasoned with spices (cumin, Sichuan peppercorns, and dried chiles or chili powder), and finished with cilantro.

Before cooking, we briefly treated slices of beefy flank steak with baking soda, which raised the meat's pH so that it stayed moist and tender during cooking. To prevent the meat from overcooking before it browned, we stir-fried it in two batches until its juices reduced to a sticky fond that coated each slice. Quickly stir-frying sliced onion allowed it to soften but retain a hint of its raw bite and crunch. Grinding whole cumin seeds and Sichuan peppercorns released vibrant aromatic compounds that gave the dish plenty of fragrance while Sichuan chili powder added moderate heat.

We add the onion to the wok during the final minutes of cooking so that it softens but retains some crunch.

STIR-FRIED CUMIN BEEF

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

We developed this recipe for a 14-inch wok, but a 12-inch nonstick or carbon-steel skillet can be used instead. You can substitute 1 tablespoon of ground cumin for the cumin seeds. If you can't find Sichuan chili powder, Korean red pepper flakes (gochugaru) are a good substitute. Another alternative is 1¾ teaspoons of ancho chile powder plus ¼ teaspoon of cayenne pepper. There is no substitute for Sichuan peppercorns. We like this stir-fry with steamed white rice and stir-fried baby bok choy. Our recipe for Stir-Fried Cumin Beef for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/jun20.

- 1 tablespoon water
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 pound flank steak, trimmed, cut with grain into 2- to 2½-inch-wide strips, each strip sliced against grain ¼ inch thick
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1 tablespoon cumin seeds, ground
- 2 teaspoons Sichuan chili powder
- 1¼ teaspoons Sichuan peppercorns, ground
- ½ teaspoon table salt, divided
- 1 tablespoon Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons molasses
- ½ teaspoon cornstarch
- ¼ cup vegetable oil, divided
- ½ small onion, sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh cilantro

1. Combine water and baking soda in medium bowl. Add beef and toss to coat. Let sit at room temperature for 5 minutes.

2. While beef rests, combine garlic and ginger in small bowl. Combine cumin, chili powder, peppercorns, and ¼ teaspoon salt in second small bowl. Add Shaoxing wine, soy sauce, molasses, cornstarch, and remaining ¼ teaspoon salt to beef mixture. Toss until well combined.

3. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in wok over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add half of beef mixture and increase heat to high. Using tongs, toss beef slowly but constantly until exuded juices have evaporated and meat begins to sizzle, 2 to 6 minutes. Transfer to clean bowl. Repeat with 1 tablespoon oil and remaining beef mixture.

4. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons oil in now-empty wok over medium heat until shimmering. Add garlic mixture (oil will splatter) and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, 15 to 30 seconds. Add onion and cook, tossing slowly but constantly with tongs, until onion begins to soften, 1 to 2 minutes. Return beef to wok and toss to combine. Sprinkle cumin mixture over beef and toss until onion takes on pale orange color. Transfer to serving platter, sprinkle with cilantro, and serve immediately.

was easy to develop beautiful wok hei at home, too—and when wok virtuoso Grace Young whipped up a fragrant batch of fried rice for my colleagues and me on a regular stovetop, my suspicion was confirmed.

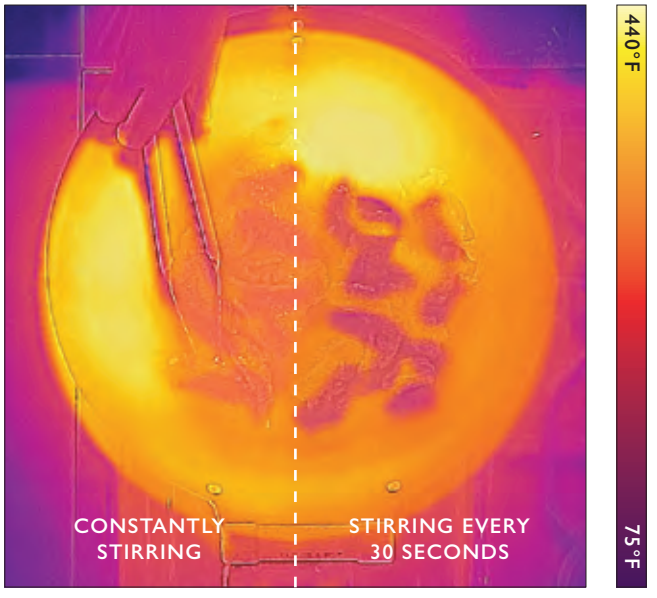
Young and other experts attribute wok hei flavor to a few complementary factors: aroma compounds formed when oil gets very hot (in restaurants, oil sometimes even catches fire briefly when food is tossed from the wok into the air), chemical interactions between the food and components of the wok's seasoned steel, and the accelerated Maillard and caramelization reactions that happen when the heat is turned way up.

Since Young was able to create great wok hei without any acrobatic tossing or pyrotechnic flare-ups, I didn't try that. Instead, I stir-fried identical batches of lightly seasoned beef, pad thai, and fried rice in both a wok and a skillet and held side-by-side tastings. In each case, we noticed that the wok-cooked batch tasted more savory and complex—further evidence that a wok is worth owning if you do a lot of stir-frying.

SCIENCE

How We Proved That Stirring Speeds Cooking

To prove that constant stirring makes food cook faster, we used an infrared camera to measure the temperature of two different batches of stir-fried beef after about 1 minute of cooking: one that we stirred constantly and another that we stirred every 30 seconds. The color of the meat that we stirred constantly (left) is noticeably brighter and more yellow, indicating that it got hotter than the meat that we stirred only periodically (right), which is darker purple.



PHOTOGRAPHY: JAY LAYMAN

Sizzling Vietnamese Crepes

The shrimp-and-pork-studded rice flour pancakes called bánh xèo look like omelets and are made like French crepes. But this dish is one of a kind.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Bánh xèo, particularly the version made in Ho Chi Minh City, is one of my favorite dishes. If I spot it on a menu at a Vietnamese restaurant, I'm *going* to be ordering it. It's a spectacular jumble of flavors, colors, textures, fragrances, and temperatures, at the center of which is a warm, crisp-tender, turmeric-tinted crepe punctuated with small shrimp and matchsticks of rich pork belly. To enjoy it, you tuck pieces of the sunny-yellow pancake inside a cool lettuce leaf along with lots of fresh, aromatic herbs and then dip the bundle into nuoc cham, a mixture of fish sauce spiked with lime juice, sugar, and chiles that contains sour, salty, sweet, umami, and spicy flavors. Often, do chua, a carrot and daikon pickle, is served on the side. Bánh xèo is so incredibly good that I think everyone should know how to make it.

First, you stir-fry the pork and shrimp with sliced onions, push the mixture to one side of the pan, and pour in a rice flour and coconut milk batter that fills in the skillet space. When the batter hits the hot skillet, it sizzles audibly, hence the onomatopoeic name: "Bánh" is a nonspecific term for a variety of foods made primarily of starch, and "xèo" ("sss-ay-o") means "sizzling" and mimics the hiss of the batter hitting the pan. A handful of bean sprouts is then placed onto the filled side of the crepe, which is cooked until it achieves a shattering crispness on the bottom and a tender, custardy texture on top. Unlike a French crepe, this one is not flipped in the pan; it's just folded in half.

To enjoy bánh xèo, tuck a piece of the crepe and several leaves of fresh Thai basil and cilantro inside a lettuce leaf, and then dip the bundle into sweet-sour-salty-spicy nuoc cham.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Crepe Expectations

Before experimenting with the crepe batter, I sorted out the proteins. Pork belly, as much as I love it, isn't always easy to come by. In its place, I opted for readily available, well-marbled country-style pork ribs. Rather than small shrimp, I chose (again, easier-to-find) medium-large shrimp that I cut into small pieces.

The batter for bánh xèo is made by whisking together rice flour, water, coconut milk, turmeric, and salt. In the best versions I've had, the crepe cooks up lacy at the edges, with a universe of variously sized holes within. And yet, my first few crepes failed to crisp and were marred by thick patches.

I soon realized that because the crepe set so quickly in the hot skillet, it was crucial for the batter to rapidly flow over the entire pan surface. If it didn't spread fast enough, it gathered around the pork and shrimp, creating a crepe with both thick spots and gaping holes. I found that in order for the batter to flow freely, it needed to have a consistency comparable to heavy cream, which I achieved with 1 cup of water, ⅓ cup of coconut milk, and ½ cup of rice flour.

But a loose consistency and a thin crepe weren't enough to ensure crispness. For that to happen, you must manage the fact that rice flour is slow to absorb water. This is a problem because in order for the crepe to dry out and crisp, any water in the mixture must first be absorbed by the starch in the rice flour to create a gel. Then the water must be driven off quickly, to leave behind disordered, rigid starch molecules with gaps between them—in other words, a crisp, lacy texture. If no gel is formed, the starch remains orderly when the water exits, without gaps and therefore without good crispness.

Using hot water didn't help, though it did mitigate the slight grittiness by allowing the water to

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20

Get the Right Rice Flour

Use ordinary white rice flour (ground from long- or medium-grain rice), not glutinous rice flour (ground from glutinous, aka "sweet," rice), for this recipe. The starch in glutinous rice is 98 percent amylopectin, which becomes soft and sticky when cooked, and 2 percent amylose. The starch in ordinary white rice, on the other hand, is 80 percent amylopectin and 20 percent amylose.

Use ordinary white rice flour . . . not glutinous rice flour

penetrate and hydrate the particles enough to soften them somewhat. Many recipes call for letting the batter rest before cooking, and I wondered if this would give the starch more time to absorb the water in the rice flour. But when I tried a rest, it had no effect.

I decided to follow the lead of a few recipes I found that called for incorporating a bit of cornstarch. Whereas rice flour is slow to hydrate because rice kernels are rather dense and the flour is not milled very fine, cornstarch is a pure starch that's been treated with water and finely milled, so it readily soaks up moisture. Just 3 tablespoons helped ensure a crisp texture without noticeably thickening the batter.

Finally, I realized the importance of the sound the crepe made during cooking. If the pan wasn't hot enough to say "xèo" when the batter was poured in, it formed a thick, soft skin. If instead it was hot enough to sizzle audibly, that was a signal that the water was rapidly being driven off to form the ideal cracklingly crisp, holey appearance.

Details, Details

At last, I was ready to hold my first bánh xèo party. I started by mixing up the *Cook's Illustrated* recipe for nuoc cham and preparing a batch of tangy do chua and divided them among small individual serving bowls. Next, the crepes: To serve four people at once, I kept the first few crepes warm on a rack in a low oven, which did not compromise their hard-won texture. I chose tender Boston lettuce for the wrappers, since its leaves are supple yet large enough to create a good-size bundle. Lastly, I set out generous piles of fresh cilantro and Thai basil leaves. It was time to feast.

BÁNH XÈO (SIZZLING VIETNAMESE CREPES)

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

Stir the coconut milk thoroughly to combine before measuring. Although we prefer the flavor of regular coconut milk, light coconut milk can be substituted. If you can't find Thai basil leaves, substitute regular basil. Serve with Do Chua (Daikon-Carrot Pickle), if desired; our recipe is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/jun20.

Nuoc Cham

- 3 tablespoons sugar, divided
- 1 small Thai chile, stemmed and minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ⅔ cup hot water
- 5 tablespoons fish sauce
- ¼ cup lime juice (2 limes)

Crepes

- 1 head Boston lettuce (8 ounces), leaves separated and left whole
- 1 cup fresh Thai basil leaves
- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves and thin stems
- 1 cup hot water (120 to 130 degrees)
- ½ cup (3 ounces) white rice flour
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon ground turmeric
- ½ teaspoon table salt, divided
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil, divided
- 4 ounces boneless country-style pork ribs, trimmed and cut into 2-inch-long matchsticks
- 1 small red onion, halved and sliced thin
- 6 ounces medium-large shrimp (31 to 40 per pound), peeled, deveined, halved lengthwise, and halved crosswise
- ⅓ cup canned coconut milk
- 6 ounces (3 cups) bean sprouts, divided

1. FOR THE NUOC CHAM: Using mortar and pestle (or using flat side of chef's knife on cutting board), mash 1 tablespoon sugar, Thai chile, and garlic to fine paste. Transfer to medium bowl and add hot water and remaining 2 tablespoons sugar. Stir until sugar is dissolved. Stir in fish sauce and lime juice. Divide sauce among 4 individual small serving bowls.

2. FOR THE CREPES: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 275 degrees. Set wire rack in rimmed baking sheet, spray rack with vegetable oil spray, and set aside. Arrange lettuce, basil, and cilantro on serving platter. Whisk hot water, rice flour, cornstarch, turmeric, and ¼ teaspoon salt in bowl until smooth.

3. Heat 1 teaspoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add pork and onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until pork is no longer pink and onion is softened, 5 to 7 minutes. Add shrimp and remaining ¼ teaspoon salt and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until shrimp just begin to turn pink, about 2 minutes longer. Transfer mixture to second bowl. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels. Add coconut milk and 2 teaspoons oil to crepe batter and stir to combine.

4. Heat 2 teaspoons oil in now-empty skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add one-third of pork mixture and heat through until sizzling, about 30 seconds. Spread pork mixture over half of skillet. Pour ½ cup batter evenly over entire skillet. (Batter poured over filling will drain to skillet surface. If needed, tilt skillet gently to fill gaps.) Spread 1 cup bean sprouts over filling. Cook until crepe loosens completely from bottom of skillet with gentle shake, 4 to 5 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and continue to cook, shaking skillet occasionally, until edges of crepe are lacy and crisp and underside is golden brown, 2 to 4 minutes longer.

5. Gently fold unfilled side of crepe over sprouts. Slide crepe onto prepared wire rack and transfer to oven to keep warm. Repeat 2 more times with remaining oil, pork mixture, batter, and bean sprouts. When final crepe is cooked, use 2 spatulas to transfer all 3 crepes to cutting board and cut each crosswise into 1¼-inch-wide strips.

6. TO SERVE: Place crepes and greens in center of table, and give each diner 1 bowl of sauce. To eat, wrap individual strip of crepe and several leaves of basil and cilantro in lettuce leaf and dip into sauce.

STEP BY STEP

MAKING BÁNH XÈO

After stir-frying the pork, onion, and shrimp, make the crepe.

1. Heat oiled skillet over medium-high heat and spread one-third of pork mixture over half of skillet.

2. Pour ½ cup batter evenly over entire skillet. Spread 1 cup bean sprouts over filling.

3. Cook until crepe loosens from skillet bottom with gentle shake, 4 to 5 minutes.

4. Reduce heat to medium-low; cook until underside is brown, 2 to 4 minutes. Fold crepe in half.

The Original Vindaloo

Disregard vindaloo's reputation for extreme heat. The original—tender, juicy pork in a thick, tangy sauce that's aromatic with spices—is milder and more nuanced.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Food challenges such as belly-buster sundaes, six-alarm chili, and 32-ounce black-and-blue porterhouse steaks aren't my thing. That's why I had always sidestepped vindaloo, which I had thought must sit at the top of every culinary thrill-seeker's list of favorite fiery Indian dishes. I prefer mild to medium-hot curries in which the painstakingly calibrated flavors of ginger, garlic, and spices haven't been obliterated by searing heat. But it turns out that I had been mistaken about vindaloo, at least in its original form.

The scorching vindaloo served at many Indian restaurants in the United States and England is actually an offshoot of the original Goan version, which is composed of moist nuggets of pork braised to tenderness in their own juices and a fragrant paste of spices such as cinnamon and cardamom, mild dried Kashmiri chiles, and fresh ginger and garlic. Plenty of coconut vinegar (or sometimes tamarind) balances the rich pork, but the dish has little to no other liquid, so the potent, bright-red sauce thickly coats the meat. Rice, naan, or Goan pao, which are nearly identical to America's soft, slightly sweet dinner rolls, are ideal companions. This sounded like a vindaloo I could get behind.

I prefer curries in which the flavors haven't been obliterated by searing heat.

We create a heady sauce by braising the pork in a rich spice paste that includes chiles along with cumin, paprika, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, and nutmeg.

Mixing a Masala

Before I could follow a traditional Goan recipe, I needed to source two of the key ingredients: coconut vinegar and Kashmiri chiles. I was able to locate coconut vinegar—an acidic and sweet-smelling but not coconutty product made from coconut tree sap—at my neighborhood Indian grocer, and I ordered whole dried Kashmiri chiles from an online source.

Following the Goan recipe, I used a blender to grind together a spice paste, sometimes called a wet masala. Along with ¾ cup of the coconut vinegar and 12 Kashmiri chiles, many other flavors typical of the cuisine were represented: cumin, black pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, cloves, fresh ginger, and garlic.

Given the option of pork belly or pork butt, I opted for the latter because it's easier to find and leaner, though still plenty rich. I trimmed the roast and cut it into 1-inch chunks. Recipes called for marinating the meat in the masala for anywhere from 4 to 48 hours; I was worried about the pork being damaged by all the acidity, so I opted for the shorter time.

I sautéed some onions in oil, added the marinated meat, and cooked the curry over low heat. I lingered nervously near the pot for the first 45 minutes, stirring occasionally, worried that the dry-ish mixture would scorch before the pork's juices loosened it up. After 90 minutes, when the paste had transformed into a sauce that was thick and fragrant, I took a bite.

With one taste I understood why the original vindaloo was so venerated. The coconut vinegar contributed a pleasing brightness tempered by a hint

The Provenance of Pork Vindaloo

You may not associate pork with Indian food, but Goa, where the dish originated, was a Portuguese colony for more than 400 years, and the Portuguese brought pork—and Catholicism—to the region. In fact, the word "vindaloo" is thought to be a corruption of the Portuguese phrase "carne de vinha d'alhos," or "meat in wine and garlic." Goan cooks added ginger and garlic ground with plenty of their native sweet spices, substituted coconut vinegar for the soured wine, and added ground Kashmiri chiles for their brilliant color. The result was a well-spiced—but not spicy—pork curry.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Seeking a Sub for Kashmiri Chiles?

Kashmiri chiles—valued for their vibrant color and mild heat—are a principal ingredient in vindaloo, but they usually require ordering online. Our substitution is a combination of dried guajillo chiles, which are similarly mild and fruity; paprika for a vivid red color boost; and black tea leaves for a slightly astringent finish.

of sweetness, and the Kashmiri chiles gave the masala rich complexity and a touch of heat that complemented the spices. But just as I had feared, the 4-hour bath in the acidic masala had turned the meat dry.

I made the Goan recipe again, skipping the marinating time altogether in the hope that the meat would emerge juicier. I also moved the pot to a 325-degree oven once the mixture was bubbling on the stovetop so that I wouldn't have to worry about it scorching. After 90 minutes, I sampled the meat. It was still dry, even though I'd skipped marinating. That's because there was still plenty of vinegar in the pot. This acidic treatment lowered the pH of the meat to a point where the proteins squeezed out moisture.

And thus my conundrum: I couldn't get rid of the vinegar because vindaloo needs a certain amount of tang. But vinegar doesn't just add an acidic taste, it also affects texture. What's more, when you add the vinegar matters because it is volatile—meaning that its flavor and acidity dissipate easily during cooking. Ultimately, the solution was to add less vinegar, late in the cooking process. Instead of adding ¾ cup of vinegar at the start of cooking, I poured in just ⅓ cup halfway through the cooking time. The lesser amount of acid wasn't enough to adversely affect the texture of the meat, but enough of the vinegar's tang remained for my dish to taste like vindaloo.

Teatime

My final challenge was to find better substitutes for the coconut vinegar and the Kashmiri chiles so that in the future I could make vindaloo without sourcing specialty ingredients. The vinegar was easy: Its sweet aroma made the cider vinegar I always have on hand a good sub.

My dive into the world of dried Kashmiri chiles was not as straightforward. Most sources describe them as vibrantly red but mild in flavor, so some cookbook authors suggest substituting paprika. Confusingly, others recommend swapping in arbols—among the hottest of dried chiles—one for one.

To zero in on the flavor of Kashmiri chiles, I softened some of my dwindling supply in water, blended them with a bit of salt to bring out the flavor, and tasted the bright red puree. It was only slightly hot and a little fruity, and it had a subtly astringent finish, reminiscent of well-steeped tea.

Guajillo chiles provided the slight fruitiness and mild heat, and just 1 tablespoon of paprika boosted the color of the masala. The Kashmiri chile profile was almost complete, but the notion of adding tea for astringency kept nagging at me: I considered making a strong tannic infusion and mixing it into the masala, but I knew it would make the sauce too soupy. Finally, I just emptied a couple of tea bags into the masala. It worked. These substitutions produced a vindaloo that tasted almost exactly like the one I'd made with Kashmiri chiles and coconut vinegar.

I'm content to leave modern versions of pork vindaloo to the culinary daredevils; this version, deliciously intense in its own right, is the one I'll return to again and again.

GOAN PORK VINDALOO

SERVES 8 TOTAL TIME: 2½ HOURS

Pork butt roast is often labeled Boston butt. If you don't have loose tea, open up two or three black tea bags and measure out 2 teaspoons of tea. Decaffeinated tea can be used if desired. Traditional Goan vindaloo is not very spicy, but if you prefer more heat, add up to ½ teaspoon of cayenne pepper. Serve with white rice, naan, or Goan pao.

- 4 large dried guajillo chiles, wiped clean, stemmed, seeded, and torn into 1-inch pieces (about 1 ounce)
- 1 cup water, divided
- 1 (1½-inch) piece ginger, peeled and sliced crosswise ⅛ inch thick
- 6 garlic cloves, chopped coarse
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons loose black tea
- 2 teaspoons table salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- ¼–½ teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground cardamom
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 (3- to 3½-pound) boneless pork butt roast, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 large onion, chopped fine
- ⅓ cup cider vinegar

1. Combine guajillos and ½ cup water in bowl and microwave until steaming, about 1½ minutes. Let sit until guajillos are softened, about 10 minutes. While guajillos soften, adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Process guajillo mixture; ginger; garlic; paprika; cumin; tea; salt; pepper; cayenne, if using; cinnamon; cardamom; cloves; and nutmeg in blender on low speed until smooth paste forms, 1½ to 2 minutes. With blender running, add remaining ½ cup water. Increase speed to high and process for 1 minute. Add pork to large bowl; pour spice paste over pork and mix thoroughly.

2. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook, stirring frequently, until soft and golden, 7 to 9 minutes. Add pork mixture and stir to combine. Spread mixture into even layer. Continue to cook until mixture begins to bubble, about 2 minutes longer. Cover pot, transfer to oven, and cook for 40 minutes. Stir in vinegar. Cover and return pot to oven. Continue to cook until fork inserted into pork meets little or no resistance, 40 to 50 minutes longer. Let stand, uncovered, for 10 minutes. Stir and serve.

SCIENCE

How to Time the Tang

Slightly sweet cider vinegar was a good swap for the coconut vinegar traditionally used in pork vindaloo, but it took us a few tries to figure out how much to use and when to add it. When we marinated the pork in vinegar or simmered it for too long with lots of vinegar, the meat turned dry. That's because acid lowers the pH of meat, making it easier for the proteins to link up and squeeze out moisture. Our solution: Skip marinating and add a modest amount of vinegar to the pot halfway through the cooking time. Exposed to less acid for less time, the meat stays juicy, and because we add the vinegar late, enough of its volatile bite remains for the dish to still taste sufficiently tangy.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Fixing Glazed Pork Chops

The best way to produce tender, juicy chops with a stay-put glaze is to take it slow. Bonus: You'll have built-in time for making a side dish.

BY LAN LAM

On busy weeknights, I often build meals around boneless pork chops. Their mild taste makes them easy to pair with sides, they're ready to cook straight from the package, and they don't require hours of cooking to turn tender.

But plain chops can be boring, so I like to gussy them up a bit. This time, I had my sights set on a sweet, tangy glaze. I could picture juicy chops with a rich, glossy coating clinging tenaciously to the tops and sides. And yet, as soon as I started experimenting with recipes, I realized this was fantasy: By the time a glazed chop reaches your plate, its coating ends up everywhere but on the meat.

Many glazes are made with jams, jellies, or preserves, which is a big part of the problem. They are sugary and offer sheen, but they liquefy when heated. I needed a sweet option that would stay put. Enter apple butter: It's still sweet, but it's also packed with apple solids. That means it won't budge when heated.

I spiked some apple butter with maple syrup, Dijon mustard, soy sauce, and cider vinegar and painted the mixture onto a batch of pan-seared chops. The deeply browned, glistening chops looked terrific, so I called my colleagues to taste. But by the time they arrived, my pride had faded to embarrassment: The chops had become surrounded by a watery pool of glaze.

I realized that although pan searing is great for producing a substantial crust on meat, the intense heat causes the proteins on the meat's surface to contract and squeeze out liquid as it rests. And that liquid diluted my glaze. I had a hunch that slow roasting would be better: The low, ambient heat would cook the pork gently, so it would exude less liquid during the resting period.

I brushed a teaspoon of glaze onto each chop before popping the baking sheet into a 275-degree oven. After 40 minutes, the chops were nearly cooked through and the thin glaze had dried to a tacky film that was primed for a more substantial application—great news since I like a generous amount of glaze. I layered on a second coat and slid the sheet under the broiler. This brought the chops to 140 degrees (the ideal serving temperature) and fused the sweet, tangy lacquer to the meat. It also added a hint of char—a good stand-in for the intense browning produced via pan searing. Just as I'd hoped, the meat exuded very little liquid, so the glaze wasn't diluted and clung nicely.

We pair up apple butter and Dijon mustard for a sweet and tangy no-cook glaze that clings to the boneless chops. For an easy supper, serve the chops with fork-mashed potatoes.

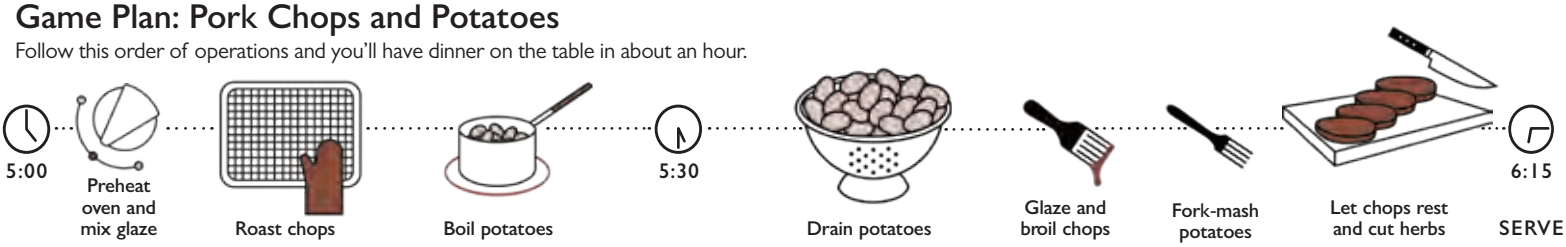
The final benefit of slow roasting was the time I had to prep a simple side. I whipped up one of my go-tos: fork-mashed potatoes. All I needed to do was boil baby potatoes, drain and mash them, and then gloss them with extra-virgin olive oil and butter. I also used a trick from the test kitchen to ensure well-seasoned potatoes: I boiled them in heavily salted water with a garlic clove and a few sprigs of thyme. Since I had time to spare, I chopped some parsley to add color, freshness, and vibrancy to both dishes.

With my technique established, it was easy to swap out ingredients and change the personality of the menu. A spicy glaze made with gochujang (Korean chile-soybean paste) gave the chops an intense savory flavor. (Like apple butter, gochujang doesn't thin out when heated.) I used the roasting time to clean and pan-roast some sugar snap peas, which I seasoned with minced garlic and a dash of soy sauce.

I think you'll love these tender, juicy chops—especially their picture-perfect glaze—as well as the sides that go with them. You'll even have time to spare to tidy up the kitchen and set the table. Or, better yet, pour a glass of wine and put someone else in charge.

Game Plan: Pork Chops and Potatoes

Follow this order of operations and you'll have dinner on the table in about an hour.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: SAMANTHA MARCHESI

Slow Roasting Makes the Glaze Stick

A comparison of pan-seared and slow-roasted chops shows that slow roasting is the better choice for glazed chops.

PAN-SEARED: GLAZE RUNS OFF

Intense heat causes the proteins at the surface of the meat to contract and squeeze out about 1 tablespoon of glaze-diluting liquid during resting.

SLOW-ROASTED: GLAZE STAYS PUT

Cooked via low, gentle heat, the chop sheds only ½ teaspoon of liquid while it rests, so the glaze doesn't budge.

MUSTARDY APPLE BUTTER–GLAZED PORK CHOPS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

If your broiler has multiple temperature settings, use the highest. We like the consistency that Musselman's Apple Butter gives the glaze; if you're using another brand, you may need to thin the glaze with up to 1 tablespoon of water. Our recipe for Mustardy Apple Butter–Glazed Pork Chops for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/feb20.

- 3 tablespoons apple butter
- 2 tablespoons maple syrup
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon soy sauce
- ½ teaspoon cider vinegar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless pork chops, ¾ to 1 inch thick, trimmed
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh parsley

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 275 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and set wire rack in sheet. Spray rack with vegetable oil spray. Stir apple butter, maple syrup, mustard, soy sauce, and vinegar together in small bowl.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20**

2. Sprinkle salt evenly over both sides of chops. Place chops on prepared wire rack and brush 1 teaspoon glaze on top and sides of each chop. Roast until meat registers 135 to 137 degrees, 40 to 45 minutes.

3. Remove sheet from oven and heat broiler. Brush 1 tablespoon glaze on top and sides of each chop. Return sheet to oven and broil until glaze is bubbly and slightly charred in spots, 3 to 6 minutes. Let rest for 5 minutes. Sprinkle with parsley and serve.

FORK-MASHED POTATOES WITH HERBS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

Chives, tarragon, chervil, or a combination can be substituted for the parsley. Use baby potatoes measuring 1 to 2 inches in diameter.

- 1½ pounds baby potatoes, unpeeled
- Table salt for cooking potatoes
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

1. Place potatoes, 1 teaspoon salt, garlic, and thyme sprigs in medium saucepan. Add cold water to cover potatoes by 1 inch and bring to boil over high heat. Adjust heat to maintain steady simmer and cook until paring knife meets no resistance when inserted into largest potato, 20 to 25 minutes. Drain potatoes; discard garlic and thyme sprigs. Return potatoes to saucepan.

2. Use large fork or wooden spoon to break potatoes into rough ½-inch chunks. Add butter, oil, and parsley and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

SPICY GOCHUJANG-GLAZED PORK CHOPS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

Red miso can be substituted for the white miso. If your broiler has multiple temperature settings, use the highest. Make sure to use gochujang paste, which comes in a tub, instead of the sauce, which comes in a bottle. Our recipe for Spicy Gochujang-Glazed Pork Chops for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/feb20.

- 4 teaspoons gochujang paste
- 4 teaspoons white miso
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup
- 1 tablespoon orange juice
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless pork chops, ¾ to 1 inch thick, trimmed
- 1 scallion, sliced thin

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 275 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and set wire rack in sheet. Spray rack with vegetable oil spray. Stir gochujang, miso, soy sauce, maple syrup, orange juice, and garlic together in small bowl.

2. Sprinkle salt evenly over both sides of chops. Place chops on prepared wire rack and brush 1 teaspoon glaze on top and sides of each chop. Roast until meat registers 135 to 137 degrees, 40 to 45 minutes.

3. Remove sheet from oven and heat broiler. Brush 1 tablespoon glaze on top and sides of each chop. Return sheet to oven and broil until glaze is bubbly and slightly charred in spots, 3 to 6 minutes. Let rest for 5 minutes. Sprinkle with scallion and serve.

SKILLET-ROASTED SUGAR SNAP PEAS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

Black or white sesame seeds (or a combination) can be used in this recipe.

- 1 tablespoon sesame seeds
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 pound sugar snap peas, strings removed
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce

1. Toast sesame seeds in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until lightly browned, about 2 minutes. Transfer to bowl. Heat oil in now-empty skillet over high heat until shimmering. Add snap peas in single layer and cook, without stirring, for 30 seconds. Toss snap peas and spread into single layer. Continue to cook, tossing every 30 seconds, until snap peas are spotty brown and crisp-tender, 2 to 3 minutes longer.

2. Add garlic and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add soy sauce and cook until all liquid has evaporated, about 30 seconds. Off heat, add sesame seeds and toss to combine. Serve.

Boldly flavored miso-and-gochujang-glazed chops are complemented by a simple side of sugar snap peas.

Lion's Head Meatballs

Don't let their ferocious name intimidate you. These giant, savory, tender-yet-springy pork meatballs from eastern China are pure comfort food.

BY ANNIE PETITO

The meatballs I loved growing up were my grandmother's: a pleasingly coarse but tender mix of beef, pork, and veal that she seasoned boldly with Parmesan and herbs, browned, and then simmered in a bright-red sauce.

Chinese lion's head meatballs are very different. For one thing, they're made entirely from pork and seasoned only subtly with aromatics such as scallions, ginger, and white pepper, as well as modest amounts of Shaoxing wine and usually soy sauce—choices that enhance (rather than detract from) their porky, umami-rich profile. But what really makes them stand apart from other meatballs is their size and texture: They're as big as tennis balls and boast a seemingly paradoxical combination of spoon-tenderness and sausage-like spring and juiciness. (Read on and I'll explain the two-part method for achieving their texture.)

To me, the dish is the Chinese equivalent of matzo ball soup: simple, soothing, and deeply savory.

Served with softened cabbage, rice noodles, and the broth in which they cook, these unctuous meatballs make a complete meal.

To color the meatballs' exteriors and make them more savory, cooks often brown the meatballs before slowly braising them in clean-tasting chicken broth on a bed of napa cabbage leaves. The meatballs are typically served with the softened greens, rice noodles and/or steamed white rice, and a ladle's worth of the broth in which they cooked. The large spheres fringed with the leafy greens are said to look like a lion's mane, hence the name.

They taste milder than most meatballs I've had and also mild in comparison to the intense flavors common to foods in other regions of China. But according to food journalist and Chinese cookbook author Fuchsia Dunlop, this mildness reflects the dish's origins. Lion's head meatballs are emblematic of the cuisine of Jiangnan, which is known for its gentleness, or qing dan—a term meaning "light" to convey the food's simple, unadulterated quality. To me, the dish is the Chinese equivalent of matzo ball soup: simple, soothing, and deeply savory.

Mix It Up

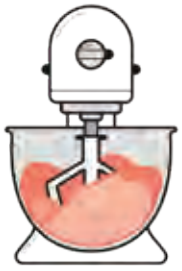
Cooks traditionally start by hand-mincing some form of fatty pork—most often belly, though some recipes call for shoulder or butt—with the aforementioned seasonings and maybe an egg. But many contemporary recipes streamline things by calling for ground pork, so I seasoned 2 pounds of ground pork with salt and a couple of tablespoons of soy sauce, which enhanced the pork's flavor without adding too much liquid. I also added a bit of sugar, Shaoxing wine, white pepper, minced scallion whites (cooks often reserve the darker greens for garnishing), and grated fresh ginger. I added an egg to give the meatballs some structure before moving on to the first unique element of the meatball-making process: the mixing method.

The Impossible Meatball (and How to Achieve Its Unique Texture)

The resilient yet ultratender texture of lion's head meatballs is the result of a two-part technique.

1. Thoroughly manipulate the meat. This causes its sticky myosin proteins to link up into a tight network that traps moisture and fat so that the meat cooks up springy and juicy, like sausage. Traditional recipes call for stirring and slapping the meat against the mixing bowl; we expedite the process by beating the pork in a stand mixer.

2. Cook the meatballs gently. We braise ours for 1½ hours in a relatively low oven to allow the meat's collagen to break down as much as possible.



VIGOROUS MIXING
Develops springiness

GENTLE COOKING
Tenderizes

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

TECHNIQUE | HOW TO CUT NAPA CABBAGE

Here's an easy way to prep the large leaves.

QUARTER cabbage lengthwise. **REMOVE** core from each piece. **CUT** crosswise into 2-inch pieces.

Many recipes, including Dunlop's, call for working the meat vigorously by stirring and/or slapping it against the side of the mixing bowl. The effect is similar to sausage making, where thoroughly kneading the meat causes its sticky myosin proteins to cross-link and bind together into a strong network that makes the meat cohesive, fine-textured, and springy. It also helps trap moisture and fat for juicy meatballs.

We've achieved that sausage-like spring in other recipes by beating ground meat in a stand mixer, so I made a batch of meatballs using the machine and another using the traditional approach to see how each affected the texture. As a point of comparison, I also mixed a batch gently by hand, as I would Italian meatballs. I formed each mixture into balls with my wet hands (to prevent the meat from sticking to me) and then set them aside (skipping browning) while I laid a single layer of napa cabbage leaves in a few Dutch ovens, added a quart of chicken broth to each pot, and brought the broth to a boil. I carefully arranged the meatballs on the leaves, covered the pots, and braised the meatballs in a 325-degree oven for 2 hours (the ambient heat would cook the meatballs gently with minimal attention).

As expected, the hand-mixed meatballs were tender, coarse, and a tad dry (because the myosin hadn't gelled as much, they hadn't trapped much moisture). Meanwhile, the meatballs made in the stand mixer were just as smooth, springy, and juicy as those made the traditional way, confirming that the mixer was a great option. But I took that sausage-y effect one step further by adding baking soda to the meat, knowing that the alkalinity would help the proteins dissolve and create a smoother, more cohesive mixture.

The baking soda treatment came with one other perk: It raised the pH of the meat so that the meat retained more moisture during cooking and cooked up more tender. In fact, the baking soda was so effective that I could cut the braising time down to 1½ hours and produce meatballs that were every bit as tender and juicy as the 2-hour batch. But I couldn't shorten the cooking time more than that: Ground pork typically comes from a tough cut such as shoulder or butt, so even though it's ground into tiny pieces, its collagen still requires a lengthy exposure to moist heat to properly break down and tenderize.

A Timing Solution

What wasn't great was the cabbage, which had turned to mush during braising. The whole leaves were also hard to eat, so I cut them into pieces and added them to the dish 30 minutes before the meatballs were done cooking. To do so, I transferred the parcooked meatballs from the broth to a plate, added the leaves, and then nestled the meatballs on top of them. When returning the meatballs to the pot, I took the opportunity to flip them so the side sitting above the broth could moisten and the other side could color—no separate browning step necessary.

While the pot was in the oven, I softened some rice vermicelli in just-boiled water off the heat until the noodles were fully tender. I rinsed them under cold water to remove excess starch, drained them, and portioned them into soup bowls. Then came the meatballs, cabbage, broth, and a handful of thinly sliced scallion greens—as well as a clean, savory aroma and a feeling of comfort-food satisfaction that rivaled (well, almost rivaled) the way I felt about my grandmother's meatballs.

The King of Meatballs

Chinese lion's head meatballs dwarf both the small Swedish and midsize Italian styles, but what makes them truly unique is their seemingly paradoxical texture: springy and juicy like well-made sausage but also smooth and ultratender.

LION'S HEAD
Springy, smooth, and tender

ITALIAN
Coarse and tender

SWEDISH
Springy and smooth

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

SHIZI TOU (LION'S HEAD MEATBALLS)

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 2 HOURS

Fully cooked ground pork can retain a slightly pink hue. Don't be concerned if the meatballs develop cracks while cooking. Shaoxing is a Chinese rice wine that can be found at Asian markets. If you can't find it, use dry sherry.

- ¾ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 2 pounds ground pork
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- 2 scallions, white parts minced, green parts sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- 4 teaspoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 small head napa cabbage (1½ pounds), quartered lengthwise, cored, and cut crosswise into 2-inch pieces
- 4 ounces rice vermicelli

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Whisk baking soda, salt, and 2 tablespoons water together in bowl of stand mixer. Add pork to baking soda mixture and toss to combine. Add egg, scallion whites, soy sauce, wine, sugar, ginger, and white pepper. Fit stand mixer with paddle and beat on medium speed until mixture is well combined and has stiffened and started to pull away from sides of bowl and pork has slightly lightened in color, 45 to 60 seconds. Using your wet hands, form about ½ cup (4½ ounces) pork mixture into 3-inch round meatball; repeat with remaining mixture to form 8 meatballs.

2. Bring broth to boil in large Dutch oven over high heat. Off heat, carefully arrange meatballs in pot (seven around perimeter and one in center; meatballs will not be totally submerged). Cover pot, transfer to oven, and cook for 1 hour.

3. Transfer meatballs to large plate. Add cabbage to pot in even layer and arrange meatballs over cabbage, paler side up. Cover, return pot to oven, and continue to cook until meatballs are lightly browned and cabbage is softened, about 30 minutes longer.

4. While meatballs and cabbage cook, bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Off heat, add vermicelli and let sit, stirring occasionally, until vermicelli is fully tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Drain, rinse with cold water, drain again, and distribute evenly among 4 to 6 large soup bowls.

5. Ladle meatballs, cabbage, and broth into bowls of noodles. Sprinkle with scallion greens and serve.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20

Moroccan Fish Tagine

With its vibrant colors, punchy flavors, and straightforward technique, a tagine is just the thing to perk up mild white fish.

BY ANNIE PETITO

A tagine is a North African earthenware pot with a tall, cone-shaped lid; it's also the name for the aromatic and complex fish, meat, or vegetable stews that are cooked inside it. But you don't need to own this specialty vessel to enjoy the dish, because these days the next best thing—a Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid—is also commonly used. I set out to create a light, fresh-tasting fish tagine.

The type of fish used in a tagine depends on the region and its available seafood, though white-fleshed fillets are common in Morocco. Regardless of the type of fish, the fillets are typically marinated in chermoula, an extraordinarily flavorful mixture of fresh herbs, garlic, and heady spices that's loosened with olive oil and lemon juice (see "Herb Paste, Meet Spice Paste").

To prepare a fish tagine, the bottom of the pot is lined with vegetables—often bell peppers, onions, carrots, and tomatoes—and the chermoula-coated fish is arranged on top before the lid is added and the assembly is moved to the stovetop or oven. At some point in the process, two signature Moroccan flavorings—pungent, floral preserved lemons and tangy green olives—are incorporated (see "Power Couple: Olives and Preserved Lemons"). Without any additional liquid in the steamy pot, the fish and vegetables slowly turn soft and tender, and their juices meld to create a tangy, garlicky, herbal broth. It's just the thing to serve with warm flatbread or spoon atop a pile of fluffy couscous.

Our tagine is deeply scented with garlic and spices; tangy green olives and floral preserved lemons offer lively bright notes.

Building a Base

I chose cod for my tagine because it has a firm yet delicate meatiness and is widely available. I divided the fillets into substantial chunks to make serving easy and then proceeded with my chermoula, buzzing fresh cilantro, garlic, and lemon juice with cumin, paprika, and cayenne in the food processor. Finally, I stirred in a couple of tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil by hand since processing can make the oil taste bitter. Gently tossing the fish in the paste gave it a gorgeous orange-red, herb-flecked coat that would permeate the dish with its flavors.

Next I turned to the vegetables. I decided to give them a head start since they would take longer to cook than the delicate fish. To facilitate staggered cooking, I opted to work on the stovetop. I glossed a Dutch oven with olive oil and then sautéed a colorful mix of sliced grassy green bell pepper, savory onion, and sweet carrot. Once the vegetables were just softened, I poured in a can of diced tomatoes and layered the fish on top. I resisted adding more liquid since I knew that the fish and vegetables would eventually give up some of their juices. After about 10 minutes of covered cooking, I lifted the lid, delighted to find that my restraint had paid off: A shallow layer of richly scented broth bubbled at the bottom of the pot. I sprinkled a handful of quartered green olives and a couple of tablespoons of finely chopped preserved lemon over the top and served the tagine.

It was a decent start: The carrot, onion, and pepper were soft and flavorful, but the cod, well seasoned on the outside, was bland within since marinades don't penetrate far beyond the surface. It was also overcooked. What's more, reserving the olives and lemon until the end was a mistake. Without time for their flavors to meld with the other ingredients, they seemed like an afterthought.

I made a few tweaks. First, before coating the cod chunks in the chermoula, I tossed them with salt and let them sit while I prepped the rest of the ingredients. The salt would season the flesh and help keep it moist. The other change: adding the olives and preserved lemon earlier so that they could soften and mingle in the broth.

Both were good moves. The lemon and olives were now more integrated, as evidenced by the lively, tangy broth. The fish was well seasoned and held on to more moisture. And yet, it was still tough. I needed to cook it more gently.

Gettin' Steamy

I've had good luck in the past with other seafood recipes with heating the cooking liquid, adding seafood, covering the pot, and removing it from the burner, allowing residual heat to gently cook the flesh through. But at the point when I was adding the fish, the pot was essentially dry, so there wouldn't be enough steam. How about a hybrid approach?

For my next batch, I added the cod and cooked the pot as before, but once the cod had released enough liquid to be actively simmering (meaning plenty of steam was being generated), I took the pot off the heat. Within

Herb Paste, Meet Spice Paste

The Moroccan condiment known as chermoula (sometimes spelled charmoula) is similar to pesto or salsa verde in that fresh herbs, extra-virgin olive oil, garlic, and lemon make up its base. But chermoula also includes gutsy spices such as cumin, paprika, and cayenne pepper, giving it an altogether different (and utterly delicious) personality that's herbal and fresh as well as warm and earthy.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

5 minutes, the pieces of cod were just opaque, tender, and flaky. After a final sprinkling of fresh cilantro, this beauty of a dish—with its layered, complex flavors—was complete.

MOROCCAN FISH TAGINE

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES

You can substitute red snapper or haddock for the cod as long as the fillets are 1 to 1½ inches thick. Picholine or Cerignola olives work well in this recipe. Serve this dish with flatbread, couscous, or rice. Our recipe for Moroccan Fish Tagine for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/aug20.

- 1½ pounds skinless cod fillets (1 to 1½ inches thick), cut into 1½- to 2-inch pieces
- ¾ teaspoon table salt, divided
- ½ cup fresh cilantro leaves, plus ¼ cup chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1¼ teaspoons ground cumin
- 1¼ teaspoons paprika
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1½ tablespoons lemon juice
- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1 onion, halved and sliced through root end ¼ inch thick
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ¼-inch strips
- 1 carrot, peeled and sliced on bias ¼ inch thick
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- ⅓ cup pitted green olives, quartered lengthwise
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped preserved lemon

1. Place cod in bowl and toss with ½ teaspoon salt. Set aside.

2. Pulse cilantro leaves, garlic, cumin, paprika, and cayenne in food processor until cilantro and garlic are finely chopped, about 12 pulses. Add lemon juice and pulse briefly to combine. Transfer mixture to small bowl and stir in 2 tablespoons oil. Set aside.

3. Heat remaining ¼ cup oil in large Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, bell pepper, carrot, and remaining ¼ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in tomatoes and their juice, olives, and preserved lemon. Spread mixture in even layer on bottom of pot.

4. Toss cod with cilantro mixture until evenly coated, then arrange cod over vegetables in single layer. Cover and cook until cod starts to turn opaque and juices released from cod are simmering vigorously, 3 to 5 minutes. Remove pot from heat and let stand, covered, until cod is opaque and just cooked through (cod should register 140 degrees), 3 to 5 minutes. Sprinkle with chopped cilantro and serve.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20**

Power Couple: Olives and Preserved Lemons

Our tagine gets its fresh herb and heady spice flavors from the chermoula that coats the fish (see "Herb Paste, Meet Spice Paste"), but its bright top notes are provided by the heavy-hitting combination of preserved lemon and green olives. Preserved lemons are a stalwart of North African cuisines, made by curing the fruit with salt to soften the rind and imbue it with an intensely citrusy, floral, and pungent flavor through fermentation. The lemons are sliced or chopped and added to recipes, rind and all. Green olives, such as the picholine variety that is commonly used in Morocco, complement the lemon with briny tang and a meaty bite.

TWO WAYS TO MAKE PRESERVED LEMONS

You can buy preserved lemons at well-stocked grocery stores, Middle Eastern markets, specialty food stores, or online, but they are also easy to make at home, whether you follow our traditional or speedy approach (the latter offers a texture similar to that of traditional preserved lemons but lacks the fermented complexity that the long-cured type has). In addition to tagines, preserved lemons also bring brightness and depth to roasted vegetables, vinaigrettes, mayonnaise, and pan sauces.

PRESERVED LEMONS

MAKES ¾ CUP
TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 7 TO 9 WEEKS CURING

Don't substitute table salt for the kosher salt. We prefer to prepare this recipe with Meyer lemons, but regular lemons can be substituted, if desired. If using regular lemons, choose smaller ones with thin skin (thin-skinned lemons will yield to gentle pressure). Because regular lemons have thicker peels, they may take two to four weeks longer to soften. *–Suzannah McFerran*

- 12 Meyer lemons (4 whole, scrubbed and dried, 8 juiced to yield 1½ cups), plus extra juice if needed
- ½ cup Diamond Crystal kosher salt

1. Cut whole lemons lengthwise into quarters, stopping 1 inch from bottom so lemons stay intact at base.

2. Working with 1 lemon at a time, hold lemon over medium bowl and pour 2 tablespoons salt into cavity of lemon. Gently rub cut surfaces of lemon together, then place in clean 1-quart jar. Repeat with remaining whole lemons and salt. Add any accumulated salt and juice in bowl to jar.

3. Pour lemon juice into jar and press gently to submerge lemons. (Add more lemon juice to jar, if needed, to cover lemons completely.) Cover jar tightly with lid and shake. Refrigerate lemons until glossy and softened, 6 to 8 weeks, shaking jar once per day for first 4 days to redistribute salt and juice. (Preserved lemons can be refrigerated for up to 6 months.)

4. To use, cut off desired amount of preserved lemon and slice, chop, or mince as desired.

Place 2 tablespoons of salt in the cavity of each lemon and gently rub the cut sides together.

24-HOUR PRESERVED LEMONS

MAKES 1 CUP
TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES, PLUS 24 HOURS CURING

It's important to slice the lemons thin. Sugar offsets the acidity and bitterness of the fruit, and olive oil helps soften the pith.

–Andrew Janjigian

- 3 lemons, rinsed
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 3 tablespoons table salt
- ¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil

1. Slice lemons thin crosswise.

2. Toss lemons with sugar and salt in bowl. Stir in oil.

3. Transfer lemons to bowl or pack into jar, cover, and refrigerate for at least 24 hours or up to 2 weeks.

4. To use, chop or mince lemon as desired.

Broiled Spice-Rubbed Snapper

A gutsy spice paste turns mild fillets into a fast, fresh dinnertime staple.

BY DAVID PAZMIÑO

Spice rubs and pastes are great for adding complexity to proteins such as chicken, pork, or beef, but they can also enhance fish. In fact, brushing a few fillets with a potent paste and sliding them under the broiler is one of the best strategies I know for quickly putting a light, fresh dinner on the table.

To choose the best type of fish for this application, I cast a wide net, finding that moderately fatty, slightly sweet snapper worked beautifully with vibrant seasonings; tilapia and sea bass were also excellent choices. I started by salting the fillets to season the flesh and help keep it moist. Next, I smeared the fish with a simple paste of pantry ingredients: raisiny-sweet ancho chile powder, citrusy ground coriander, dried oregano, black and cayenne peppers, minced fresh garlic, and a couple tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil. After arranging the fillets on a greased, foil-lined baking sheet, I slid the assembly under the broiler. In just 10 minutes, the fish was starting to flake and had reached 135 degrees; carryover cooking would bring it to 140 degrees, the test kitchen's preferred temperature for white fish. What's more, the fillets had developed a deeply caramelized surface with edges that were crispy and beginning to blacken.

One way to serve the snapper is to flake it and use it as a taco filling with toppings such as sliced avocado, cilantro, and pickled onions.

It was a good start, but the garlic had burned a bit and the paste was somewhat flat-tasting and gritty. The next time around, I switched to granulated garlic and tried to eke out flavor and soften the spices via a quick sizzle in hot oil. The taste improved somewhat, but not enough. (Plus, the entire paste now threatened to scorch because it was being cooked twice: first on the stovetop and again under the broiler.)

The oil was drawing out fat-soluble flavors, but spices have water-soluble flavors, too, so I tried drizzling 2 tablespoons of boiling water onto a fresh batch of spices. Once the mixture had thickened—a signal that the ingredients were well hydrated—I stirred in the oil. After brushing the fillets with the water-oil-spice paste, I broiled them as before.

Sure enough, the flavors were fuller and more pronounced, and the consistency of the paste had smoothed out, too (for more information, see "The Benefits of Hydrating Spices"). Finished with tart lime juice to balance the robust spices, here was a superflavorful—and superfast—midweek dinner.

The Benefits of Hydrating Spices

We often soak whole dried chiles in hot water before using them in recipes, and it turns out that this treatment is beneficial for ground chiles and spices, too. Both types of ingredients swell as they absorb water, loosening their internal structure. When heat is applied, the particles' structure becomes more porous so that oil can easily get to the interiors and dissolve any fat-soluble compounds. In our spice paste, boiling water also softens the pectin of the ground chiles and granulated garlic, improving their textures.

BROILED SPICE-RUBBED SNAPPER

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

We developed this recipe using Diamond Crystal kosher salt. If using Morton's, which is finer, use ¾ teaspoon for the fish and ⅜ teaspoon for the spice paste. Sea bass or tilapia can be substituted for the snapper, if desired. If using tilapia, which is thinner, start checking for doneness at 8 minutes. We use granulated garlic in this recipe because fresh garlic burns under the broiler; feel free to substitute garlic powder. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount. If you prefer a spicier dish, add the full ½ teaspoon of cayenne pepper. Serve the fish with steamed white rice or roasted potatoes and a vegetable; as a taco filling with cilantro leaves, avocado slices, and pickled red onions; or with a green salad and crusty bread. Our recipe for Broiled Spice-Rubbed Snapper for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/dec20.

- 3 (8-ounce) skinless snapper fillets, ¾ to 1 inch thick
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt, divided
- 1 tablespoon ancho chile powder
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 teaspoon granulated garlic
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- ¼–½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 2 tablespoons boiling water
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon lime juice, plus lime wedges for serving

1. Sprinkle both sides of snapper evenly with 1 teaspoon salt. Refrigerate for 15 to 30 minutes.

2. While snapper chills, combine chile powder, coriander, granulated garlic, oregano, pepper, cayenne, and remaining ½ teaspoon salt in small bowl. Stir in boiling water and let sit until thickened, 2 to 3 minutes. Mix in oil to make smooth paste.

3. Adjust oven rack 6 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and spray with vegetable oil spray. Place snapper, skinned side down, on prepared sheet and brush with spice mixture. Broil until top of fish is evenly browned and fish registers 135 degrees, 10 to 12 minutes. Transfer snapper to platter and drizzle with lime juice. Using spatula or large spoon, break snapper into portions. Serve with lime wedges.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Why You Should Butter-Baste Fish

We break down this pro technique to produce flawless, flavorful fillets.

BY STEVE DUNN

Want to know a secret? Even as a professional cook, I used to get a little nervous when it came time to sauté fish. Fish is expensive, and it can go from juicy to dry in a blink. And when you're dealing with flaky types such as cod, there is a good chance that the fragile fillets will fall apart when flipped.

These days, however, I cook cod and similar fish with ease, and the results are outstanding. That's because I butter-baste—a technique that involves repeatedly spooning sizzling butter over food as it cooks. I'll explain the mechanics in a bit, but first, a rundown on why it's so effective.

Bathing fish in hot butter has multiple benefits. It encourages Maillard reactions that add complexity and help develop a golden crust. Maillard reactions also turn the milk solids in the butter nutty and sweet as it browns. Those flavors, along with aromatics added to the butter, enhance the lean, mild fish. Butter basting also cooks food from above and below—the hot fat cooks the top while the skillet cooks the bottom. This means you don't have to flip the fish later on, when it is especially delicate.

A large oval spoon with a deep bowl works best for basting.

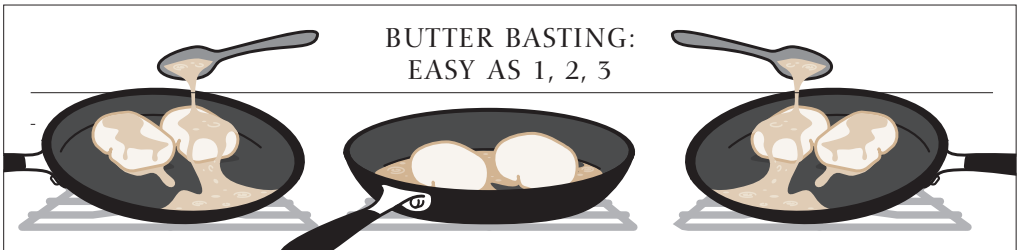
Repeatedly pouring butter over the fish enhances its deep golden crust.

Butter basting can seem intimidating because things move quickly, and chefs often rely on touch and instinct alone to know when the fish is done. But I developed an approach that's easy to master, and it even involves a few breaks along the way.

Start by cooking two 1-inch-thick fillets in an oiled nonstick or carbon-steel skillet for 4 minutes. Turn the fillets over—this is the only flip in the process, and since it happens early, the fillets will still be firm enough to stay intact—and cook them for a minute on the second side before adding cubed butter. Once the butter is melted, the real fun begins. Tilt the skillet toward you to pool the fat, and use a deep spoon to pour the butter over the fish for 15 seconds. There's no need to rush; just baste until the time is up. Now, take a break: Put the skillet flat on the burner and let the fish cook for 30 seconds. Baste again, and then take the temperature of the fish. This "on-off" method moderates the skillet's heat, and tracking the fish's temperature removes any guesswork about when it's done.

When the fish registers 130 degrees, add thyme and garlic to the far side of the skillet to keep any spattering away from your hands; the fillets will keep the aromatics out of the butter as you baste. Continue to alternate between cooking and basting until the fish registers 140 degrees. As you work, the perfume of browned butter and aromatics will waft from the skillet, and when you're done, the fish will be intact, golden, moist, and richly flavored. But that's not the only reward. The other one comes in the final moments of cooking, when you feel like a rock-star chef.

BUTTER BASTING: EASY AS 1, 2, 3



1. BASTE Tilt skillet toward you and repeatedly spoon butter over fish for 15 seconds.

2. REST Place skillet flat on burner and cook fish for 30 seconds.

3. BASTE Repeat steps 1 and 2 until fish registers 140 degrees.

BUTTER-BASTED FISH FILLETS WITH GARLIC AND THYME

SERVES 2 TOTAL TIME: 30 MINUTES

You can substitute red snapper or haddock for the cod. The "skinned" side of a skinless fillet can be identified by its streaky, slightly darker appearance.

- 2 (6-ounce) skinless cod fillets, about 1 inch thick
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch cubes
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed and peeled
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- Lemon wedges

1. Pat all sides of fillets dry with paper towels. Sprinkle on all sides with salt and pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick or carbon-steel skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Reduce heat to medium and place fillets skinned side down in skillet. Gently press on each fillet with spatula for 5 seconds to ensure good contact with skillet. Cook fillets, without moving them, until underside is light golden brown, 4 to 5 minutes.

2. Using 2 spatulas, gently flip fillets. Cook for 1 minute. Scatter butter around fillets. When butter is melted, tilt skillet slightly toward you so butter pools at front of skillet. Using large spoon, scoop up melted butter and pour over fillets repeatedly for 15 seconds. Place skillet flat on burner and continue to cook 30 seconds longer. Tilt skillet and baste for 15 seconds. Place skillet flat on burner and take temperature of thickest part of each fillet. Continue to alternate basting and cooking until fillets register 130 degrees. Add garlic and thyme sprigs to skillet at 12 o'clock position (butter will spatter). When spattering has subsided, continue basting and cooking until fillets register 140 degrees at thickest point. (Total cooking time will range from 8 to 10 minutes.)

3. Transfer fillets to individual plates. Discard garlic. Top each fillet with thyme sprigs, pour butter over fillets, and serve with lemon wedges.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/APR20**

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

The World's Greatest Tuna Sandwich

Olives, tomatoes, hard-cooked eggs, fragrant herbs, and a mustardy vinaigrette—not mayo—are the components that put this Provençal staple on the map.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

The first thing to know about pan bagnat: It's not your everyday tuna sandwich.

To me, that means a mayonnaise-y deli salad that's sandwiched between slices of toasted wheat or rye bread. Pan bagnat, the iconic Provençal tuna sandwich, is something entirely different—and, dare I say, far more grand. It's essentially a niçoise salad served between two halves of a loaf of crusty bread: Chunks of high-quality canned tuna; sliced hard-cooked eggs, tomatoes, and red onion; briny niçoise olives and (sometimes) capers; anchovies; garlic; and fragrant herbs are carefully layered and dressed in a mustardy vinaigrette. And here's the brilliant part: The sandwich gets wrapped tightly with plastic wrap and pressed under a weight, which tamps down the piled-high filling. This step ensures that the whole package is compact enough to bite through and the filling slightly saturates the crumb without softening the crisp crust. ("Pan bagnat" means "bathed bread" in Niçard, the local variant of the Provençal dialect, referring to how cooks once "refreshed" the stale bread by softening it under a stream of water.)

It's perfect picnic fare because it's portable, and it's equally great for parties because it can be made ahead. But it's tricky to make well. Besides balancing all those assertive flavors, you have to carefully assemble the loosely packed ingredients so that they don't come tumbling out when you slice or bite into the sandwich. Not many cooks put so much thought into making sandwiches—but I was about to.

After putting the filling on the baguette bottom, we add the baguette top and press the sandwich with a weight.

Due Process

Great tuna and great bread are the core components of pan bagnat. I began by draining a couple of jars of our favorite oil-packed tuna (a must for the best flavor and texture). As for the bread, the most traditional versions feature a single-serving round roll, but a baguette, ciabatta, or bâtard that French bakers slice and sell by the portion is also common. I settled on a baguette because fewer slices would be necessary to portion the long loaf, which would hopefully allow more of the filling to stay intact. I hollowed out the bottom half—a typical step that makes space for the abundant filling and increases the ratio of filling to bread—and nestled the tuna in the trough. It was

MOISTURE MANAGEMENT

To help limit the amount of moisture that the baguette absorbs from the filling, we made it water-resistant by brushing the cut sides with olive oil. The bread certainly seemed less soggy to us after we layered on the sandwich filling, but we wanted to carry out a more objective experiment.

So we brushed the cut sides of one halved baguette with a tablespoon of oil and left a second halved baguette dry as a control. We moistened two sponges with blue-tinted water to serve as the sandwich "filling" and placed one sponge between the halves of each baguette. We then wrapped the makeshift sandwiches in plastic and pressed them under a Dutch oven. An hour later, we unwrapped them and examined the results: The bread coated in oil was only faintly blue, indicating that only a small amount of water had penetrated, and it was far firmer than the uncoated bread, which had turned soggy, pasty, and blue.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

easy to shingle thin slices of tomato and eggs over the fish, but things started falling apart when I piled on the onion slices, olives, capers, anchovies, parsley, and marjoram (sweeter and more delicate than oregano or thyme, and distinctly Provençal) and doused the filling in vinaigrette.

I halved the sandwich and did my best to bundle the precariously full halves in plastic wrap before weighting them beneath a Dutch oven for about an hour. But that didn't stop the olives, capers, and onions from tumbling out when I unwrapped the halves and cut the sandwiches into portions. I needed to make the looser ingredients more cohesive.

First, I borrowed red wine vinegar from the dressing to soak the sliced onion and garlic with a little salt, which mellowed the sharp bite of both alliums and had the bonus effect of wilting the onion and making it more compact. While that mixture sat, I finely chopped the olives, capers, anchovies, and herbs in the food processor and then tossed them with the onion mixture. I divvied it up by packing most of it into the trough beneath the tuna and spreading the rest across the top of the egg slices. These ingredients now stayed mostly contained, and with their briny, salty flavors sandwiching the rest of the filling, each bite tasted balanced.

There was just one problem: Placing the wet olive mixture directly against the bread meant that the crumb, which had been pleasantly moist, was now bordering on sodden.

Avoiding a Soggy Sandwich

I looked for ways to curb the amount of free liquid in the filling. One easy fix was to drain the juicy tomatoes on paper towels before placing them in the sandwich. I also combined some olive oil and mustard with the olive mixture so that the mustard could bind up the water from the vinegar and onions. In addition, I made the crumb water-resistant by brushing the cut surfaces of the baguette with more olive oil. I also decided to toast the baguette before building the sandwich, which would make the exterior more crisp.

When I capped this sandwich with the top of the baguette and sliced it crosswise, the filling stayed put and it was easy to wrap each half into a tidy torpedo. I assembled another Dutch oven "press," this time with a rimed baking sheet between the pot and the bread to make the setup steadier, and flipped the sandwiches after 30 minutes so that gravity could help evenly distribute the moisture.

The results? Each component of the filling was thoughtful, and the balance of flavors was pitch-perfect. Brushing oil on the bread kept enough liquid from the filling at bay so that the crumb was moistened but not sodden. And the make-ahead convenience meant that this would be just the thing to serve at backyard parties—yes, a tuna sandwich fit for company—as well as have on hand for busy nights.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20

PAN BAGNAT (PROVENÇAL TUNA SANDWICH)

SERVES 4 TO 6

TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES, PLUS 1 HOUR PRESSING

We developed this recipe with Tonnino Tuna Fillets in Olive Oil, but you can substitute three 5-ounce cans of another oil-packed tuna. To accommodate the filling, the baguette should be approximately 18 inches long, 3 inches wide, and at least 2 inches tall. A ciabatta of similar size will work, as will individual ciabatta rolls. You can substitute 1 tablespoon of oregano for the marjoram and kalamata olives for the niçoise. Our recipe for Easy-Peel Hard-Cooked Eggs is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/jun20.

- 1 vine-ripened tomato, cored and sliced thin
- 1 small red onion, sliced thin
- 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- 1 large baguette, halved horizontally
- ¾ cup niçoise olives, pitted
- ½ cup fresh parsley leaves and tender stems
- 3 tablespoons capers, rinsed
- 2 tablespoons fresh marjoram leaves
- 3 anchovy fillets, rinsed and patted dry
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 2 (6½-ounce) jars oil-packed tuna, drained
- 3 hard-cooked eggs, sliced thin

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Lay tomato slices on paper towel–lined plate and set aside. Place onion, vinegar, garlic, and salt in bowl and toss to combine. Using your hands or metal spoon, remove inner crumb from baguette bottom to create trough, leaving ¼-inch border on sides and bottom. Place baguette halves cut side up on baking sheet and bake until very lightly toasted, 5 minutes.

2. Pulse olives, parsley, capers, marjoram, and anchovies in food processor until coarsely but evenly chopped, 10 to 12 pulses. Transfer olive mixture to bowl with onion mixture. Add ¼ cup oil, mustard, and pepper and toss to combine.

3. Brush inside of each baguette half with 1 tablespoon oil. Place two-thirds of olive mixture in hollow of baguette bottom and spread evenly. Distribute tuna evenly over olive mixture and drizzle with remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Shingle tomato slices over tuna. Shingle egg slices over tomato. Top eggs with remaining olive mixture and cap with baguette top (sandwich will be very full).

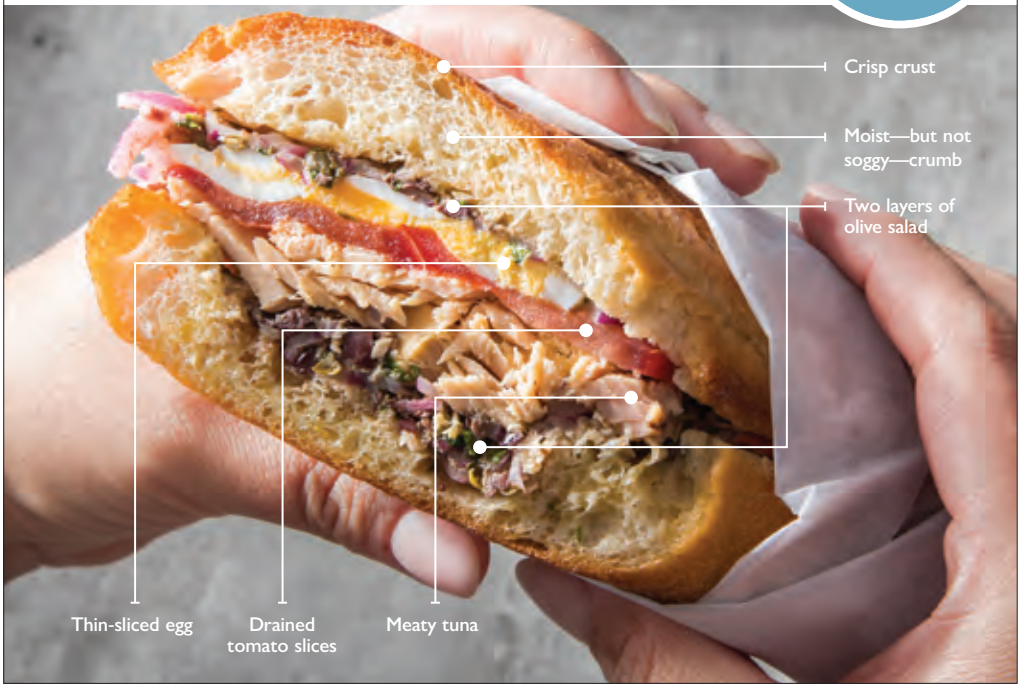
4. Press gently on sandwich and slice in half crosswise on bias. Wrap each half tightly in plastic wrap. Place rimmed baking sheet on top of sandwiches and weight with heavy Dutch oven or two 5-pound bags of flour or sugar for 1 hour, flipping sandwiches halfway through weighting. (Wrapped sandwiches can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours. Let come to room temperature before serving.)

5. Unwrap sandwiches, slice each sandwich in half (or in thirds to serve 6) on bias, and serve.

A CLOSER LOOK

'Wichcraft

Sandwich making tends to be a loose art, but our take on this French classic—from the carefully calibrated seasonings to the architecture of the filling to the amount of moisture that the bread soaks up—is all about precision.



A Smarter Way to Pan-Sear Shrimp

Shrimp cook so quickly that it's almost impossible to brown them before they become dry and rubbery. So why not take it slow?

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

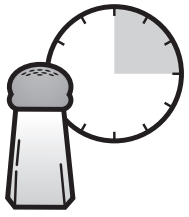
What could be easier than pan-searing shrimp so that they brown deeply and cook up juicy and tender? In some ways, pan-searing just about anything else.

Don't get me wrong: Pan searing is an inherently quick way to cook shrimp and should be really simple. But when it comes to achieving that ideal combination of deep, flavorful browning on the outside and snappy, succulent meat on the inside, shrimp might be the hardest protein to get right. For one thing, they're tiny and best cooked to a relatively low 120 degrees, so it's almost impossible to get any color on them before they dry out and turn rubbery.

But if you've ever had truly well-browned, juicy shrimp, you know that they're just the thing for bulking up rice or noodle bowls or salads, and they pair well with a host of bold seasonings. My goal was to figure out how to pan-sear them well—and as it turned out, the solution was right in my wheelhouse. The problems with pan-searing shrimp, I realized after flashing them in a hot, oiled skillet as per usual and producing tough results, are just exacerbated versions of the ones I've encountered when coming up with the best way to pan-sear other relatively quick-cooking proteins such as steak and salmon. All I had to do here was modify those methods so that the cooking happened more gently. Here's my method—which is, indeed, really simple.

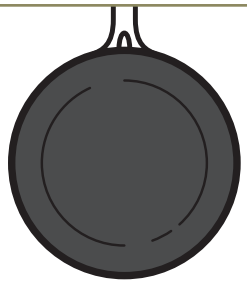
Don't underestimate the potential of plain seared shrimp: They're invaluable for adding briny-sweet savoriness and tender, snappy texture to everything from rice and noodle bowls to salads.

5 STEPS TO PERFECT PAN-SEARED SHRIMP



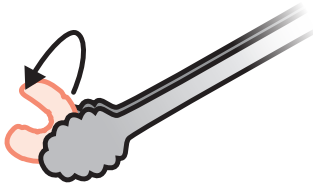
1. SALT BRIEFLY Salting the shrimp for 15 minutes (up to 30 minutes is fine) helps them retain moisture even as they're seared, but it doesn't introduce extra moisture like brining does, so the shrimp's exteriors still brown beautifully. Salt also seasons the shrimp.

2. ADD SUGAR JUST BEFORE COOKING Sprinkling sugar on the shrimp (patted dry after salting) boosts browning and underscores their sweetness. The trick is waiting to sprinkle it until just before searing so that it doesn't get wiped off when you dry the shrimp.



3. USE A SLICK PAN; OIL SHRIMP, NOT SKILLET Searing in a nonstick or carbon-steel skillet ensures that flavorful browning sticks to the food and not to the pan. Lightly oiling the shrimp themselves (instead of the pan) ensures that they are evenly coated.

4. START COLD; SEAR GENTLY A cold start offers more control: You can arrange the shrimp in a single layer before cooking, so they make even contact with the pan. Since they heat up gradually with the skillet, they don't buckle (good for browning) and are less likely to overcook.



5. FLIP AND FINISH OFF HEAT Once the shrimp are spotty brown and pink at the edges on the first side, cut the heat and quickly turn each piece, letting residual heat gently cook the shrimp the rest of the way.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN



Toss the shrimp with one of these toppings: peanuts, black pepper, and lime (left); pistachios, cumin, and parsley (center); or fermented black beans with ginger and garlic.

Why You Should Buy Frozen Shrimp—and How to Measure Them Accurately

Unless you have access to shrimp directly from a boat, we recommend buying them frozen. The quality is generally much better than that of defrosted shrimp, the flavor and texture of which decline rapidly once thawed.

Most shrimp, including all bagged options, are individually quick-frozen. The process locks in freshness and allows you to thaw exactly what you need, but it also encases each shrimp in an icy shell that adds weight, making it tricky to measure how much you'll have for cooking once the ice melts. We've found that the shrimp lose anywhere from 12 to 25 percent of their weight.

To account for that, it's best to defrost more shrimp than a recipe calls for. But because the range of loss is so wide (it depends on factors such as shrimp size and whether or not they are peeled), weight isn't the most precise way to measure. Instead, count out what you need based on the shrimp's per-pound number range. Example: For extra-large shrimp, the range is 21 to 25 (see chart below), which represents the shrimp's raw, unfrozen weight. So if a recipe calls for 1½ pounds of shrimp, count out 25 pieces plus 13 more.

TEST KITCHEN NAME	COUNT PER POUND
Colossal	U/12*
Extra-Jumbo	U/15
Jumbo	16–20
Extra-Large	21–25
Large	26–30
Medium-Large	31–40
Medium	41–50
Small	51–60
Extra-Small	61–70

*U = Under

PAN-SEARED SHRIMP WITH PEANUTS, BLACK PEPPER, AND LIME

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

We prefer untreated shrimp; if yours are treated with additives such as sodium tripolyphosphate, skip the salting in step 1. You can substitute jumbo shrimp (16 to 20 per pound) for the extra-large shrimp; if substituting, increase the cooking time by 1 to 2 minutes. To use the plain seared shrimp as a neutral protein in rice bowls or salads, skip steps 2 and 4.

- 1½ pounds extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, divided
- 2 teaspoons coriander seeds
- 1 teaspoon black peppercorns
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1⅛ teaspoons sugar, divided
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 4 teaspoons vegetable oil, divided
- ½ cup fresh cilantro leaves and tender stems, chopped
- 1 tablespoon lime juice, plus lime wedges for serving
- 3 tablespoons dry-roasted peanuts, chopped coarse

1. Toss shrimp and ½ teaspoon salt together in bowl; set aside for 15 to 30 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, grind coriander seeds and peppercorns using spice grinder or mortar and pestle until coarsely ground. Transfer to small bowl. Add paprika, garlic, 1 teaspoon sugar, pepper flakes, and remaining ½ teaspoon salt and stir until combined.

3. Pat shrimp dry with paper towels. Add 1 tablespoon oil and remaining ⅛ teaspoon sugar to bowl with shrimp and toss to coat. Add shrimp to cold 12-inch nonstick or well-seasoned carbon-steel skillet in single layer and cook over high heat until undersides of shrimp are spotty brown and edges turn pink, 3 to 4 minutes. Remove skillet from heat. Working quickly, use tongs to flip each shrimp; let stand until second side is opaque, about 2 minutes. Transfer shrimp to platter.

4. Add remaining 1 teaspoon oil to now-empty skillet. Add spice mixture and cook over medium heat until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Off heat, return shrimp to skillet. Add cilantro and lime juice and toss to combine. Transfer to platter; sprinkle with peanuts; and serve, passing lime wedges separately.

PAN-SEARED SHRIMP WITH FERMENTED BLACK BEANS, GINGER, AND GARLIC

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

Omit spice mixture of coriander seeds, peppercorns, paprika, garlic, 1 teaspoon sugar, ½ teaspoon salt, and red pepper flakes. Omit cilantro, lime, and peanuts. Combine 2 scallion whites, sliced thin; 1 tablespoon fermented black beans, rinsed, drained, and chopped coarse; 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger; 2 minced garlic cloves; and 1 teaspoon sugar in small bowl. In step 4, add black bean mixture to skillet instead of spice mixture and cook until ginger is just starting to brown, about 45 seconds. Add 2 scallion greens, sliced thin on bias; 1 tablespoon soy sauce; and 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil to skillet with shrimp.

PAN-SEARED SHRIMP WITH PISTACHIOS, CUMIN, AND PARSLEY

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

Omit peppercorns and 1 teaspoon sugar from spice mixture. Substitute 1 teaspoon ground cumin for coriander seeds and cayenne pepper for pepper flakes. Substitute 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil for vegetable oil, adding 1 tablespoon to raw shrimp and using remaining 1 tablespoon to cook spice mixture. Reduce cilantro to ¼ cup and add ¼ cup fresh parsley leaves and tender stems, chopped. Substitute lemon juice for lime juice, omit lime wedges, and substitute ¼ cup coarsely chopped toasted pistachios for peanuts.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/DEC20

Fried Calamari

Squid is inexpensive, requires almost no prep, and cooks in minutes. So why aren't you frying it?

BY STEVE DUNN

Fried calamari is an iconic restaurant appetizer across the United States, but that hasn't always been the case. In the 1970s and '80s, a handful of cephalopod supporters had to fight to move the needle on Americans' squid squeamishness. Among these supporters were Massachusetts Institute of Technology student Paul Kalikstein, who outlined "The Marketability of Squid" in his graduate thesis, and reporter Florence Fabricant, whose 1978 appeal in *The New York Times* detailed the many practical perks of the "neglected seafood." Several state and federal marine programs also encouraged restaurant chefs to replace overfished stocks with squid—and to call it by its more enticing Italian name, calamari—in an effort to buoy a struggling seafood industry.

These campaigns made their mark: By the mid '90s you could find a plate of crispy rings and tentacles at any reliable sports bar or red-sauce joint in the country. Squid's bait-to-plate ascent was so impressive, in fact, that *The New York Times* used a "Fried Calamari Index" to compare the trajectories of other trendy foods over time.

However, home cooks rarely buy and prepare squid themselves, so I've decided to join the campaign and bait readers with a fried calamari recipe of my own. One of squid's best features is that it cooks in minutes, but since it can quickly go from tender to rubbery—the most recognizable flaw of subpar restaurant versions—I needed to nail down the frying time. And I needed a formula for the perfect coating: golden brown, crispy, and delicate.

To ensure a crispy, golden-brown coating, we opt for a flour–baking powder dredge, shake off the excess, and let the coating hydrate while the oil heats.

Milking It

Frying squid is superfast. All you do is dredge the pieces in a starchy coating (all-purpose flour, cornstarch, and cornmeal are all common) that helps them crisp and brown quickly, drop them into a pot of hot oil, and fish them out a few minutes later when they've turned golden brown. Season them with salt, pair them with a dipping sauce (or lemon wedges), and serve immediately.

But there's an inherent challenge to frying something that cooks so quickly: There's barely enough time for the exterior to brown and crisp before the interior overcooks. Squid is packed with collagen, which is why there's such a narrow window of doneness when it's pleasantly springy-tender. As the old adage goes, you can cook squid either hot and fast or low and slow, but avoid anything in between. So I focused on ways to keep the squid tender and to encourage the coating (for now, I used all-purpose flour) to brown rapidly.

Plenty of recipes call for soaking the squid in buttermilk or milk, because theoretically the lactic acid (though milk has only a small amount) tenderizes the flesh and extends the cooking time before it toughens. But the soaking tests that I ran on squid with both types of dairy and for varying lengths of time showed that dairy did not affect tenderness. However, I did learn that dunking squid in milk—not buttermilk—before dredging it helps ensure that just enough of the starchy coating will cling. The thicker buttermilk grabbed too much dredge, and thinner water didn't grab enough, resulting in coatings that fried up either thick and tough or insubstantial. Plus, proteins and sugar in the milk encourage browning.

The one trick that enhanced tenderness was cutting thicker rings. Presliced, squid rings tend to measure about ½ inch wide. By the time the coating was browned, these slim rings, which cooked very quickly, threatened to turn tough. It was better to buy whole cleaned squid and slice the bodies (also called "tubes") crosswise myself into ¾-inch-thick rings. (I cut any long tentacles to match the size of the shorter ones.)

Flour Power

I knew that the dredge I chose would impact the coating's texture and how quickly the calamari browned, so I decided to test all the starches I saw in recipes: rice flour, all-purpose flour, cornstarch, fine cornmeal, and semolina. I tossed 1 pound of squid in each dredge, making sure to shake off any excess; dropped half the pieces into 350-degree oil (frying in two batches ensured that the oil temperature didn't

RECIPE TESTING The Dredge Report

We dredged the squid in a variety of starches to find the perfect formula for a delicately crispy, golden-brown crust. Most options fell short, but all-purpose flour, plus baking powder to add lightness, did the trick.

SEMOLINA
Hard

CORNMEAL
Gritty

CORNSTARCH
Pale

RICE FLOUR
Crunchy

ALL-PURPOSE FLOUR + BAKING POWDER
Crispy

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Squid 101

GOOD SQUID LOOKS PRISTINE Squid should look moist, shiny, and ivory-colored.

CLEANED SQUID IS SOLD IN TWO PARTS Most fishmongers sell both squid bodies and squid tentacles. The bodies tend to be smooth and tender, while the tentacles offer pleasant chew and more surface area.

BUY WHOLE BODIES WHEN POSSIBLE Though we've found the quality of precut rings to be just fine, buying whole bodies allows you to cut them to your own specification.

MOST SQUID HAS BEEN FROZEN Unless you have access to squid direct from the boat, anything you buy has been previously frozen and treated with additives such as sodium citrate and sodium carbonate to inhibit spoilage and enhance texture. But that's fine: We found the quality of frozen squid—both frozen in the supermarket freezer section and thawed at the fish counter—to be good, and we didn't detect any off-flavors or textures as we have in other types of treated seafood.

- **If you buy thawed:** Ask the fishmonger how long it's been thawed. For the best quality, thawed squid should be cooked within two days.
- **If you buy frozen:** Many supermarkets carry frozen squid packaged in blocks of whole bodies or rings. To use part of a frozen block, wrap the block in a dish towel and press it against the edge of a counter or table to break it.

STORE UNCOOKED SQUID ON ICE Like all seafood, squid deteriorates rapidly. Keep it in the back of the refrigerator, where it's coldest, in a zipper-lock bag resting on a bed of ice.

drop too much and prolong cooking); retrieved them as soon as they were tender (exactly 3 minutes later); and repeated the process with the second batch.

The coarse semolina fried up hard and the cornmeal gritty, while the rice flour was crunchy (not crisp) and the cornstarch was pale. But the all-purpose flour batch boasted deep golden color since the flour contains proteins that brown. Although it was dusty and not as delicate as I wanted, I moved forward with it and added baking powder to lighten up the texture. To rid the surface of that dusty film—I recognized this as unhydrated flour—I dredged the squid before heating the oil and spread the pieces out on a wire rack to hydrate while the oil came up to temperature.

'Tis the Season

Though the tweaks I'd made seemed subtle, they added up to exceptionally good fried calamari: lightly springy pieces encased in a delicate, lacy shell. I sprinkled salt onto the squid right when it came out of the oil, just as I would with any fried food, and dug in to what I thought was the perfect batch—but I quickly realized that the seasoning was off. Some bites were salt bombs, others bland. I tried again and seasoned the dredge instead. But the seasoning was still uneven, and this time the problem was obvious: The willowy tentacles picked up considerably more dredge—and thus considerably more salt—than the rings. The best approach turned out to be seasoning the milk so that it evenly distributed the salt.

All I needed were the fixings: a quick marinara sauce for the traditional style, an even-quicker sriracha-spiked mayonnaise, and banana peppers fried along with the squid for a proper Rhode Island–style version. A crowd-pleasing party platter or a quick dinner, this was the stuff that food fads are made of.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20

FRIED CALAMARI

SERVES 4 AS AN APPETIZER TOTAL TIME: 50 MINUTES

If desired, omit the lemon wedges and serve with Quick Marinara Sauce or Spicy Mayonnaise (recipes follow); make the sauce before preparing the squid. Use a Dutch oven that holds 6 quarts or more for this recipe. Precut squid will not be as tender as whole bodies that you cut yourself. You can double this recipe and fry the calamari in four batches; the amount of oil remains the same. We tested this recipe with King Arthur Gluten-Free Multi-Purpose Flour, and the results were acceptable. Our recipes for Rhode Island–Style Fried Calamari and Fried Calamari for Two are available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/feb20.

- ½ cup milk
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1 pound squid, bodies sliced crosswise ¾ inch thick, extra-long tentacles trimmed to match length of shorter ones
- 2 quarts vegetable oil for frying
- Lemon wedges

1. Set wire rack in rimmed baking sheet. Set second rack in second sheet and line with triple layer of paper towels. Heat oven to 200 degrees.

2. Whisk milk and salt together in medium bowl. Combine flour, baking powder, and pepper in second medium bowl. Add squid to milk mixture and toss to coat. Using your hands or slotted spoon, remove half of squid, allowing excess milk mixture to drip back into bowl, and add to bowl with flour mixture. Using your hands, toss squid to coat evenly. Gently shake off excess flour mixture and place coated squid in single layer on unlined rack. Repeat with remaining squid. Let sit for 10 minutes.

3. While squid rests, heat oil in Dutch oven over high heat to 350 degrees. Carefully add half of squid and fry for exactly 3 minutes (squid will be golden brown). Using slotted spoon or spider skimmer, transfer calamari to paper towel–lined rack and transfer to oven to keep warm. Return oil to 350 degrees and repeat with remaining squid. Transfer calamari to platter and serve immediately with lemon wedges.

QUICK MARINARA SAUCE

SERVES 4 (MAKES 1½ CUPS) TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

Our favorite crushed tomatoes are made by SMT.

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil leaves
- ⅛ teaspoon sugar

Heat oil and garlic in 10-inch skillet over medium heat, stirring frequently, until fragrant but not browned, about 2 minutes. Stir in tomatoes and simmer until slightly thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir in basil and sugar and season with salt to taste.

SPICY MAYONNAISE

SERVES 4 (MAKES 1¼ CUPS) TOTAL TIME: 5 MINUTES

Our favorite mayonnaise is Blue Plate Real Mayonnaise, and our favorite sriracha is Kikkoman Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce.

- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons sriracha
- 2 teaspoons grated lime zest plus 2 tablespoons juice
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika

Whisk all ingredients together in bowl.

How to Make Chana Masala

The wildly popular Indian dish of chickpeas simmered until tender in a tangy, fragrantly spiced tomato-ginger sauce is a dinnertime hero.

BY ANDREA GEARY

The allure of chana masala, arguably one of the most popular vegetarian dishes in India, is multifaceted. First, the visuals: Golden chickpeas glimmer in an orangey-red tomato sauce, with a small side salad providing a pop of green. Then, the fragrance: The aromas of spices, ginger, and garlic perfume the dish. Finally, the taste: The yielding, almost creamy chickpeas and feisty sauce are balanced by the freshness and crunch of onion, chile, and cilantro.

It's also a practical dish, since it comes together easily and it calls for inexpensive, readily available ingredients.

To come up with my own version, I reviewed several recipes. Some started with dried chickpeas that required soaking, along with fresh tomatoes that had to be peeled and chopped, while others called for canned products. But once the ingredients were prepped, the method was similar: Fry a paste of onion, ginger, and garlic in oil. Stir in spices such as cumin, garam masala, and a mild chile powder (Kashmiri chile powder is traditional, but paprika is a common sub), and then add the tomatoes, chickpeas, and some water. Simmer until the chickpeas are soft and the sauce has thickened; then serve with rice, naan (or bhature; see "Bread on the Side"), and the salad.

Fresh cilantro leaves, chopped red onion, and thinly sliced serrano chiles are a lively finish to this easy-to-make vegetarian dish.

But none of these versions matched the stellar examples I'd eaten in the past. Several seemed lean and austere, the kind of thing devout carnivores expect vegetarian food to be. In some, the chickpeas were so soft that they were escaping their skins; in others, they remained too snappy. And the dishes lacked the nuanced spice flavor and heady aroma that are the hallmarks of chana masala.

Can-Do

My first round of testing had yielded one happy discovery: There was no advantage in starting with dried chickpeas and fresh tomatoes. Canned chickpeas were not only nicely seasoned but also 90 percent of the way to the ideal tender but intact texture. And canned tomatoes were sweet and tangy—far better than the fresh ones available at the supermarket 10 months out of the year. I wanted a smooth sauce, so for my next batch I decided to puree canned whole tomatoes, which have a fresh flavor and break down readily in the food processor.

I moved on to the onion, ginger, and garlic. For this dish (and many other Indian dishes) these aromatics are ground to a paste to produce big flavor without a distracting texture. In many Indian homes, an appliance called a mixer grinder is used to do this job, but I used a food processor. While I was at it, I added the stems of the cilantro sprigs I had set aside for the salad, along with a serrano chile.

I fried the paste in a tablespoon of oil until it was soft and brown and then added my spice mixture, which I had bolstered with fennel seeds and sweet, earthy turmeric for more depth. I added the drained chickpeas, the tomato puree, and 1 cup of water before letting it all simmer for 15 minutes.

I was making progress, but I wasn't there yet. The turmeric and fennel had added depth, but I wanted more; plus, the dish was too lean. Increasing the oil from 1 to 3 tablespoons solved both problems: Besides adding richness, the extra fat emboldened the spices (fat carries flavor, especially the fat-soluble flavors in spices). It also contributed much-needed body to the sauce, though not enough.

The next time around, instead of draining and rinsing the cans of chickpeas, I added their contents—liquid and all—to the pan and omitted the additional water. Admittedly, it's not canonical, but that liquid is full of proteins and carbohydrates, which boosted the savoriness and consistency of the sauce nicely.

The Missing Link

Still, the flavor wasn't complex enough. It jumped straight from the earthy, foundational flavors of turmeric, cumin, and beans to the overt grassiness of the cilantro, chile, and onion, with nothing bridging the gap. A friend with a deep knowledge of Indian cooking guessed my misstep: "No garam masala?"

I'd been adding it all along; the problem was that I'd been adding it too early. In Indian cuisine, the

For Multidimensional Flavor, Stagger Spices

The European tradition generally calls for adding spices to dishes early on so that their flavors have time to diffuse throughout the food. But in Indian cooking, the approach is more nuanced. Though there aren't any hard-and-fast rules, generally, the spices that are meant to permeate and offer background flavor—here, paprika, cumin, turmeric, and fennel—are added early. Spices that are meant to provide vibrant top notes—garam masala in this case—are added toward the end, as prolonged cooking drives off some volatile compounds.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

coriander, cinnamon, cardamom, and other sweet spices that make up the blend are valued for their vibrant flavors, so they're often added at the end of cooking and sometimes even sprinkled atop a dish right before serving. Adding the spices late means that fewer volatile compounds are driven off, so their taste is more prominent. Indeed, holding the garam masala until near the end of the simmering time worked brilliantly, producing layered flavors. Speaking of layers, instead of serving the dish with a salad, I used the chiles, onion, and cilantro as a topping so that each bite would benefit. Once I'd set out a small bowl of lime wedges for additional tang, it was time to eat.

Because this dish comes together quickly, it is ideal for busy nights. But if you have the time, I recommend that you make the most delicious and traditional accompaniment: the puffed fried breads known as bhature. See the box at right to learn how.

CHANA MASALA

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 50 MINUTES

Because the sodium contents of canned chickpeas and tomatoes vary, we include only a small amount of salt in this recipe; season with additional salt at the end of cooking if needed. If you prefer a spicier dish, leave the seeds in the serrano chiles. This dish is often paired with bhature, deep-fried breads that puff up as they cook; alternatively, serve it with rice or naan.

- 1 small red onion, quartered, divided
- 10 sprigs fresh cilantro, stems and leaves separated
- 1 (1½-inch) piece ginger, peeled and chopped coarse
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped coarse
- 2 serrano chiles, stemmed, halved, seeded, and sliced thin crosswise, divided
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon ground turmeric
- ½ teaspoon fennel seeds
- 2 (15-ounce) cans chickpeas, undrained
- 1½ teaspoons garam masala
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- Lime wedges

1. Chop three-quarters of onion coarse; reserve remaining quarter for garnish. Cut cilantro stems into 1-inch lengths. Process chopped onion, cilantro stems, ginger, garlic, and half of serranos in food processor until finely chopped, scraping down sides of bowl as necessary, about 20 seconds. Combine onion mixture and oil in large saucepan. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until onion is fully softened and beginning to stick to saucepan, 5 to 7 minutes.

2. While onion mixture cooks, process tomatoes and their juice in now-empty food processor until smooth, about 30 seconds. Add paprika, cumin, turmeric, and fennel seeds to onion mixture and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in chickpeas and their liquid and processed tomatoes and bring to boil. Adjust heat to maintain simmer, then cover and simmer for 15 minutes. While mixture cooks, chop reserved onion fine.

3. Stir garam masala and salt into chickpea mixture and continue to cook, uncovered and stirring occasionally, until chickpeas are softened and sauce is thickened, 8 to 12 minutes longer. Season with salt to taste. Transfer to wide, shallow serving bowl. Sprinkle with chopped onion, remaining serranos, and cilantro leaves and serve, passing lime wedges separately.

Bread on the Side

The rich and tender fried breads known as bhature are a common accompaniment to chana masala. If you'd like to make both recipes, first prepare the bhature dough and then prepare the chana masala through step 2. Next, portion, shape, and fry the bhature. Finally, finish the chana masala.

BHATURE

SERVES 4

TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES, PLUS 1 HOUR RESTING

To get the right dough texture, we recommend weighing the flour and stirring the yogurt well before measuring it. Do not substitute Greek yogurt here. Use a Dutch oven that holds 6 quarts or more for frying. Each bhatura takes less than a minute to cook, so make sure that you have everything in place before you start to fry.

- ½ cup plain yogurt
- ¼ cup water
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil, plus extra for shaping
- 2 cups (10 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- ¾ teaspoon table salt
- ¾ teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 2 quarts vegetable oil for frying

1. Whisk yogurt, water, and 3 tablespoons oil in small bowl until smooth. Pulse flour, sugar, salt, baking powder, and baking soda in food processor until combined, about 2 pulses. With processor running, add yogurt mixture and process until mixture forms smooth ball, about 30 seconds. Using your lightly oiled hands, transfer dough to lightly oiled counter. Knead until dough is smooth and springy, about 5 minutes. Form dough into ball and transfer to lightly greased bowl. Place plastic wrap or damp dish towel on surface of dough and let rest for at least 1 hour or up to 3 hours.

2. Add 2 quarts oil to large Dutch oven until it measures about 1½ inches deep and heat over medium-high heat to 390 degrees. Set wire rack in rimmed baking sheet and line with double layer of paper towels. Divide dough into 8 equal portions and shape into tight, round balls. Place balls seam side down on counter, coat lightly with extra oil, and cover with plastic. Use heel of your hand to press 1 dough ball into 3-inch round. Using rolling pin, gently roll into 6-inch round of even thickness, adding extra oil to counter as necessary to prevent sticking. Roll slowly and gently to prevent creasing. Cover with plastic or damp dish towel. Repeat with remaining dough balls.

3. Carefully place 1 dough round in hot oil. Press gently with back of spider skimmer to keep dough submerged until it begins to puff. As bread begins to puff on 1 side, gently press unpuffed side into oil until bread is evenly inflated, about 20 seconds. Continue to cook until bottom is light golden brown, about 10 seconds longer. Flip bread and cook on second side, lightly pressing both sides into oil to ensure even browning, about 20 seconds. Lift bhatura with spider skimmer and let drain briefly over pot before transferring to prepared rack. Repeat with remaining dough rounds, adjusting burner, if necessary, to maintain oil temperature between 380 and 400 degrees. Serve.

TECHNIQUE | FRYING BHATURE

As the bread begins to puff on one side, gently press the unpuffed side into the oil until the bread is evenly inflated, about 20 seconds. Continue to cook until the bottom is light golden brown, about 10 seconds longer, and then flip the bread and cook on the second side, lightly pressing each side into the oil to ensure even browning, about 20 seconds.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/OCT20

PHOTOGRAPHY: KEVIN WHITE

Farro and Broccoli Rabe Gratin

This meatless main gets its savory backbone from an everyday Japanese ingredient.

BY JOSEPH GITTER

Many gratins trade almost entirely on the richness of heavy cream and cheese, but there is room to modernize—and lighten up—the concept to create a satisfying meatless main course. My plan was to keep the usual crunchy topping but pack the filling with substantial, boldly flavored ingredients. And just because the dish would be vegetarian didn't mean it would have to lack depth.

I took inspiration from the classic Tuscan dish of beans and greens, a union of white beans and escarole or Swiss chard seasoned with onion, garlic, and red pepper flakes. To turn the dish into a hearty main, it seemed fitting to add another Tuscan staple—farro—to the mix. The tender chew and robust nuttiness of the hulled whole-wheat kernels would round out the gratin.

To start, I sautéed a chopped onion in olive oil to the point of caramelized sweetness and then added the farro to bring forth its earthy taste. Once the grains were lightly toasted, I poured in more water than was needed to hydrate the grains and let the mixture simmer until they were just tender. By that point, the liquid had thickened to a lush, silky consistency, thanks to the starch that had escaped from the grains.

Next up, the greens. Instead of the usual escarole or chard, I chose broccoli rabe for its sturdier structure, vivid hue, and pungent taste. And yet, when the rabe was simply sautéed, its bitterness overtook the dish. For the next batch, I briefly blanched the rabe to soften its sharp edge. Now it still offered personality without outshining the farro.

Grated Parmesan and panko that's toasted in the microwave make a crunchy, salty-savory topping.

I quickly sautéed the blanched rabe with the garlic and red pepper flakes and then stirred in a can of drained white beans and a good amount of sweet-tart, umami-packed sun-dried tomatoes, whose concentrated pops of flavor and tender chew were brilliant counterpoints to the creamy beans and peppery rabe.

The dish was coming together nicely, but the farro itself still tasted a little plain. Subbing vegetable broth for some of the water used to simmer the grains helped a little—but not enough. Umami-rich anchovies are frequently used in Italian cooking to build flavor, but I gave them a pass so that I could keep the meal vegetarian. Instead, I took a cross-cultural assist from a Japanese ingredient: miso. Just 2 tablespoons of white miso stirred into the farro cooking liquid infused the grains with an underlying savoriness and contributed a bit of body that helped bind the filling into a cohesive whole.

All that was left was to transfer the mixture to a gratin dish, sprinkle on a combo of microwave-toasted panko bread crumbs and Parmesan cheese, and slide my revamped gratin under the broiler to brown.

The Magic of Miso

When we wanted to bolster our gratin with savory depth, we turned to an essential ingredient in the Japanese kitchen: **white miso**. The fermented soybean paste delivers salty, sweet, and umami flavors, all while keeping the dish vegetarian. The thick paste also adds body to the filling.

FARRO AND BROCCOLI RABE GRATIN

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

Do not substitute pearl, quick-cooking, or pre-steamed farro for the whole farro in this recipe.

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- ¼ teaspoon table salt, plus salt for cooking broccoli rabe
- 1½ cups whole farro
- 2 cups vegetable broth
- 2 tablespoons white miso
- ½ cup panko bread crumbs
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 pound broccoli rabe, trimmed and cut into 2-inch pieces
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 (15-ounce) can small white beans or navy beans, rinsed
- ¾ cup oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, chopped

1. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in large saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and salt and cook until softened and lightly browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in farro and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly toasted, about 2 minutes. Stir in 2½ cups water, broth, and miso; bring to simmer; and cook, stirring often, until farro is just tender and remaining liquid has thickened into creamy sauce, 25 to 35 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, toss panko with 1 tablespoon oil in bowl and microwave, stirring occasionally, until golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in Parmesan and set aside.

3. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in Dutch oven. Add broccoli rabe and 1 tablespoon salt and cook until just tender, about 2 minutes. Drain broccoli rabe and set aside. Combine remaining 1 tablespoon oil, garlic, and pepper flakes in now-empty pot and cook over medium heat until fragrant and sizzling, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in reserved broccoli rabe and cook until hot and well coated, about 2 minutes. Off heat, stir in beans, tomatoes, and farro mixture. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Adjust oven rack 10 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Transfer bean-farro mixture to broiler-safe 3-quart gratin dish (or broiler-safe 13 by 9-inch baking dish) and sprinkle with reserved panko mixture. Broil until lightly browned and hot, 1 to 2 minutes. Serve.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DANIEL J. VAN ACKERE

Chinese Stir-Fried Tomatoes and Eggs

This surprisingly complex comfort food deserves a place at everyone's table.

BY JOSEPH GITTER

As a fussy eater growing up in England, the one thing I'd never refuse was creamy scrambled eggs doused in ketchup. Stir-fried tomatoes and eggs, xīhóngshì chǎo jīdàn in Mandarin (faankeh chao dan in Cantonese), isn't so terribly far off from this concept, so I wasn't surprised to learn that this dish of pillowy curds enrobed in a chunky, savory-sweet tomato sauce is often the first thing that Chinese children learn how to make. It's also a dish that many Chinese American chefs, writers, and bloggers say they crave most when they want something soothing, homey, and satisfying. A typical version goes like this: Cook beaten eggs quickly in an oil-slicked wok until they're just set. Remove them from the wok and toss in aromatics such as ginger and garlic, along with chopped or sliced tomatoes. Cook until the tomatoes soften and release their juice. Return the eggs to the wok, stir everything together, and serve with plenty of steamed rice.

Sesame oil and Shaoxing wine add nutty savoriness to the eggs.

It's hard to find fault in something so simple and good. But since eggs can overcook in a flash, I wanted to nail down a foolproof process. I also wanted to boost the flavor just a bit and make sure that the tomatoes contributed saucy body rather than a flood of liquid.

Some recipes call for whisking savory Shaoxing wine and nutty sesame oil into the eggs, which I found not only added complexity but also diluted the egg proteins, making it more difficult for them to bond and form tight curds. Another bonus: The extra moisture from the wine meant more steam to puff the eggs. Adding salt to the raw eggs also kept them from turning tough and seasoned them more evenly.

Most recipes call for cooking the eggs over medium-high heat. Though it might seem counterintuitive to apply lots of heat to something you want to stay soft and moist, it's the best way to quickly produce steam before the eggs set. I followed suit, removing the eggs as soon as they were plump but still wet.

Next, I got to work on the tomato base. I grated a nub of ginger and sliced a few garlic cloves and some scallion whites for savory allium flavor, reserving the scallion greens to add later. Though fresh tomatoes are commonly used, I wanted a dish that would be reliably good year-round, so I opted for canned tomatoes. I chose whole peeled tomatoes so that I could control their size, cutting them into 1-inch pieces that would be large enough not to get lost in the eggs.

When I added the tomatoes and their juice to the pan, the mixture was too thin, so I followed the suggestions of a few recipes and tried stirring a cornstarch slurry into one batch and ketchup into another. The slurry gave the sauce a slick mouthfeel that I didn't love, and ketchup made the dish taste overly sweet. The best approach was to season the tomatoes with just enough sugar to enhance their flavor and cook them down until their juice thickened but the tomatoes themselves remained meaty and distinct.

Once the tomato juice had reduced, I returned the eggs to the pan, breaking them up with a spatula into pieces about the size of the tomato chunks. A handful of the reserved scallion greens, cut into 1-inch lengths, added bright color and fresh, grassy flavor.

I may not have grown up craving this dish, but it tasted so satisfyingly cohesive, savory, and complex that I'll be craving it from now on.

XĪHÓNGSHÌ CHǍO JĪDÀN (CHINESE STIR-FRIED TOMATOES AND EGGS)

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 25 MINUTES

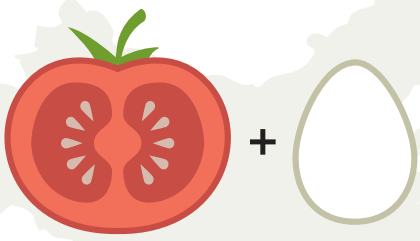
Serve the stir-fry with steamed white rice.

- 4 scallions, white parts sliced thin, green parts cut into 1-inch lengths
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil, divided
- 3 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
- 8 large eggs
- 2 tablespoons Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 teaspoon table salt, divided
- 1 (28-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained with juice reserved, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 teaspoons sugar

1. Combine scallion whites, 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, garlic, and ginger in small bowl; set aside. Whisk eggs, Shaoxing wine, sesame oil, and ½ teaspoon salt together in separate bowl.

2. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons vegetable oil in 12-inch nonstick or carbon-steel skillet or 14-inch wok over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add egg mixture. Using rubber spatula, slowly but constantly scrape along bottom and sides of pan until eggs just form cohesive mass, 1 to 2 minutes (eggs will not be completely dry); transfer to clean bowl.

3. Add reserved garlic mixture to now-empty pan and cook over medium heat, mashing mixture into pan, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add tomatoes and their juice, sugar, and remaining ½ teaspoon salt and simmer until almost completely dry, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in egg mixture and scallion greens and cook, breaking up any large curds, until heated through, about 1 minute. Serve.



How Tomato Met Egg in China

Tomatoes arrived in China around the late 16th century, but it took more than 300 years for Chinese cooks to view them as edible. In the early 20th century, foreign enclaves with Western restaurants sprang up in the newly established Republic of China, creating new demand for the fruit—known in the north as "western persimmon" (xīhóngshì in Mandarin) and in the south as "foreign eggplant" (faankeh in Cantonese). Cultivation increased, and tomatoes began appearing in Chinese dishes. Around the 1940s, the now-iconic pairing of stir-fried tomatoes and eggs was born.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Everyday Lentil Dal

This Indian staple is quick, easy, nourishing, inexpensive, and—most important—incredibly flavorful.

BY STEVE DUNN

Dal is the Hindi term for dried peas, beans, and legumes and—somewhat confusingly—also refers to the dishes made from them. Dal in some form is consumed daily in most Indian households. Not only is it a complete protein when paired with rice or bread, but unlike many dietary cornerstones, dal can be utterly packed with flavor.

But there's more: Dal comes together easily and quickly and it's nourishing, satisfying, and cheap. And one of the real joys of dal is that it can take a near-endless variety of forms, from celebratory dal makhani, rich with butter and cream, to workday dishes consisting of only lentils, onion, and spices.

I set my sights on palak dal from northern India, a simple dal finished with spinach ("palak" means "spinach" in Hindi) that would be a great weeknight main. Here's the usual routine: Start by simmering dal in water, sometimes with turmeric (some say for its vibrant color, while others claim it has health benefits) and/or asafetida, the dried resin scraped from the root of the Ferula assa-foetida plant, which is said to be a digestive aid. When the mixture is soft and creamy, stir in a few handfuls of fresh spinach.

Next comes the real genius: tadka, a seasoning technique central to Indian cuisine that takes mere minutes. Just bloom whole spices (and sometimes aromatics) in fat, and then use the highly fragrant, visually stunning mixture as a glistening garnish.

Indian cooks often use a pressure cooker to expedite dal's longer cooking time, but for mine I decided to go with red lentils, as they have their hulls removed and break down in just 20 minutes on the stovetop. I simmered the lentils and turmeric in a 1:3 ratio of lentils to water and opted to leave out the asafetida, which can be hard to track down (I approximated its allium-like flavor with garlic and onion in the tadka). A few turns of a whisk broke down the lentils even more and gave them a porridge-like consistency thick enough to spoon over rice. Finally, I wilted baby spinach in the dal and brightened it with fresh lemon juice.

We finish our dal with a tadka, a mixture of whole spices, chiles, garlic, ginger, onion, and curry leaves fried in ghee.

Tadka time. Vegetable oil and ghee are both often used here, and I decided to try the former first. I sizzled ingredients in stages in 1 tablespoon of oil: Whole cumin and brown mustard seeds went in first (mustard seeds are not typically added to the tadka for this dish, but I love their taste and texture), followed by chopped onion, sliced garlic, grated ginger, dried arbol chiles, and a fresh serrano chile to give the dish a bit of heat. When the onions were golden brown, I spooned the tadka onto the stewy lentils. The sweetness, spice, and moderate heat of the tadka gave the dish big personality, not to mention that it looked gorgeous atop the ocher lentils. What's more, the cumin and mustard seeds provided bits of crunch.

Curious About Curry Leaves?

Glossy green curry leaves have no relation to curry powder, though they're often added to curries. Instead, they're the leaves of the curry tree (Murraya koenigii), a member of the citrus family native to Southeast Asia. The fresh leaves, which are entirely edible, have a smoky, citrusy, savory aroma and flavor that has no substitute. Look for curry leaves in the herb section at Indian or Asian markets or some supermarkets that stock a wide selection of international ingredients. Fresh leaves can be frozen in a zipper-lock bag for up to one month.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

No Ghee? Browned Butter Works, Too

Ghee is traditionally made by simmering fermented cream (or fermented cream that has been turned into butter) until all its moisture has evaporated and its milk solids have browned, creating a variety of Maillard reactions and changing the composition of the fat. The solids are then strained out, leaving behind pure butterfat with a distinctive, nutty flavor. We were happy to find that quickly browning butter and discarding the browned milk solids left in the pan (which we don't typically do for browned butter) produced a sort of faux ghee with similar nuttiness. Here's how to make it: Melt 6 tablespoons butter in 10-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Continue to cook, swirling skillet and stirring constantly with rubber spatula, until butter is dark golden brown and has nutty aroma, 1 to 3 minutes longer. Slowly pour butter into small heatproof bowl, leaving as much of browned milk solids behind as possible. Using paper towel, wipe solids from skillet and discard.

My only complaints were that the dal tasted a little lean and the ginger was too prominent. To give the dish more richness, I switched the fat in the tadka from oil to ghee and bumped it up to 3 tablespoons. The ghee added welcome nutty sweetness and depth. Since not all cooks keep ghee on hand, I also came up with a sort of faux ghee made by quickly browning butter and discarding the browned milk solids (see "No Ghee? Browned Butter Works, Too").

I also moved the ginger from the tadka to the saucepan with the lentils—more cooking would soften its flavor. Finally, many cooks include fresh curry leaves in tadka. I loved their distinctively smoky, citrusy taste in contrast with the creamy, earthy lentils. Fragrant, complex, and comforting, this dish is now a regular on my table.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20**

PALAK DAL (SPINACH-LENTIL DAL WITH CUMIN AND MUSTARD SEEDS)

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

See "No Ghee? Browned Butter Works, Too" for instructions on making faux ghee. For less heat, remove the ribs and seeds of the serrano. Fresh curry leaves add a wonderful aroma to this dal, but if they're unavailable, you can omit them. Yellow mustard seeds can be substituted for brown. Monitor the spices and aromatics carefully during frying, reducing the heat if necessary to prevent scorching. Serve the dal with naan and basmati or another long-grain white rice.

- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) dried red lentils, picked over and rinsed
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- ¾ teaspoon ground turmeric
- 6 ounces (6 cups) baby spinach
- 1½ teaspoons table salt
- 3 tablespoons ghee
- 1½ teaspoons brown mustard seeds
- 1½ teaspoons cumin seeds
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 15 curry leaves, roughly torn (optional)
- 6 garlic cloves, sliced
- 4 whole dried arbol chiles
- 1 serrano chile, halved lengthwise
- 1½ teaspoons lemon juice, plus extra for seasoning
- ⅓ cup chopped fresh cilantro

1. Bring 4½ cups water, lentils, ginger, and turmeric to boil in large saucepan over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to maintain vigorous simmer. Cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until lentils are soft and starting to break down, 18 to 20 minutes.

2. Whisk lentils vigorously until coarsely pureed, about 30 seconds. Continue to cook until lentils have consistency of loose polenta or oatmeal, up to 5 minutes longer. Stir in spinach and salt and continue to cook until spinach is fully wilted, 30 to 60 seconds longer. Cover and set aside off heat.

3. Melt ghee in 10-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Add mustard seeds and cumin seeds and cook, stirring constantly, until seeds sizzle and pop, about 30 seconds. Add onion and cook, stirring frequently, until onion is just starting to brown, about 5 minutes. Add curry leaves (if using), garlic, arbols, and serrano and cook, stirring frequently, until onion and garlic are golden brown, 3 to 4 minutes.

4. Add lemon juice to lentils and stir to incorporate. (Dal should have consistency of loose polenta. If too thick, loosen with hot water, adding 1 tablespoon at a time.) Season with salt and extra lemon juice to taste. Transfer dal to serving bowl and spoon onion mixture on top. Sprinkle with cilantro and serve.

Transform Your Cooking with Tadka

Tadka (variously known as chhonk, bagar, phodni, vagarne, oggarane, and more, depending on the region) is a core technique in Indian cooking that involves blooming whole spices (and sometimes other ingredients) in fat to extract their aromas and fat-soluble flavors. The highly perfumed fat and its contents are either spooned onto a finished dish (which often incites a flourish of crackling and sizzling) or incorporated during cooking. The particular ingredients in tadka vary greatly depending on the food that is being seasoned as well as the cook's community, caste, and region, but classic combinations do exist. For instance, in Kerala, a mix of coconut, cinnamon stick, star anise, and clove is popular; Punjabis combine cardamom pods, cinnamon stick, clove, ginger, garlic, and onion; and Bengali cooks enjoy black mustard seed, cumin seed, nigella seed, and fenugreek seed. Regardless of the particular ingredients, the contributions of a tadka are many. –Kaumudi Marathé

- **RICHNESS:** Oil or ghee makes lean dishes more satisfying.
- **FLAVOR:** Whole (and sometimes ground) spices, fresh and dried chiles, curry leaves, ginger, garlic, and onions offer vivid flavor, heat, and depth.
- **AROMA:** As whole spices bloom in hot fat, they may darken in color, unfurl, pop, or puff. They will also release pungent aromas that will perfume your kitchen—and your food.
- **COLOR AND TEXTURE:** Whole spices contribute tremendous visual and textural character to even the simplest of dishes.

Cast Iron Pan Pizza

Allow us to reacquaint you with your favorite pie: thick, plush, crisp, and extra-cheesy. And novice bakers, take note: There's no rolling, stretching, or baking stone required.

BY LAN LAM

It wasn't long ago that pan pizzas were dowdy pies associated with chain restaurants, but I like to think that those of us who grew up savoring these thick-crusted pizzas always knew they had more potential. And now they're getting their due: Respected pizzaiolas are finally giving these pies the same attention they've always lavished on thinner, more austere styles, and Americans are (re)acquiring a taste for them. Even Pizza Hut wants a better slice: The iconic chain recently revamped its signature pan pizza for the first time in decades.

If you ask me, the appeal of pan pizza is obvious. The crumb is thick, plush, and encased in a golden, crispy crust. The red sauce is thick and has a bright taste. And there's plenty of gooey, stretchy cheese. My favorite versions include a rim of fused-to-the-crust fried cheese called frico, a bonus feature that's borrowed from Detroit-style pies. It's also the easiest, most home cook–friendly pie you can make. In my recipe, there's literally 1 minute of kneading and no rolling or stretching. And because it's baked in a pan, there's no dicey transfer of the topped dough to a hot baking stone. In fact, it doesn't require any pizza-specific equipment at all. Here's how it works.

In my recipe, there's literally 1 minute of kneading and no rolling or stretching.

The abundance of water in our almost no-knead dough (about 73 percent hydration) leads to a bubbly, airy, tender crumb.

A Crust with Contrast

What makes a good pan pizza crust so different from other styles is the distinct textural contrast between its crispy, golden, rich-tasting edge and its tender, plush, airy interior. One good way to achieve that soft, light interior structure is to make a high-hydration dough: The more water that's in the mix, the bigger the bubbles and the airier the crumb. I found that a ratio of 8 ounces of water to 11 ounces of bread flour (the best choice of flour for building structure in dough, since it contains more gluten-forming proteins than all-purpose flour) produced a dough that was supple but not soupy.

All that water came with a few other perks, too. First, it helped the dough come together really easily; all I had to do was mix it into the dry ingredients with a wooden spoon or spatula. Second, it allowed me to almost entirely skip kneading as long as I let the dough rest overnight in the refrigerator. When given enough time, water can facilitate gluten development by helping the proteins in the flour find each other, enabling them to align and form the cross-links necessary for good structure. Third, the long fermentation in the refrigerator produced a dough with great flavor, since the cold temperature slowed the remaining yeast activity and allowed for the development of more complex-tasting acid by-products. (I did, however, need to start with warm water so that there was an initial burst of yeast activity to create lots of bubbles in the dough.) The upshot: As long as I kneaded the dough for just 1 minute after mixing, the water and the overnight rest did the rest of the work for me.

On to that crisp, golden edge, which forms as the pie bakes—or more truthfully, fries—in a well-oiled pan. Some recipes call for baking the pie in a round cake pan, but I opted for a 12-inch cast-iron skillet. I slicked the pan with a generous 3 tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil before baking the pie on the lowest rack so that the crust was as close as possible to the heat source. Using a cast-iron skillet allowed me to move the baked pie from the hot oven to the stovetop for the last few minutes of cooking; that way, I was able to give the underside of the crust a direct blast of heat without overbaking the interior or the toppings. (I did find that a greased round cake pan or pie plate was ideal for preshaping the dough before it rested; by the time the rest was over, all I had to do was press the dough gently into the skillet—no rolling or stretching required.)

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20**

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

BUILD A CHEESE WALL

Frico—the lacy, crispy, browned cheese crust that forms where the cheese meets the side of the pan—adds extra-savory crunch to our pan pizza. To build a substantial "wall" of cheese that browned deeply, we used plenty of Monterey Jack (which was drier and thus better able to brown than mozzarella but not as dry and salty as Parmesan) and pressed it at least ½ inch up the side of the pan. (We deliberately refrained from saucing the dough all the way to the edge lest any sauce slip between the dough and the cheese and prevent the frico from bonding to the pizza crust.)

Cheese Two Ways

"It's all about the crust" is an old pizza adage, but with pan pies, it's about the cheese, too. There's the usual top layer of gooey, stretchy mozzarella that you find on most pizza, and on the best versions there's also the frico: the lacy, crispy rim of fried cheese that forms where the cheese meets the side of the pan.

Shredded mozzarella was great for the top of the pie, but I found it too wet for frico; not enough moisture evaporated by the time the cheese browned, so the result was tough and bendy, not crispy. I experimented with drier options and landed on Monterey Jack. Not as dry (nor as salty) as Parmesan and more neutral than cheddar, it crisped up into a rich, savory ring. The trick was applying the cheese just right: I sprinkled the shreds over the ½-inch border of dough I had deliberately left unsauced and pressed them up the side of the pan so that they formed a mini cheese "wall." By the time the pizza finished baking 30 minutes later, it had deeply browned, crispy frico.

Bright, Thick, No-Cook Sauce

To offset the richness of the oil-fried crust and the abundant cheese, pan pizza sauce should be bright and fresh-tasting but also thick enough to stay put. I started with canned whole tomatoes and crushed them by hand in a fine-mesh strainer so that most of their juice drained away. (This would produce a thicker mixture than using commercial crushed tomatoes.) Then I turned them into a no-cook sauce by pureeing them in a food processor with extra-virgin olive oil, minced garlic, dried oregano, a pinch of red pepper flakes, and some sugar and salt for balance. The sauce came together in a flash and was packed with flavor.

CAST IRON PAN PIZZA

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS, PLUS 14 HOURS RESTING

This pizza bakes in a 12-inch cast-iron skillet. Weigh the flour and water for the best results. Use a block cheese, not fresh mozzarella, for this recipe. Avoid preshredded cheese; it contains added starch, which gives the melted cheese a drier, chewier texture.

Dough

- 2 cups (11 ounces) bread flour
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 1 teaspoon instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1 cup (8 ounces) warm water (105 to 110 degrees)
- Vegetable oil spray

Sauce

- 1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¼ teaspoon sugar
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon dried oregano
- Pinch red pepper flakes

Pizza

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 ounces Monterey Jack cheese, shredded (1 cup)
- 7 ounces whole-milk mozzarella cheese, shredded (1¾ cups)

1. FOR THE DOUGH: Using wooden spoon or spatula, stir flour, salt, and yeast together in bowl. Add warm water and mix until most of flour is moistened. Using your hands, knead dough in bowl until dough forms sticky ball, about 1 minute. Spray 9-inch pie plate or cake pan with oil spray. Transfer dough to prepared plate and press into 7- to 8-inch disk. Spray top of dough with oil spray. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 12 to 24 hours.

2. FOR THE SAUCE: Place tomatoes in fine-mesh strainer and crush with your hands. Drain well, then transfer to food processor. Add oil, garlic, sugar, salt, oregano, and pepper flakes and process until smooth, about 30 seconds. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

3. FOR THE PIZZA: Two hours before baking, remove dough from refrigerator and let sit at room temperature for 30 minutes.

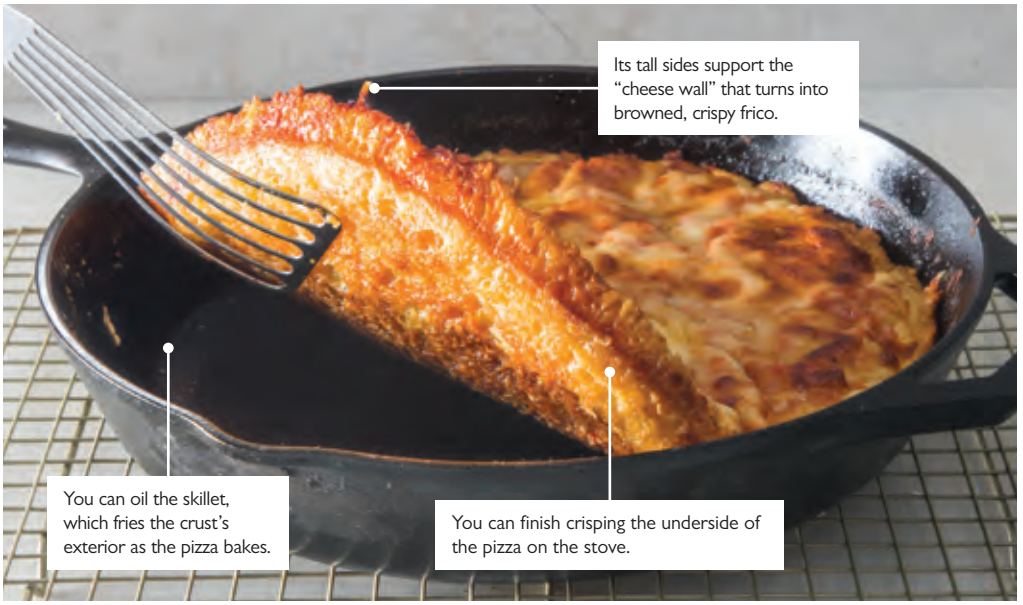
4. Coat bottom of 12-inch cast-iron skillet with oil. Transfer dough to prepared skillet and use your fingertips to flatten dough until it is ⅛ inch from edge of skillet. Cover tightly with plastic and let rest until slightly puffy, about 1½ hours.

5. Thirty minutes before baking, adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Spread ½ cup sauce evenly over top of dough, leaving ½-inch border (save remaining sauce for another use). Sprinkle Monterey Jack evenly over border. Press Monterey Jack into side of skillet, forming ½- to ¾-inch-tall wall. (Not all cheese will stick to side of skillet.) Evenly sprinkle mozzarella over sauce. Bake until cheese at edge of skillet is well browned, 25 to 30 minutes.

6. Transfer skillet to stovetop and let sit until sizzling stops, about 3 minutes. Run butter knife around rim of skillet to loosen pizza. Using thin metal spatula, gently lift edge of pizza and peek at underside to assess browning. Cook pizza over medium heat until bottom crust is well browned, 2 to 5 minutes (skillet handle will be hot). Using 2 spatulas, transfer pizza to wire rack and let cool for 10 minutes. Slice and serve.

The Perks of the Pan

A cast-iron skillet makes pizza easier, cheesier, and crispier than a baking stone ever could.



The Silkiest Risotto

Our formula for the sweetest, freshest corn flavor also turns out the most luxurious pot of risotto we've ever had.

BY ANNIE PETITO

I was deep into recipe development for corn risotto when I started to wonder if the dish might be fundamentally flawed. There were hurdles to saturating the creamy rice with corn flavor that also seemed integral to risotto cookery. First, heat drives off many of the compounds we associate with the vegetable's fresh, sweet taste. Second, chicken broth and wine obscure the flavor further. When I tried to overcome these challenges by adding handfuls of snappy peak-season kernels to the pot and infusing the rice with a concentrated broth I'd made by simmering the spent cobs, I failed to capture the vibrant, sweet corn flavor that is the raison d'être of the whole dish.

Happily, it all worked out in the end, and even better than I thought it would. Because along with figuring out how to make risotto that's suffused with the bright, grassy, buttery flavors of high-season corn, I discovered that corn itself—when treated just right—can transform your average pot of risotto into one that's exceptionally lush and velvety.

"All'onda," or "on the wave," is the term Italians use to describe the fluid consistency of properly cooked risotto.

Striking Gold

My framework was our unique risotto method, which produces rice as creamy as a conventional approach does but requires a fraction of the hands-on work. The key differences are that after sautéing the aromatics and Arborio rice and deglazing the pot with wine, we add almost all the cooking liquid (4 to 5 cups of warm chicken broth cut with water) up front and simmer the mixture in a covered pot for the better part of 20 minutes rather than gradually ladling the liquid into the rice while stirring constantly. Both methods cause the rice grains to slough off starch into the cooking liquid and form a viscous gel, giving risotto its trademark creaminess, but our method lets agitation from the simmering liquid do most of the work so that we need to stir the pot just twice during that first phase. Only during the last few minutes of cooking do we add a bit more liquid and stir constantly to enhance the risotto's thick, creamy body.

Replacing the chicken-y cooking liquid with homemade corn broth and stirring kernels into the rice were two of the most common—and unsuccessful—approaches I found in my research. But no matter how long I simmered the cobs in water for broth, the liquid tasted dilute because the bare cobs had almost nothing valuable left to offer. And while there was loads of bright corn flavor inside the kernels, it was confined to sporadic pops, not distributed throughout the dish.

So I took a more radical approach and buzzed the kernels (3 cups), along with the pulpy, flavor-packed "milk" I scraped from their cobs, in the blender, adding just enough water to engage the blades. The result was a sunny puree bursting with fresh corn flavor—an elixir of sorts that

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE

SCIENCE

Liquid Gold

Truly vibrant corn flavor is hard to capture in risotto. Kernels add only sporadic pops of sweetness, and broth made from boiled cobs tastes insipid.

So instead of merely accenting the rice with corn, we made it an integral part of the dish by stirring in a puree made from kernels and the "milk" that we scraped from the cobs. That liquid not only saturated every bite with corn flavor but also added naturally occurring starch from the corn, which, when heated, thickened to a sauce-like consistency that gave the risotto exceptionally silky body.

RAW PUREE
Thin and loose

COOKED PUREE
Viscous and glossy

I hoped would transform my workaday risotto into corn-saturated gold.

Before putting it to work, I strained the puree to remove the tough bits of skin, which left me with about 2 cups of gleaming liquid. Then I picked up with my risotto method, simmering the rice in a combination of the strained puree and water, the latter of which I swapped in for the chicken broth so that the vegetable's flavor would stand out as much as possible.

The sun-colored rice certainly looked awash in corn. And thanks to the natural cornstarch in the puree, which gelled and acted like a silky sauce, the risotto was exceptionally lush and glossy (for more information, see "Liquid Gold"). But after simmering for nearly 20 minutes, the puree had a flat and, well, cooked flavor.

That test turned out to be my crash course in corn flavor compounds: Many of these compounds develop only after some cooking; others, including the grassy, fresh-tasting ones that I was going for, are volatile and vanish when heated. If I wanted to preserve fresh corn flavor, I had to wait until the rice was nearly done before adding the puree. This change altered the whole dish, saturating the risotto with the corn's bright flavor.

Crème de la Crème

In a last-ditch effort to maximize the corn's presence, I circled back to adding kernels. A cup of them contributed just enough snap, sweetness, and color.

Then I took a closer look at the wine, which is almost as common in risotto as the rice itself but tasted harsh against the vegetable's delicate sweetness. It had to go, but I needed to add something in its place that would further brighten up the rice. The unconventional answer turned out to be crème fraîche, a source of much subtler acidity as well as fat and rich dairy flavor that complemented the corn and enhanced the risotto's already refined, luxurious consistency (see "The Dairy Godmother").

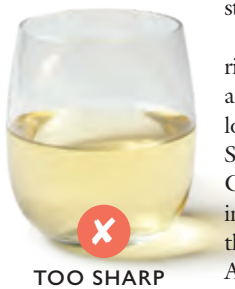
I stirred in a generous scoop before serving, along with grated Parmesan, chopped chives, and a splash of lemon juice just to tease out the cultured dairy's tang a bit more. The result was startlingly good—a next-level kind of risotto, distinct and flavorful enough to stand on its own but restrained enough to accompany almost anything. My inauspicious start was a distant memory, and this dish was shaping up to be the raison d'être of many summer dinners to come.

A TOUCH OF TANG
Crème fraîche

INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT

The Dairy Godmother

No pot of risotto is complete without a glug of wine to brighten up the starchy rice—or so we assumed. But in our Corn Risotto, the wine's sharp, acidic punch overwhelmed the vegetable's delicate sweetness, so we left it out and instead finished the dish with crème fraîche (plus a splash of lemon juice). The cultured dairy contributed some acidity but far less than the wine, and its dairy flavor complemented the corn. Plus, its fat enhanced the risotto's ultracreamy consistency.



TOO SHARP
White wine

CORN RISOTTO

SERVES 6 TO 8 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

Serve this risotto with a side salad as a light main course, or serve it as an accompaniment to seared scallops or shrimp or grilled meat. We recommend RiceSelect Arborio Rice, and our favorite Parmesan cheese is Boar's Head Parmigiano-Reggiano. If crème fraîche is unavailable, you can substitute sour cream. A large ear of corn should yield 1 cup of kernels, but if the ears you find are smaller, buy at least six.

- 4–6 ears corn, kernels cut from cobs (4 cups), divided, cobs reserved
- 5½ cups hot water, divided
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 shallot, minced
- 2 teaspoons table salt
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1½ cups Arborio rice
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup)
- ¼ cup crème fraîche
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives
- ½ teaspoon lemon juice

1. Stand 1 reserved corn cob on end on cutting board and firmly scrape downward with back of butter knife to remove any pulp remaining on cob. Repeat with remaining reserved cobs. Transfer pulp to blender. Add 3 cups corn kernels.

2. Process corn and pulp on low speed until thick puree forms, about 30 seconds. With blender running, add ½ cup hot water. Increase speed to high and continue to process until smooth, about 3 minutes longer. Pour puree into fine-mesh strainer set over large liquid measuring cup or bowl. Using back of ladle or rubber spatula, push puree through strainer, extracting as much liquid as possible (you should have about 2 cups corn liquid). Discard solids.

3. Melt butter in large Dutch oven over medium heat. Add shallot, salt, garlic, and pepper and cook, stirring frequently, until softened but not browned, about 1 minute. Add rice and thyme sprigs and cook, stirring frequently, until grains are translucent around edges, 2 to 3 minutes.

4. Stir in 4½ cups hot water. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer until liquid is slightly thickened and rice is just al dente, 16 to 19 minutes, stirring twice during cooking.

5. Add corn liquid and continue to cook, stirring gently and constantly, until risotto is creamy and thickened but not sticky, about 3 minutes longer (risotto will continue to thicken as it sits). Stir in Parmesan and remaining 1 cup corn kernels. Cover pot and let stand off heat for 5 minutes. Stir in crème fraîche, chives, and lemon juice. Discard thyme sprigs and season with salt and pepper to taste. Adjust consistency with remaining ½ cup hot water as needed. Serve immediately.

Congee

Soothing, simple to make, and endlessly versatile, China's iconic savory rice porridge should be part of your regular dinner—or breakfast—rotation.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Andrew personalizes his congee with a mix of traditional toppings and nontraditional ones, such as jammy eggs.

Congee—and every other version of rice porridge that's made across East and Southeast Asia—is one of the earliest and most enduring forms of culinary thrift. For centuries, maybe even millennia, Chinese cooks have stretched the grain by boiling it in plenty of water until it dissolves into something that hovers between starch and soup. Depending on the regional style, the rice might be simmered with pork bones or preserved greens until it's thick and glossy ("juk" in Cantonese) or cooked in plain water or light broth to a thinner consistency and served with a variety of savory accompaniments ("baizhou" in Mandarin). In either case, the milky-white gruel is Dickensian in the best possible way: plain sustenance that's economical and appealing at any time of day.

Accompaniments transform this dish into something so extraordinary that you might forget it comes from almost nothing.

That's particularly true at breakfast, when congee (a generic term for the dish borrowed from a Tamil word that describes grain-based soups) is consumed the way oatmeal is in Western diets. It's also classic fast food at lunch and popular late at night, when it's just the thing to tide over an empty stomach till morning. It's even served as baby food; as gentle, hydrating fare when you're sick; and as nourishment for the elderly.

Congee is also a dead-simple, forgiving thing to make; without much thought, you can improvise a version that's good enough. But the variety of rice, the type and amount of liquid, and the cooking time all affect its flavor and consistency, and the more I make congee (these days I make it often—when the ground frosts, when I have a cold, when I have fried shallots to use up), the more I want a precise formula I can repeat that's better than good enough.

I'm partial to both the creamy consistency of juk and the contrast between baizhou's clean, neutral base and assertive accompaniments. And since I found plenty of recipes that fall in between those distinct styles, I felt justified in making my own ideal hybrid: a thick but pourable porridge done up with an assortment of toppings that would make congee fun to cook and versatile to eat. With kitchen staples (soy sauce and fresh herbs), it would be a simple snack; with substantial proteins (runny eggs and stir-fried meats), it would be the ultimate kind of rice bowl.

The Golden Ratio

Congee can be made with any kind of rice, but long-grain varieties are common. I chose conventional long-grain but also liked fragrant jasmine for its subtle popcorn-like savoriness.

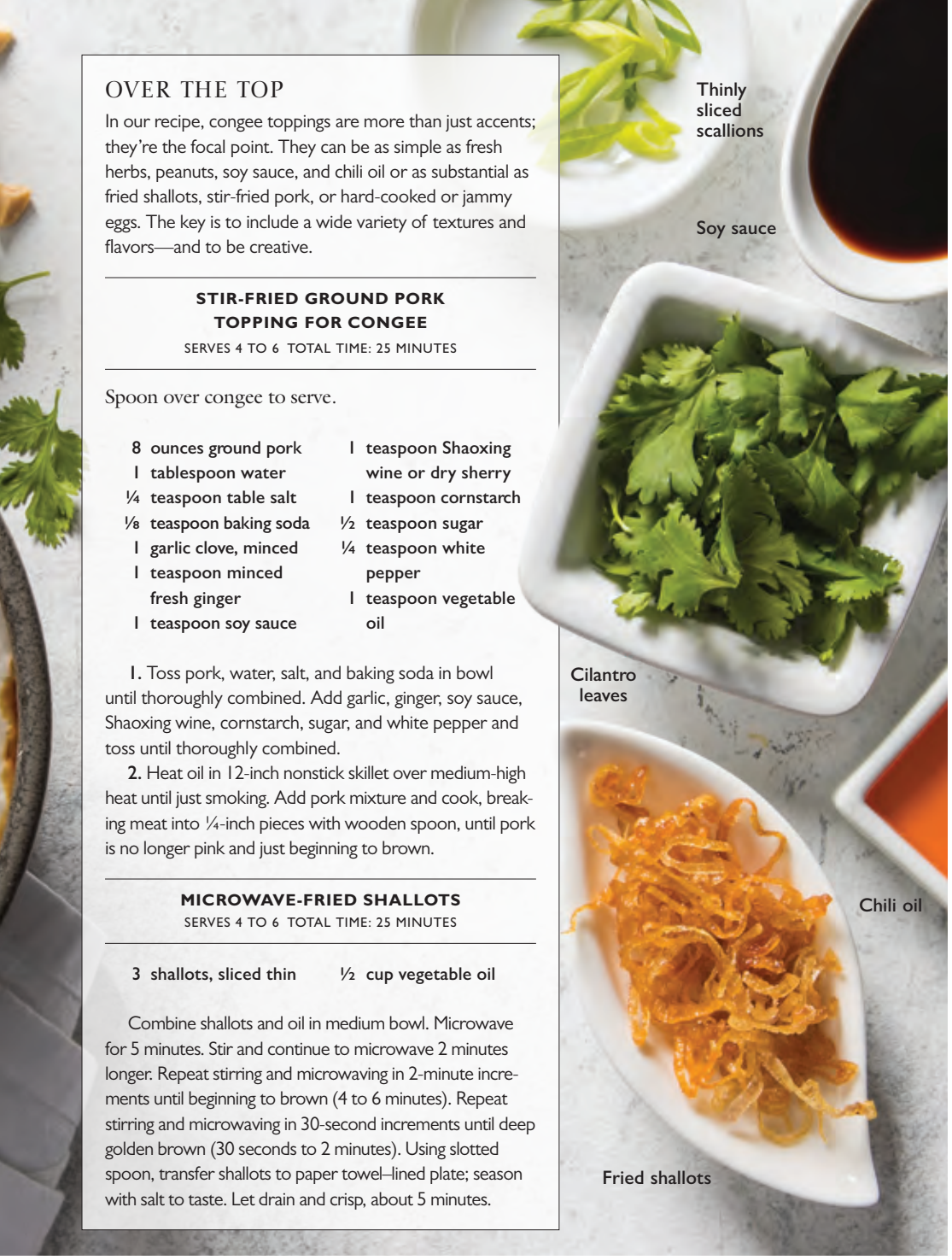
The question was how to nail that perfect porridge consistency—particularly the glossy liquid surrounding the rice grains—so I dug into the factors that affect it most: the ratio of water to rice and the cooking time.

According to recipes I found, ratios can vary from about 7 parts water to 1 part rice to more than double that. I tried a few, bringing 1 cup of rice and various amounts of water to a boil in identical Dutch ovens and gently simmering them uncovered for 1½ hours. It didn't take long to see that the results were better—thick and creamy yet fluid rather than stodgy—when there was more water in the mix. After a bit more tinkering, I settled on a ratio of 10 cups liquid to ¾ cup rice, slightly higher than 13 to 1.

I'd been seasoning the pot with ¾ teaspoon of salt, but at this point I also opted to cut the water with 1 cup of chicken broth, which added just enough savory backbone without obscuring the congee's clean, neutral flavor.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/APR20

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY



OVER THE TOP

In our recipe, congee toppings are more than just accents; they're the focal point. They can be as simple as fresh herbs, peanuts, soy sauce, and chili oil or as substantial as fried shallots, stir-fried pork, or hard-cooked or jammy eggs. The key is to include a wide variety of textures and flavors—and to be creative.

STIR-FRIED GROUND PORK TOPPING FOR CONGEE

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 25 MINUTES

Spoon over congee to serve.

- 8 ounces ground pork
- 1 tablespoon water
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- ⅛ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- ¼ teaspoon white pepper
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil

1. Toss pork, water, salt, and baking soda in bowl until thoroughly combined. Add garlic, ginger, soy sauce, Shaoxing wine, cornstarch, sugar, and white pepper and toss until thoroughly combined.

2. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add pork mixture and cook, breaking meat into ¼-inch pieces with wooden spoon, until pork is no longer pink and just beginning to brown.

MICROWAVE-FRIED SHALLOTS

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 25 MINUTES

- 3 shallots, sliced thin
- ½ cup vegetable oil

Combine shallots and oil in medium bowl. Microwave for 5 minutes. Stir and continue to microwave 2 minutes longer. Repeat stirring and microwaving in 2-minute increments until beginning to brown (4 to 6 minutes). Repeat stirring and microwaving in 30-second increments until deep golden brown (30 seconds to 2 minutes). Using slotted spoon, transfer shallots to paper towel–lined plate; season with salt to taste. Let drain and crisp, about 5 minutes.

Long Simmer for Good Body

Forty-five minutes might sound like a long time to cook white rice since the grains will be tender much sooner. But don't be tempted to shortcut the simmer: The liquid surrounding the grains should be viscous and glossy, which happens only once the rice has softened completely and released starch into the water.

15 MINUTES
Thin and loose

45 MINUTES
Viscous and silky

Shortcut the Simmer

If you've cooked much white rice, you know that it doesn't take more than 15 minutes or so for the grains to turn tender. But most congee recipes call for simmering the rice for a minimum of 45 minutes or as long as 1½ hours. This allows for the grains to thoroughly break down and release their starches into the cooking liquid. Only when that happens does the liquid thicken and take on that glossy, pearly sheen.

Using my newly calibrated liquid-to-rice ratio, I confirmed that 1½ hours of gentle but steady simmering produced the smoothest, creamiest congee. But could I expedite the process? I tried soaking the raw rice and even soaking and then freezing it before cooking (the latter causes the grains to burst and break down more quickly). Neither helped much. But what if I just cranked up the heat?

As it turned out, vigorously simmering the rice produced porridge every bit as creamy as the low-and-slow method did in about half the time. But I had to partially cover the pot to speed cooking and minimize evaporation, which caused the starchy liquid to boil over. (It's the same problem that causes a pot of oatmeal to erupt: The starches form a viscous gel that swells and blocks the water bubbles from escaping. Eventually, so many bubbles build up that the porridge spills over.) Fortunately, I could avoid the problem by rinsing the rice to remove any excess surface starch that would fuel the formation of starchy gel, and wedging a wooden spoon between the lid and the pot kept them well separated, giving the bubbles plenty of space to escape.

With my porridge formula clocking in at under an hour, I put together a few easy toppings (see "Over the Top"). But I always keep "project" accompaniments in mind, too; rich stir-fried or braised meats or condiments such as salty, funky pickles or fiery, deeply savory chili crisp (see our recipe on page 110) can transform this dish into something so extraordinary that you might forget it comes from almost nothing.

CONGEE (CHINESE RICE PORRIDGE)

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

For vegetarian congee, substitute water for the chicken broth. Jasmine rice can be substituted for conventional long-grain white rice; do not use basmati. We prefer the distinctive flavor of Chinese black vinegar here; look for it in Asian supermarkets. Congee provides a subtle savory background for flavorful toppings. Serve with Stir-Fried Ground Pork Topping for Congee and/or Microwave-Fried Shallots, if desired.

- ¾ cup long-grain white rice
- 1 cup chicken broth
- ¾ teaspoon table salt
- Scallions, sliced thin on bias
- Fresh cilantro leaves
- Dry-roasted peanuts, chopped coarse
- Chili oil
- Soy sauce
- Chinese black vinegar

1. Place rice in fine-mesh strainer and rinse under cold running water until water runs clear. Drain well and transfer to Dutch oven. Add broth, salt, and 9 cups water and bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to maintain vigorous simmer. Cover pot, tucking wooden spoon horizontally between pot and lid to hold lid ajar. Cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture is thickened, glossy, and reduced by half, 45 to 50 minutes.

2. Serve congee in bowls, passing scallions, cilantro, peanuts, oil, soy sauce, and vinegar separately.

Coconut Rice Two Ways

Every region that grows coconuts and rice marries them to make the grains rich and fragrant. Here are two of our favorite—and very different—versions.

BY ANDREA GEARY

The expression "What grows together goes together" is a cliché, but it's true: In temperate climates, strawberries go with rhubarb; where it's cold, preserved fish and rye bread are a dynamic duo; and near the equator, coconut gets cooked with rice.

But coconut rice varies from one tropical cuisine to another. The coconut component might be fresh or dried, or it might be canned milk or cream. Some versions are served plain or perhaps with a squeeze of lime; others are embellished with spices, alliums, chiles, tomatoes, meat, fish, or beans. But get this: Even the simple versions made with few ingredients can have surprisingly different flavors and textures. After cooking a handful of recipes from around the globe, I homed in on two styles that I loved for their ability to pair well with a range of dishes—and for the fact that, despite having nearly identical ingredients (rice, canned coconut milk, sugar, and salt), they were as different as could be.

A Thai Take

The first was coconut rice from Thailand: hung kao mun gati. This simple, elegant dish always seems to take my meal up a notch when I order it in restaurants. It turns out that it may have an illustrious provenance: Sources suggest that it can be traced to the Persians in the court of King Narai of Thailand (1632–1688), who enjoyed rice dishes prepared with liquids other than water, including coconut milk.

Happily, this Thai classic is just as easy to make as plain white rice: All you do is simmer jasmine rice in a mixture of coconut milk, water, sugar, and salt until the liquid is absorbed. The simple simmer leaves the grains rich-tasting and subtly sweet, with a tender, slightly clingy texture. Serve the rice as is or top with garnishes such as fried shallots and chopped peanuts.

One of the few variables I saw among recipes for the Thai version was the ratio of coconut milk to water used to cook the rice. While many incorporated a full 14-ounce can (plus water) for 1½ cups of rice, I found the rice too oily and perfumed. After some trial and error, I found my sweet spot: 1½ cups of rice cooked in 1 cup of coconut milk and 1½ cups of water. I also found that it was necessary to treat the rice as I would in any other application, rinsing it well to rid it of excess starch that would otherwise make the grains gummy and letting it stand for 10 minutes after cooking, which allowed the moisture to distribute evenly throughout. Unlike plain rice, a gentle stir was necessary before serving this version to blend in any coconut oil that had risen to the top.

Hung kao mun gati pairs as beautifully with traditional entrées such as stir-fries, curries, and satay as it does with everything from steamed vegetables to lean fish to rich grilled pork.

Now spin the globe; we're going to the Caribbean.

HUNG KAO MUN GATI (THAI COCONUT RICE)

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES

Our favorite coconut milk is from Aroy-D; do not use low-fat coconut milk in this recipe. Many brands of coconut milk separate during storage; be sure to stir yours until it's smooth before measuring it. We like the delicately clingy texture of jasmine rice here, but regular long-grain white rice can be substituted. Avoid basmati; the grains will remain too separate. The rice can be cooked in a rice cooker instead of on the stovetop. Chopped toasted peanuts, toasted sesame seeds, fried shallots, and pickled chiles are great toppings for this rice. Serve with stir-fries or grilled meat or fish.

- 1½ cups jasmine rice
- 1 cup canned coconut milk
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ¾ teaspoon table salt

1. Place rice in fine-mesh strainer set over bowl. Rinse under running water, swishing with your hands, until water runs clear. Drain thoroughly. Stir rice, 1½ cups water, coconut milk, sugar, and salt together in large saucepan. Bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to maintain bare simmer. Cover and cook until all liquid is absorbed, 18 to 20 minutes.

2. Remove saucepan from heat and let sit, covered, for 10 minutes. Mix rice gently but thoroughly with rubber spatula, transfer to bowl or platter, and serve.

Hung kao mun gati (left) is lovely on its own, but depending on what you're serving it with, try embellishing it with fried shallots, pickled chiles, toasted sesame seeds, and/or chopped peanuts. A squeeze of lime is all arroz con titoté (right) needs to sharpen its flavors.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/OCT20**

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Colombian-Style

Arroz con titoté, a tan-colored, brown-flecked coconut rice that is popular in beachside restaurants along the Caribbean coast of Colombia, is a knockout dish whose taste stunned me the first time I cooked it. Made with virtually the same ingredients as its Thai cousin, it featured a toasty aroma and rich nutty flavor that I barely recognized as coconut—a result of the unique treatment of the coconut milk.

Here's how it works: Pour a whole can of coconut milk into a saucepan and boil it until all the water is gone, leaving only coconut oil and tiny particles of coconut solids. Then keep cooking until those coconut solids darken to a rich, toasty brown. Add the rice and coat it well with the fat before stirring in water, brown sugar, salt, and raisins.

When I first made this dish, which is often served with whole grilled or fried fish and patacones (double-fried smashed plantains), I expected it to be heavy and sweet, but it was neither. Coating the rice grains with fat before adding the liquid was a classic pilaf strategy that ensured that the grains cooked up separate and not gluey (here again, rinsing the rice was also critical). And the browned coconut, which along with the rendered fat is known as titoté, imparted very little coconut heft and creaminess and more of a rich toasty depth instead (see "Coaxing Nutty Flavor from Coconut Milk"). The raisins heightened the dish's slight sweetness without making it seem at all dessert-y. A spritz of lime, the traditional garnish, snapped all the flavors into focus.

This is not to say my arroz con titoté was completely without problems. Some brands of coconut milk had a tendency to splatter dramatically during the reducing step, which was messy and hazardous until I thought to partially cover the saucepan. And some cans of the stuff simply refused to separate into fat and solids due to the presence of emulsifiers, so I had to be careful to buy one that listed only coconut and water on the label. I also had to learn to be patient while the milk reduced and to trust that the oil would eventually separate out. Then I had to allow the coconut solids to get good and dark before I added the rice to ensure that the dish had just the right nutty flavor.

With those issues sorted, I had another—quite different—coconut rice in my repertoire that also amply demonstrated how brilliantly these two ingredients work together.

ARROZ CON TITOTÉ (COLOMBIAN COCONUT RICE)

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

Our favorite coconut milk is from Aroy-D; do not use a product with additives or the milk won't cook properly. Do not use low-fat coconut milk here. The coconut solids may bond to the surface of your saucepan in step 2, but they will release as the rice cooks. Browning the coconut milk adds nutty depth, so the small amount of sugar and raisins does not make the dish taste particularly sweet. Serve with grilled or broiled fish or meat. Don't omit the lime wedges; they bring all the flavors into focus.

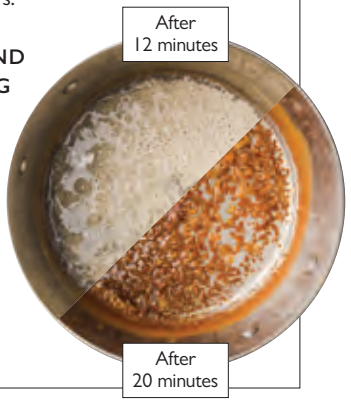
- 1 (14-ounce) can coconut milk
- 1½ cups long-grain white rice
- 2¼ cups water, divided
- ⅓ cup raisins
- 2 tablespoons packed dark brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- Lime wedges

COAXING NUTTY FLAVOR FROM COCONUT MILK

Coconut usually calls to mind an intensely fruity aroma and a creamy vanilla-like flavor. These distinctive characteristics come from volatile compounds in the fruit called lactones; lactones also contribute flavor to pineapples and peaches. Simmering coconut milk, as we do for Thai coconut rice as well as for many soups and braises, causes some of the lactones to dissipate, but enough remain to make these dishes recognizably coconutty. But you can bring a whole other dimension to coconut milk by changing the way you cook it. For Colombian arroz con titoté, you simmer the coconut milk until its water evaporates, the oil separates out, and the coconut solids brown in the oil. This process drives off the lactones and creates new compounds, transforming the milk's fresh coconut flavor into something that tastes richer, nuttier, and more buttery. In fact, some of these new compounds (pyrazines, pyrroles, and furans) belong to the same families of flavor compounds that give true nuts such as pecans or almonds their characteristic flavors.

BE PATIENT AND KEEP COOKING

Getting the water in the coconut milk to evaporate and the solids to brown can take 20 minutes or longer. But don't worry—it will get there eventually.



1. Pour coconut milk into large saucepan. Cover, leaving lid slightly ajar so steam can escape. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until coconut milk is reduced by about three-quarters and begins to sputter, 10 to 12 minutes. While coconut milk cooks, place rice in fine-mesh strainer set over bowl. Rinse under running water, swishing with your hands, until water runs clear. Drain thoroughly.

2. Reduce heat to medium. Uncover saucepan and cook, stirring frequently, until fat separates from coconut solids, about 2 minutes. Continue to cook, stirring frequently, until coconut solids turn deep brown (solids will stick to saucepan), about 3 minutes longer. Add rice and cook, stirring constantly, until grains are well coated with fat. Stir in ½ cup water (mixture may sputter) and scrape bottom and sides of saucepan with wooden spoon to loosen coconut solids. Stir in raisins, sugar, salt, and remaining 1¾ cups water. Bring mixture to boil. Adjust heat to maintain low simmer. Cover and cook until all liquid is absorbed, 18 to 20 minutes.

3. Remove saucepan from heat and let sit, covered, for 10 minutes. Mix rice gently but thoroughly and transfer to serving bowl. Serve with lime wedges.

Occasion-Worthy Rice

Pilaf makes a great side dish, but Uzbekistan's revered beef-and-carrot-studded plov can be the centerpiece of your table.

BY ANDREA GEARY

What do you eat when you're celebrating? Soup dumplings? Prime rib? A tower of cream puffs festooned with spun sugar? In Uzbekistan, the answer is rice pilaf, no question.

Known as plov (or osh), Uzbekistan's fragrant combination of savory spiced rice, tender meat, and velvety carrots studded with tangy, garnet-colored dried barberries is piled high on a platter and garnished with a head of spreadably soft garlic. The ultimate expression of generosity, community, and national identity, plov is prepared at every feast by a master of the art, known as an oshpaz, who cooks in a huge wok-shaped cauldron called a kazan and may serve hundreds of guests from a single batch.

Uzbekistani home cooks make plov, too, but on a smaller scale. The process starts with sautéing loads of onions and carrots in a large pot. Then some spices (cumin, coriander, and black pepper), salt, and barberries are tossed in. Chunks of beef or lamb are added and cooked for a bit before water is added to almost cover the meat. A head of garlic is plunked in the center, the pot is covered, and everything is cooked over moderate heat until the meat is almost tender. Then comes the rice.

Typically, cooks smooth the rice (a long-grain variety) into an even layer over the stew and then crank up the heat. The goal is to bring the flavorful liquid to a hard boil so that it is forced through the rice to flavor it without disturbing the dish's distinct layers. Cooks then lower the heat, cover the pot, and let the rice finish cooking.

And therein lies the challenge of plov: The meat must turn tender at the exact time the rice is cooked and the moisture has evaporated or been absorbed, leaving the pot neither scorched nor flooded.

Multiple tries left me with over- or undercooked beef (I used boneless short ribs), sodden or crunchy rice, and a crusted pot—not to mention mushy carrots and dull flavor. I'd have to find my own way.

Made with rice, spices, carrots, and just 1 pound of beef, plov is a savory—and economical—way to celebrate.

GARLIC MAKES IT PLOV
A whole head of garlic, simmered to buttery tenderness with the meat and then served proudly alongside the finished rice, distinguishes Uzbek plov from other Silk Road rice dishes. There's also a tablespoon of minced garlic in our recipe, but including the whole bulb allows diners who want even more garlic flavor to pluck a soft clove from the head and mix it into their portion.

Tweaking Tradition

My first changes were simple, starting with searing the beef. This created a rich fond that would flavor the rice, making the dish beefy from top to bottom. I did the searing in a saucepan, not a Dutch oven, knowing that the Dutch oven's broad surface would cause swifter evaporation, making it more difficult to cook the rice later. Then I transferred the meat to a plate and added the onions to the saucepan; their moisture handily loosened the fond from the bottom.

I followed with the carrots, but instead of cutting them into chunks and adding them all at once—which guarantees they'll turn pulpy—I grated the largest one and added it to the saucepan with minced garlic, cumin, and coriander. The grated carrot would meld into the dish over the course of cooking, distributing its sweetness throughout. I cut

Silk Road Rice

The Silk Road was a network of routes (sources differ on the exact path) used by traders to move goods between China and the West. The fact that so many cuisines along the Silk Road prominently feature rice dishes with similar names demonstrates that food traditions traveled along these ancient paths as well.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Carrots Two Ways

Carrots are as important to plov as the meat (the ratio of carrot to beef is almost 1:1). To give them even more prominence in our pilaf, we use them in two ways. First, we grate the largest carrot and add it with the aromatics so that its earthy sweetness flavors the dish. Then we cut the others into chunky batons that we add in the last phase of cooking so that they retain their shape and add pops of color.

the remainder into batons that I would add later, so they'd retain their shape.

I stirred in half the barberries with the aromatics and spices and reserved the rest for scattering over the finished dish. Then I returned the seared beef to the saucepan along with enough water to submerge it halfway, placed a head of garlic in the center (see "Garlic Makes It Plov"), covered the saucepan, and let everything simmer on the stovetop. A little over an hour later, I fished out the meat (to prevent it from overcooking) and the head of garlic, setting them aside while I added the carrot batons and rice, which I spread evenly over the top.

Per tradition, I turned up the heat to infuse the rice with meaty, savory goodness and then turned it down and covered the saucepan. While the rice cooked, I cut the short ribs into cubes and then folded them back into the mixture when the rice was about half cooked.

My plov was a success: The grated carrot had flavored the dish and then melded into the mixture, while the chunkier pieces were tender but intact. The minced garlic and barberries had depth and zing, and the meat and rice were perfectly cooked.

But here's a nugget of test kitchen insight: A recipe that works once doesn't necessarily work consistently. I couldn't reliably repeat my success. Sometimes the moisture evaporated too soon, leaving the rice hard and the saucepan scorched, and adding more water often made the pilaf soggy.

Under Control

The funny thing about rice is that though it has a reputation for being finicky, it's actually predictable in that it always absorbs water in a 1:1 ratio by volume. What is finicky is how much water evaporates during cooking, since that can vary depending on the heat level, the diameter of your saucepan, and how tightly its lid fits. It seemed to me that the key to solving the plov challenge was controlling evaporation.

So I made three more changes. First, instead of cranking the heat to push the flavorful liquid up through the rice, I stirred the rice and carrots into the stew and gently simmered the rice so that it would cook more slowly and evenly. Second, I crimped a piece of foil over the saucepan before adding the lid to ensure a tight seal. Last, I moved the braising step to the oven; its steady, even heat would be the best defense against erratic evaporation (and the fact that the plov could cook unattended was a happy bonus).

These changes enabled me to turn out batch after batch of perfect plov. I piled the last batch on a platter, sprinkled it with the reserved barberries, and finished it with sliced scallions. Finally, I added the garlic head that marked it as Uzbekistan's favorite feast food. I was in the mood to celebrate.

BEEFING UP PLOV

Plov isn't a meat-heavy dish, but a good version should boast loads of savory, meaty depth. We captured that by using superbeefy boneless short ribs—just 1 pound in a dish that serves four—and searing them to build a rich fond that became the savory foundation of our pilaf.

PLOV (RICE PILAF WITH BEEF AND CARROTS)

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 2¼ HOURS

Grate the largest carrot on the large holes of a box grater. You can substitute 1¼ pounds of blade steak, about 1 inch thick, for the boneless short ribs; halve the steak along the central line of connective tissue, and then remove the tissue. Don't substitute bone-in short ribs. If barberries are unavailable, combine 2 tablespoons of dried currants and 1 tablespoon of lemon juice in a small bowl. Microwave, covered, until very steamy, about 1 minute. Add the currants (and any residual lemon juice) to the plov as directed. Diners can mix individual cloves of the cooked garlic into their pilaf.

- 5 carrots, peeled
- 1 pound boneless beef short ribs, trimmed
- 1½ teaspoons table salt, divided
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 onions, quartered through root end and sliced ¼ inch thick
- 2 tablespoons dried barberries, divided
- 3 garlic cloves, minced, plus 1 head garlic, outer papery skin removed and top ½ inch cut off
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons ground coriander
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1¾ cups water
- 1 cup basmati rice, rinsed and drained
- 2 scallions, sliced thin

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grate largest carrot. Cut remaining 4 carrots into 2 by ½-inch pieces.

2. Pat beef dry with paper towels and sprinkle all over with ½ teaspoon salt. Heat oil in large saucepan over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add beef and cook until well browned on all sides, 10 to 12 minutes. Using tongs, transfer beef to bowl.

3. Add onions and remaining 1 teaspoon salt to saucepan. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally and scraping up any browned bits, until onions are soft, about 5 minutes. Add grated carrot, 1 tablespoon barberries, minced garlic, cumin, coriander, and pepper and cook, stirring constantly, until garlic and spices are fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes. Spread mixture into even layer. Return beef to saucepan, nestling it into vegetables. Add water and any accumulated beef juices. Place garlic head in center of saucepan. Increase heat to high and bring mixture to vigorous simmer. Remove saucepan from heat; place large sheet of aluminum foil over saucepan, crimp tightly to seal, and cover tightly with lid. Transfer saucepan to oven and cook until meat is fork tender, 1¼ to 1½ hours.

4. Transfer beef and garlic head to cutting board. Stir rice and remaining carrots into cooking liquid (saucepan handle will be hot). Bring to simmer over medium heat. Adjust heat to maintain simmer; replace foil, cover, and cook until liquid level has dropped below rice and rice is half cooked, about 10 minutes. While rice cooks, cut beef into ½-inch cubes. Gently fold beef into rice mixture, making sure to incorporate rice on bottom of saucepan. Replace foil, cover, and continue to cook until rice is tender and moisture is fully absorbed, 10 to 15 minutes longer. (Check rice every 5 minutes by sliding butter knife to bottom of center of saucepan and gently pushing rice aside; if bottom appears to be drying out, reduce heat slightly.)

5. Pile pilaf on platter. Sprinkle with scallions and remaining 1 tablespoon barberries. Garnish with garlic head and serve.

FOIL MAKES IT FAIL-SAFE

The rice in plov is cooked via the absorption method, which means there is just enough liquid in the pot to hydrate and gel the rice's starch. But a lid that doesn't provide a perfect seal can allow too much liquid to escape, leaving some of the grains dry and hard. Crimping a sheet of aluminum foil over the pot before topping it with the lid ensures that every bit of the flavorful cooking liquid is retained and absorbed into the rice.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20**

Angel Hair Done Right

For perfectly al dente strands, throw out the rule book on pasta cookery.

BY STEVE DUNN

Angel hair might just be the least popular pasta variety out there. I get it: With an average diameter of less than 1 millimeter, angel hair pasta is so delicate that treating it like standard-issue noodles guarantees a disappointing tangle of mush. It was only when I ignored all conventional wisdom about pasta cookery that I was able to produce results that I could get truly excited about. Here's what you need to know.

Don't Test for Doneness

Superfine angel hair goes from pleasantly tender to hopelessly overcooked in a heartbeat. That means that in the few seconds required to taste-test a strand, the rest of the pot could overcook. And I don't recommend following the cooking time on the box, as it's generally too long. Instead, I eliminated any guesswork by determining exactly how long to boil three top-selling brands.

Don't Finish in the Sauce

Unlike other pasta shapes that benefit from a few final minutes of simmering in sauce, angel hair is too fragile to withstand more exposure to heat once it is drained. I found that it's best to toss angel hair with light, no-cook sauces. (This also means that dinner comes together in the time it takes to boil the water.)

Our foolproof approach results in al dente angel hair lightly coated by a flavorful sauce.

Add Lots of Pasta Cooking Water

Ultrafine angel hair contains more strands per ounce than thicker cuts such as spaghetti and fettuccine and therefore has more surface area with the capacity to absorb a great deal of liquid. To achieve an ideal consistency, it is necessary to incorporate a generous amount of pasta cooking water into the sauce—up to 1½ cups, depending on the recipe.

Make Pesto (Sort Of)

It's important to start the sauce with a concentrated mixture that won't be overly diluted by the cooking water. I make a pesto-like sauce but reserve the cheese for sprinkling while serving since it thickens the sauce and makes it hard to toss with the delicate strands.

No Time to Taste-Test

Because angel hair is so fine, it can overcook even in the few seconds it takes to sample a strand for doneness. Instead, follow our recommended cooking times below.

DE CECCO
1½ minutes

BARILLA
3 minutes

PRINCE
3 minutes

ANGEL HAIR PASTA WITH BASIL, CAPER, AND LEMON SAUCE

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 30 MINUTES

Do not follow the cooking time on the pasta box. Boil De Cecco angel hair for 1½ minutes and Barilla and Prince for 3 minutes. Use straight pasta; angel hair curled into nests tends to tangle in the pot. Our recipes for Angel Hair Pasta with Kalamata Olive and Basil Sauce and Angel Hair Pasta with Sun-Dried Tomato and Mint Sauce are available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/jun20.

- 1 tablespoon plus ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- ½ cup panko bread crumbs
- 1 cup fresh basil leaves
- 1 cup fresh parsley leaves
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed
- 4 anchovy fillets, rinsed
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest plus 2 tablespoons juice
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- ½ teaspoon table salt, plus salt for cooking pasta
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 12 ounces angel hair pasta
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup)

1. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 8-inch skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add panko and cook, stirring frequently, until golden brown, about 4 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to plate and let cool.

2. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot.

3. Process basil, parsley, capers, anchovies, lemon zest and juice, garlic, mustard, salt, pepper, and remaining ½ cup oil in food processor until smooth, about 1 minute, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Transfer to large heatproof bowl.

4. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt to boiling water and cook, stirring occasionally, until al dente. Reserve 1 cup cooking water, then drain pasta. While pasta drains, whisk ½ cup reserved cooking water into sauce. Add pasta to sauce and toss gently with tongs, adjusting consistency with remaining reserved cooking water as needed. Sprinkle with panko mixture. Serve, passing Parmesan separately.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

The Fastest Fresh Tomato Sauce

Your best bet for pasta sauce on the fly? The small but mighty cherry tomato.

BY STEVE DUNN

Savory-sweet, juicy cherry tomatoes are typically enjoyed as a snack or in salads. But they have another application that may surprise you: They're the perfect choice for a quick fresh tomato sauce. You can toss these little fruits directly into the pan without any prep, and they don't need lengthy cooking to concentrate their flavor or thicken into a sauce. That's because they're more flavorful than the bigger varieties conventionally used for sauce and have more sugar in their flesh and more savory glutamates in their gel. They're also full of soluble pectin that readily forms a pasta-coating consistency.

To make my own version of the sauce, I sautéed 2 pounds of tomatoes (enough for 12 ounces of pasta) in olive oil in a skillet with slivered garlic. In just 10 minutes, the tomatoes had melted into a lush, silky mixture that tasted remarkably complex. There was just one issue: I didn't want all the cherry tomatoes to burst and disappear into the sauce. Part of the fun of eating these diminutive spheres is how they pop in your mouth, releasing a flood of juices. To ensure that some of the tomatoes stayed whole, I tried adding them in stages, but the delayed additions never softened enough and tasted raw. Smashing some of the fruits early to force them to release their juices left too many annoying, undercooked skins.

Then the solution occurred to me: Instead of sautéing the tomatoes in a skillet, I would move them to a saucepan. Thanks to this pan's smaller circumference, only some of the tomatoes would be in direct contact with the pan bottom, while others would rest on top, protected from the heat. Covering the saucepan allowed this upper layer to cook gently in the steam of the released juices, remaining plump and ready to pop.

With my cooking method nailed down, I did a quick test, subbing grape tomatoes for cherry. I was a little surprised to find that these didn't work nearly as well, producing a sauce that was thin and dry. Turns out grape tomatoes aren't as juicy as cherry tomatoes, and their pectin takes longer to cook down and dissolve.

All that was left was to tweak the sauce's flavor, which didn't need much: Anchovies added depth while salt, a touch of red pepper flakes, and sugar brought everything into balance. I also tossed a couple of pats of butter into the cooked pasta when I combined it with the sauce, which gave the whole thing a light, creamy richness that still allowed the fresh tomato flavor to shine. Fresh basil and a gremolata-inspired topping transformed this dish into something elegant and special.

PASTA WITH BURST CHERRY TOMATO SAUCE AND FRIED CAPER CRUMBS

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 50 MINUTES

Be sure to use cherry tomatoes; grape tomatoes won't break down as much and will produce a drier sauce. Our topping contributes crunch and depth, but you can substitute 1 cup (2 ounces) of grated Parmesan cheese, if desired. For a spicier dish, use the larger amount of red pepper flakes.

Topping

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup capers, rinsed and patted dry
- 1 anchovy fillet, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- ½ cup panko bread crumbs
- ⅛ teaspoon table salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ cup minced fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest

Pasta

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 2 anchovy fillets, rinsed and patted dry
- 2 pounds cherry tomatoes
- 1½ teaspoons table salt, plus salt for cooking pasta
- ¼ teaspoon sugar
- ⅛–¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 12 ounces penne rigate, orecchiette, campanelle, or other short pasta
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 2 pieces and chilled
- 1 cup fresh basil leaves, torn if large

1. FOR THE TOPPING: Heat oil in 10-inch skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add capers and anchovy and cook, stirring frequently, until capers have darkened and shrunk, 3 to 4 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer caper mixture to paper towel–lined plate; set aside. Leave oil in skillet and return skillet to medium heat. Add panko, salt, and pepper to skillet and cook, stirring constantly, until panko is golden brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer panko to medium bowl. Stir in parsley, lemon zest, and reserved caper mixture.

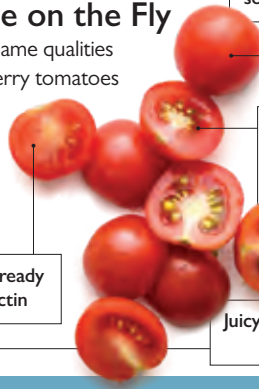
2. FOR THE PASTA: Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. While water is coming to boil, heat oil, garlic, and anchovies in large saucepan over medium heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until anchovies break down and garlic is lightly browned, 4 to 5 minutes. Add tomatoes, salt, sugar, and pepper flakes to saucepan and stir to combine. Cover and increase heat to medium-high. Cook, without stirring, for 10 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt to boiling water. Cook, stirring often, until al dente. Reserve ½ cup cooking water, then drain pasta and return it to pot. Off heat, add butter and tomato mixture to pasta and stir gently until oil, butter, and tomato juices combine to form light sauce, about 15 seconds. Adjust consistency with reserved cooking water as needed, adding 2 tablespoons at a time. Stir in basil and season with salt to taste. Serve, passing topping separately.

A sprinkling of basil and a crispy, lemony gremolata-inspired topping make this dish company worthy.

Botanically Engineered for Sauce on the Fly

Many of the same qualities that make cherry tomatoes so enjoyable to eat raw make them perfect for a quick sauce.



FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Dan Dan Mian

Awash in palate-jolting chili sauce and heaped with crispy bits of pork, these noodles are soul-warming street food in Sichuan. They can—and should—be in your kitchen, too.

BY LAN LAM

If you love noodles and Sichuan food, you're probably well versed in dan dan mian and all its chewy, spicy, electric glory. The dish, named for the pole that vendors use to tote ingredients, is iconic street food within the province, where diners savor even the act of mixing together their own portion—a custom known as "ban." The ritual starts with four color-blocked elements neatly composed in a bowl: a pool of vivid red chili sauce, a mound of ivory wheat noodles, crispy browned bits of seasoned ground pork, and lengths of jade-green baby bok choy. Then, with the nudge of your chopsticks, all that color, heat, and savory tang washes over the noodles—and then your palate. Just as the numbing sensation and richness builds and nearly overwhelms your tastebuds, a juicy, cooling piece of bok choy swoops in and resets your system for the next bite. If there's a more dynamic noodle-eating experience out there, I don't know it.

And yet, I'd rarely made dan dan mian until recently. The hang-up wasn't about the cooking; even though there are four components, each one is fast and simple to prepare. It was about sourcing the handful of very particular ingredients that make dan dan mian so complex. Without a robust Sichuan pantry, I was missing many of them—and my impression had always been that this is not a dish where I could just hack it with substitutions and expect to get it right.

But when I ran a diagnostic breakdown of the dish, sussing out where I could and couldn't compromise, I learned that my assumption was only partially true. Yes, there were a few must-haves to seek out, but there was also a good bit of ingredient flexibility that helped bring dan dan mian within my grasp. Zeroing in so deeply also prompted me to polish up a few steps along the way so that the flavors and textures of the dish really popped. Now I knock out a version whenever I want, and you should, too. Because the only thing more satisfying than tucking into a bowl yourself will be hearing your friends and family clamor for seconds.

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE

[LONG, SPRINGY NOODLES]

The noodles should soak up the sauce, capture the crumbly bits of pork, and deliver springy chew. Fresh, thin, egg-free Chinese wheat noodles are the standard for dan dan mian, but fresh lo mein and ramen check all those boxes, too. Even dried lo mein works, as long as you use half as much. Whichever kind you use, be sure to give the noodles a thorough rinse after cooking them to remove their sticky surface starch. Otherwise, they'll fuse into a doughy mass.

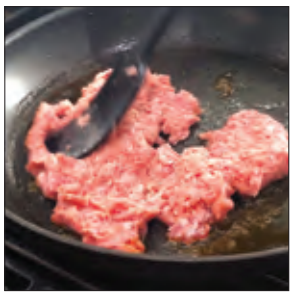
[SPICY, DEEPLY FRAGRANT CHILI SAUCE]

Sichuan chili oil is the base of the sauce that reddens, lubricates, and lights up the noodles with má ("numbing") là ("spicy") flavor. Making your own usually involves heating spices and sometimes aromatics in neutral oil and letting the mixture sit for several days to draw out maximum flavor. But I found that you can make a good version by gently heating Sichuan chili powder (you can substitute Korean gochugaru, which is a tad milder), ground Sichuan peppercorns (their numbing sensation is critical here), and cinnamon in oil for just 10 minutes.

Turning that oil into a deeply savory sauce is simply a matter of whisking in a handful of bottled condiments and pastes. Soy sauce is the easy one, and balsamic vinegar can mimic the fruity tang of Chinese black vinegar. Traditionally, it's a combination of Chinese sweet wheat and sesame pastes that adds earthy, faintly sweet depth and thickens the mixture, but hoisin and tahini make admirable stand-ins. Don't worry if the oil separates and pools as the sauce sits; it's normal—and quite pretty.

[CRISPY, SAVORY PORK TOPPING]

Tender, juicy meat is not the goal here. What you want is a crispy, umami-rich seasoning that clings to the noodles. To get the meat really fine-textured and brown, I smear the ground pork into a thin layer across the wok with a rubber spatula, jab at it with the spatula's edge to break it up into bits, and sear it hard—really hard. The end result is fine bits of pork with browned and crispy edges.



Then I stir in minced garlic and grated ginger, followed by a big scoop of the Sichuan pickle called ya cai. Made by fermenting the stalks of a Chinese mustard plant, it adds tangy, complex, subtly spicy funk. There's nothing quite like it (even in Sichuan, where fermented foods are a particular speciality), and since it's shelf-stable, you may as well stock up on it for future dan dan mian.

[PLUMP, JUICY BOK CHOY]

Blanching baby bok choy brightens its color and slightly softens its texture, but that softening does more than tenderize. It frees water from the cell walls, giving the vegetable its juicy, palate-cleansing effect. To create bite-size pieces that soften at the same rate, I trim the base of each bulb, which causes the larger outer leaves to separate, and then halve the bulb lengthwise. The pieces need only a minute-long dunk in the water before they're crisp-tender (save the water to boil the noodles!), and there's no need to fuss with shocking in an ice bath, since they will cool quickly once transferred to a plate.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

DAN DAN MIAN (SICHUAN NOODLES WITH CHILI SAUCE AND PORK)

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

If you can't find Sichuan chili powder, substitute gochugaru (Korean red pepper flakes). Sichuan peppercorns provide a tingly, numbing sensation that's important to this dish; find them in the spice aisle at Asian markets. We prefer the chewy texture of fresh, eggless Chinese wheat noodles here. If they aren't available, substitute fresh lo mein or ramen noodles or 8 ounces of dried lo mein noodles. Ya cai, Sichuan preserved mustard greens, gives these noodles a savory and pungent boost; you can buy it online or at an Asian market. If ya cai is unavailable, omit it and increase the soy sauce in step 2 to 2 teaspoons. This dish can be served warm or at room temperature. Our recipe for Dan Dan Mian (Sichuan Noodles with Chili Sauce and Pork) for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/oct20.

Sauce

- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon Sichuan chili powder
- 2 teaspoons Sichuan peppercorns, ground fine
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons Chinese black vinegar or balsamic vinegar
- 2 teaspoons sweet wheat paste or hoisin sauce
- 1½ teaspoons Chinese sesame paste or tahini

Noodles

- 8 ounces ground pork
- 2 teaspoons Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- 1 teaspoon soy sauce
- 2 small heads baby bok choy (about 3 ounces each)
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, divided
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
- 1 pound fresh Chinese wheat noodles
- ⅓ cup ya cai
- 2 scallions, sliced thin on bias

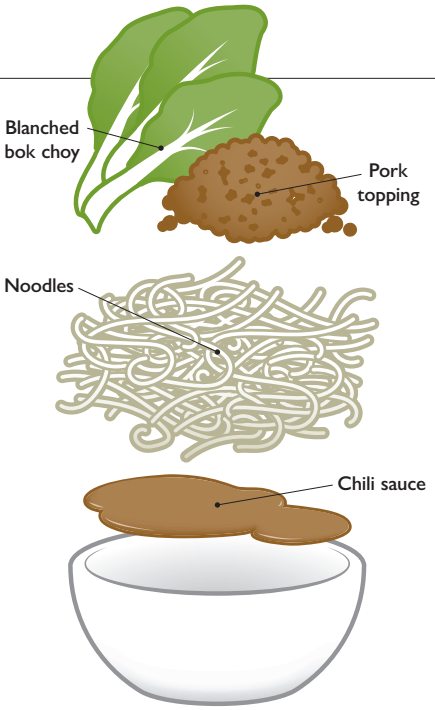
1. FOR THE SAUCE: Heat oil, chili powder, peppercorns, and cinnamon in 14-inch wok or 12-inch nonstick skillet over low heat for 10 minutes. Using rubber spatula, transfer oil mixture to bowl (do not wash wok). Whisk soy sauce, vinegar, wheat paste, and sesame paste into oil mixture. Divide evenly among 4 shallow bowls.

2. FOR THE NOODLES: Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. While water comes to boil, combine pork, Shaoxing wine, and soy sauce in medium bowl and toss with your hands until well combined. Set aside. Working with 1 head bok choy at a time, trim base (larger leaves will fall off) and halve lengthwise through core. Rinse well.

3. Heat 2 teaspoons oil in now-empty wok over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add reserved pork mixture and use rubber spatula to smear into thin layer across surface of wok. Break up meat into ¼-inch chunks with edge of spatula and cook, stirring frequently, until pork is firm and well browned, about 5 minutes. Push pork mixture to far side of wok and add garlic, ginger, and remaining 1 teaspoon oil to cleared space. Cook, stirring constantly, until garlic mixture begins to brown, about 1 minute. Stir to combine pork mixture with garlic mixture. Remove wok from heat.

4. Add bok choy to boiling water and cook until leaves are vibrant green and stems are crisp-tender, about 1 minute. Using slotted spoon or spider skimmer, transfer boy choy to plate; set aside. Add noodles to boiling water and cook, stirring often, until almost tender (center should still be firm with slightly opaque dot). Drain noodles. Rinse under hot running water, tossing with tongs, for 1 minute. Drain well.

5. Divide noodles evenly among prepared bowls. Return wok with pork to medium heat. Add ya cai and cook, stirring frequently, until warmed through, about 2 minutes. Spoon equal amounts of pork topping over noodles. Divide bok choy evenly among bowls, shaking to remove excess moisture as you portion. Top with scallions and serve, leaving each diner to stir components together before eating.



TECHNIQUE | BUILD THE BOWL

Proper dan dan mian starts with carefully composing the four elements (chili sauce, noodles, pork topping, and blanched bok choy) in the bowl. Doing so allows diners to enjoy the visual contrast of each plated portion as well as the act of tossing everything together—a Sichuan custom known as "ban." Above is a breakdown of how to layer everything in the bowl.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/OCT20

No-Fear Artichokes

Don't let yourself be intimidated by a vegetable. Whole artichokes are easy to prep and cook, impressive to serve, and fun to eat.

BY ANDREA GEARY

If I serve you a whole artichoke—armored, pointy, and downright hostile-looking—it means I like you. Surprised? Consider this: Eating an artichoke involves removing its many leaves one by one, dipping each leaf in something delicious, and then scraping off the tender flesh with your teeth. The journey to the dense, nutty heart is by necessity a leisurely one. So when I present you with a whole artichoke, I'm saying, "You're someone I want to spend time with."

But a lot of people are daunted by the idea of preparing and serving artichokes. Forbidding appearance aside, there's conflicting advice about the best way to trim and cook artichokes; since they can be pricey outside their growing region, just winging it seems reckless. And eating them requires artichoke-specific techniques that aren't exactly intuitive.

Still, it's worth overcoming these obstacles, because the edible parts of an artichoke have a uniquely rich, almost creamy texture and an appealing flavor that's a little like asparagus, but with added intrigue. A well-cooked artichoke needs little embellishment beyond melted butter.

Until recently I'd never cooked artichokes the same way twice, and my attempts had yielded mixed results. So I was eager to embark upon a mission: I'd demystify the whole globe artichoke—the preparation, the cooking, and the eating—once and for all, thus providing more cooks with a fabulous excuse to hang out with people they like.

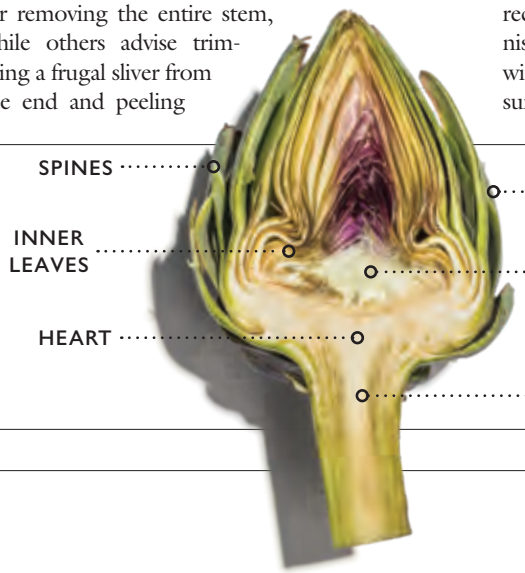
An artichoke is perfectly cooked when an outer leaf readily detaches from the base and its pale flesh can be easily scraped off with your teeth.

Hearts and Flowers

An artichoke has four main components: the stem, the leaves, the choke, and the heart. Some recipes call for removing the entire stem, while others advise trimming a frugal sliver from the end and peeling the rest. Almost all recipes have you lop some leaves off the top of the artichoke to make the vegetable more attractive and easier to handle. They also recommend removing the pointy ends (which botanists refer to as "spines") from the remaining leaves with scissors and then thoroughly rubbing every cut surface with a halved lemon to prevent the artichoke from discoloring. Finally, you cook, usually via steaming or boiling. I tried both.

Trimming Down

I dutifully removed the tops of four artichokes, which is most easily accomplished with the sharp teeth of a serrated knife. Next up were the spines,



Anatomy of a Globe Artichoke

Artichokes are the flower buds of a huge Mediterranean plant from the thistle family. Small, medium, and large artichokes can all grow on a single plant. The artichoke itself is made up of four parts: the stem, which is edible in smaller artichokes but often stringy in larger ones; the outer and inner bracts (commonly referred to as "leaves" or "petals"), each of which has a pointed spine at the top and a nugget of delectable flesh at the bottom; the appropriately named choke, a central collection of wiry fibers that's always discarded; and the meaty heart, the prize of the artichoke.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

HOW TO PREP AN ARTICHOKE

1. Use serrated knife to cut off stem so artichoke sits flat.

2. Cut off top inch of artichoke.

3. Snap off any small leaves around base.

which I snipped off with scissors. Finally, I snapped off the tiniest leaves around the stems, which yield little meat and only get in the way when you're trying to eat. I left the stems on but trimmed and peeled them. After giving two of the artichokes the recommended lemony rubdown, I plunged a pair (one with lemon and one without, which had already oxidized) into a pot of boiling salted water and weighed them down with a small lid to keep them submerged. I placed the remaining two artichokes on a rack set over 2 inches of boiling water and covered the pot to capture the steam. After about 45 minutes, all the artichokes, acidulated and not, had turned the same deep olive green color. The color wasn't objectionable, but it suggested that the rubbing step was a waste of time—and a lemon.

At this point, I could easily pull a leaf off each artichoke and scrape the flesh from the base with my teeth, which indicated that they were fully cooked. As I worked my way through the vegetable, I noticed two things right away. The stems were inedibly stringy, each containing only a skimpy core of tender meat that was overcooked by the time the leaves were done. Going forward, I'd simply remove them before cooking. Another discovery: The salt in the water had penetrated all the way into the hearts of the boiled artichokes, bringing forth their delicate but earthy-green flavor; by comparison, the steamed artichokes tasted flat. I'd go with boiling.

Easy Does It

My success with the salt made me wonder about the possible benefits of spiking the water with other ingredients, but lemon peel, garlic, and peppercorns left little trace, and a couple of bay leaves struck a menthol-like note that clashed with the artichokes' flavor. I would stick with just salt.

With peeling, a lemon juice rubdown, and extraneous flavorings eliminated, my method was looking user-friendly, but I decided to streamline it further with two more modifications. The first was simple: letting the artichokes bob in the water as they cooked rather than weighing them down. Yes, some portion sat above the water line, but the denser edible parts—the heart and the fleshy part of the leaves—stayed submerged without assistance.

The final modification was more audacious: I opted to leave the spines on. They soften to harmlessness as the artichokes cook, and full-length leaves are more attractive and easier to grasp when you're dismantling your artichoke at the table.

Don't Bother

REMOVING THE SPINES
The pointy tips of the leaves are not terribly big or sharp, and they soften during cooking.

TREATING WITH LEMON
Because artichokes are high in phenolic compounds, their cut surfaces discolor quickly. But cooking deepens their hue, hiding any oxidization.

WEIGHING DOWN
It's not a problem if the artichokes bob around in the water; the edible portion will remain submerged without assistance.

And thus the fearsome vegetable was vanquished. Buy some artichokes today, put a pot of water on to boil, and call some friends. It's time to relax.

BOILED WHOLE ARTICHOKES

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

This recipe can be halved. The artichokes may not be fully submerged during cooking, but the parts that need to cook will remain below the water line. Serve with melted salted butter, mayonnaise (see our recipe on page 95), or vinaigrette. Have an empty bowl on hand for the spent leaves and chokes.

4 artichokes (8 to 10 ounces each)
2½ tablespoons table salt

1. Bring 5 quarts water to boil in Dutch oven. Meanwhile, working with 1 artichoke at a time, use serrated knife to cut off stem so artichoke sits flat on counter. Cut off top inch of artichoke. Snap off any small leaves around base.

2. Add artichokes and salt to boiling water and arrange artichokes stemmed side down. Adjust heat to maintain gentle boil. Cover and cook until outer leaf easily detaches from artichoke and paler flesh at bottom of leaf can be easily scraped off with your teeth, 40 to 55 minutes.

3. Using tongs or slotted spoon, transfer artichokes to wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Turn artichokes stemmed side up and let cool for 10 minutes. Transfer artichokes, stemmed side down, to platter or individual plates and serve.

4. TO EAT: Pull off outer leaves one at a time. Pull leaf through your teeth to remove soft, meaty portion. Discard remainder of leaf. When only tender, purple-tipped leaves remain, grasp leaves and bite off tender lower sections. Pinch any remaining leaves together and pull away from base to reveal choke. Using small spoon, scrape out choke and discard. Cut heart into bite-size pieces and eat.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/APR20

HOW TO EAT AN ARTICHOKE

1. Pull outer leaf from artichoke.

2. Scrape leaf between your teeth to remove flesh.

3. Grasp and remove small, purple-tipped leaves. Bite off tender lower sections.

4. Once all leaves are removed, use small spoon to scrape out feathery choke and discard.

5. Cut heart into bite-size pieces and eat.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Hummus, Elevated

The ultrasmooth, tahini-forward version of this spread is fundamental throughout the Middle East—and will forever change the way you think about hummus.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

In one of the last reviews he penned before his untimely death in 2018, *Los Angeles Times* restaurant critic Jonathan Gold wrote lyrically about the hummus at the city's beloved Middle Eastern restaurant, Bavel:

> "The seriousness of a Middle Eastern restaurant rests in its hummus. Grainy, vaguely sour hummus is OK to send off in your children's brown-bag lunches, and the mayonnaise-y over-garlicked stuff may be exactly what you want to see alongside a takeout roast chicken . . . But the great kitchens, the ones that inspire hour-long drives and dinnertime haiku, tend to labor over their fragrant goo as assiduously as a French baker might over her baguettes."

The hummus Gold spoke of is fundamental throughout the Middle East, where it's often the focal point of a meal and entire careers are dedicated to its craft. A great version is so silky that it can be poured off a spoon and exhibits vivid yet balanced tahini flavor, garlic presence that's prominent but never "garlicky," and a lemony backbone that's tart without being sour.

And here's the best part: Superlative hummus requires only a little more time and effort to make than that lunch box stuff. Here's my component-by-component approach.

Our quick, effective method for removing the chickpeas' tough, cellulose-rich skins makes our hummus supersilky.

Chickpeas

How you treat the chickpeas impacts the consistency of hummus more than any other factor, because they are firm (even when cooked) and covered in tough skins.

My most effective tricks were overcooking them and removing their skins. It takes hours to soak and simmer dried chickpeas, but simmering canned beans took about 20 minutes. (There's no shame here: Dried and canned beans are equally good in this recipe.) I also added baking soda to the saucepan, which raised the water's pH and helped the skins break down and slip off. By the end of cooking, there was a "raft" of skins floating on the surface that was easy to remove by draining and rinsing the beans a few times.

Tahini

Tahini is hummus's major source of richness and flavor and significantly affects its consistency. Brand and color matter here, since the tahini's shade indicates how much the sesame seeds have been roasted. Lighter tahini, made with lightly roasted sesame seeds, tastes distinct but mild, whereas darker tahini, made with heavily roasted sesame seeds, is unpleasantly bitter.

One thing I discovered: It's important to process the other hummus ingredients before adding the tahini. That's because its proteins readily absorb water and clump, resulting in overly thick hummus. Processing the other ingredients without the tahini allows the water to disperse throughout the mixture; then, when the tahini is eventually added, its proteins can't immediately absorb the water and clump, and the hummus doesn't become stiff.

Water

Water is often added to enhance the spread's creaminess. I started with ¼ cup and, depending on the consistency of the tahini and the hummus itself (it thickens as it sits), added more water by the teaspoon.

Olive Oil

Typically, all the fat in hummus comes from tahini, but 2 tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil made my version especially silky. To avoid overprocessing the oil, which can release bitter-tasting compounds, I added it with the tahini.

Lemon Juice + Garlic

Instead of incorporating garlic directly into the hummus as most recipes do, I briefly steeped a few minced cloves in lemon juice, strained and discarded them, and added only the infused juice to the dip—a technique from chef Michael Solomonov's popular hummus recipe and one that we've used in the past for Caesar dressing. The juice's acid neutralizes alliinase, the enzyme that creates garlic's harsh flavor. That way, we capture some—but not too much—of the garlic's sharp, raw bite and strain out the pulpy bits.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

ULTRACREAMY HUMMUS

SERVES 8 TO 10 (MAKES ABOUT 3 CUPS)
TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

We like the light color and mild flavor of Ziyad Tahini Sesame Paste. The hummus will thicken slightly over time; add warm water, 1 tablespoon at a time, as needed to restore its creamy consistency. Serve with crudités and pita bread or crackers. If desired, you can omit the parsley, reserved chickpeas, and extra cumin in step 5 and top with our Baharat-Spiced Beef Topping for Hummus or Spiced Walnut Topping for Hummus (recipes follow).

- 2 (15-ounce) cans chickpeas, rinsed
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- ⅓ cup lemon juice (2 lemons), plus extra for seasoning
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin, plus extra for garnish
- ½ cup tahini, stirred well
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley

1. Combine chickpeas, baking soda, and 6 cups water in medium saucepan and bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat and simmer, stirring occasionally, until chickpea skins begin to float to surface and chickpeas are creamy and very soft, 20 to 25 minutes.

2. While chickpeas cook, mince garlic using garlic press or rasp-style grater. Measure out 1 tablespoon garlic and set aside; discard remaining garlic. Whisk lemon juice, salt, and reserved garlic together in small bowl and let sit for 10 minutes. Strain garlic-lemon mixture through fine-mesh strainer set over bowl, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible; discard solids.

3. Drain chickpeas in colander and return to saucepan. Fill saucepan with cold water and gently swish chickpeas with your fingers to release skins. Pour off most of water into colander to collect skins, leaving chickpeas behind in saucepan. Repeat filling, swishing, and draining 3 or 4 times until most skins have been removed (this should yield about ¾ cup skins); discard skins. Transfer chickpeas to colander to drain.

4. Set aside 2 tablespoons whole chickpeas for garnish. Process garlic-lemon mixture, ¼ cup water, cumin, and remaining chickpeas in food processor until smooth, about 1 minute, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add tahini and oil and process until hummus is smooth, creamy, and light, about 1 minute, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. (Hummus should have pourable consistency similar to yogurt. If too thick, loosen with water, adding 1 teaspoon at a time.) Season with salt and extra lemon juice to taste.

5. Transfer to serving bowl and sprinkle with parsley, reserved chickpeas, and extra cumin. Drizzle with extra oil and serve. (Hummus can be refrigerated in airtight container for up to 5 days. Let sit, covered, at room temperature for 30 minutes before serving.)

Next-Level Toppings

Hummus toppings can be as simple as fresh herbs, whole chickpeas, a little cumin, and a whorl of olive oil. But in the Middle East, hummus also functions as a blank slate that's topped with everything from sliced hard-boiled eggs to roasted vegetables to spiced meats (such as our Baharat-Spiced Beef Topping for Hummus, left) and other spreads (such as our Spiced Walnut Topping for Hummus, right).

TIP

Before serving, gently warm the hummus—in the microwave or in a nonstick skillet—to make it even smoother and more flavorful.

BAHARAT-SPICED BEEF TOPPING FOR HUMMUS

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES

Baharat is a warm, savory Middle Eastern spice blend. Ground lamb can be used in place of the beef, if desired. Toast the pine nuts in a dry skillet over medium-high heat until fragrant, 3 to 5 minutes. Serve the topping over hummus, garnishing with additional pine nuts and chopped fresh parsley.

- 2 teaspoons water
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 8 ounces 85 percent lean ground beef
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup finely chopped onion
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon hot smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground coriander
- ⅛ teaspoon ground cloves
- ⅛ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ cup pine nuts, toasted
- 2 teaspoons lemon juice

1. Combine water, salt, and baking soda in large bowl. Add beef and toss to combine. Let sit for 5 minutes.

2. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and garlic and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened, 3 to 4 minutes. Add paprika, cumin, pepper, coriander, cloves, and cinnamon and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add beef and cook, breaking up meat with wooden spoon, until beef is no longer pink, about 5 minutes. Add pine nuts and lemon juice and toss to combine.

SPICED WALNUT TOPPING FOR HUMMUS

MAKES ABOUT ¾ CUP TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

Do not overprocess; the topping should remain coarse-textured. Serve the topping over hummus.

- ¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ⅓ cup walnuts
- ¼ cup paprika
- ¼ cup tomato paste
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon ground allspice
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper

Process all ingredients in food processor until uniform coarse puree forms, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl halfway through processing. (Topping can be refrigerated for up to 5 days.)

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20

Real Greek Salad

Imagine all your favorite bites of Greek salad—sweet tomatoes; briny olives; crunchy cucumbers; and rich, tangy feta—without the lettuce filler, and you've got horiatiki salata.

BY STEVE DUNN

Following Greek tradition, we coat the vegetables separately with red wine vinegar and olive oil—rather than with an emulsified vinaigrette—to allow the flavor of each ingredient to remain distinct.

Greek salad is an old-fashioned immigrant story—an imported original nudged into an alternate version of itself so that it fell more in line with mainstream American expectations.

The traditional Greek version, known as horiatiki salata, is a colorful, chunky mix of raw tomatoes, cucumbers, green bell peppers, and onions; briny kalamata olives and (sometimes) capers; and thick slabs of rich, sheepy feta. These components are drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil and maybe lemon juice or vinegar and sprinkled with dried oregano. A staple accompaniment at Greek meals, this simple, hearty dish (also called "village salad") made its way to the United States during the 19th- and 20th-century waves of Hellenic migration and landed on the menus of many Greek-run diners and pizzerias. When the dish didn't gain much traction with American consumers, restaurateurs turned it into a recognizable salad by diluting the vegetables with lettuce (iceberg or romaine), crumbling the feta, and tossing the whole affair in a thick vinaigrette. That Greek American adaptation balanced familiarity and intrigue, eventually earning such a following that it became a standard not just at diners and pizzerias but also at chain restaurants, pubs, delis, and even convenience stores nationwide.

The popularity of Greek salad rages on, but in recent years American interest in more traditional Greek fare has started to catch up. That's good news for horiatiki fans such as myself, who've always preferred the original version of the dish—without the lettuce filler and vinaigrette bath, every element comes into bright, sharp, saline focus—and I took it as an excuse to hone my own version. I looked for ripe tomatoes and good-quality olives, feta, and olive oil, since that's best practice for any ingredient-driven dish. But it would be just as important to figure out the best way to prepare each item so that it was the best version of itself and the jumble of flavors and textures would hang together in perfect balance. Here's a component-by-component deep dive into my testing notes.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/OCT20

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE

Give the Onion a Soak

There's nothing like raw onion to add sharp, savory bite and crunch to a salad, as long as it's used in moderation. Even just half an onion's worth of thin slices tasted harsh, so I tried soaking the slices in three different liquids to temper their bite. In each case, the soak drew out the onion's harsh-tasting sulfur compounds (thiosulfinates), but only ice water did so without introducing new, distracting flavors.

BAKING SODA SOLUTION
Left a chemical aftertaste, even after we rinsed the onion three times

VINEGAR AND SALT
Essentially quick-pickled the onion, wilting the slices so that they lacked crunch and infusing them with distracting sourness

ICE WATER
Mellowed the onion's harsh bite without dulling its crunch

Salt and Drain the Tomatoes

Ripe, sweet tomatoes are a must for horiatiki, but they're also loaded with juice that flooded the salad when I added them directly to the mix. So my first step was to toss the tomatoes (halved wedges, for chunky but manageable bites) with salt and set them in a colander to drain for 30 minutes. The salt pulled out a whopping ½ cup of juice, preventing all that liquid from saturating the other vegetables; plus, it seasoned the tomatoes more deeply and evenly than I could have by simply seasoning the salad before serving.

Choose Dried, Not Fresh, Oregano

Greeks cook extensively with oregano, particularly the dried leaves, which they use in cooked applications and as a finishing touch for meat, fish, vegetables, legumes, and salads such as horiatiki. The woodsy, floral profile of dried oregano leaves is subtler and more complex than that of fresh leaves, but it's still fragrant because oregano is a hardy herb that retains much of its flavor and aroma when dried. We found that subtlety ideal for horiatiki when we tasted the salad sprinkled with both fresh and dried oregano, noting that the dried herb's more delicate flavor complemented—but didn't upstage—the vegetables.

Go for Greek Feta

It's not just folklore that Greeks make great feta. Of the eight different fetas we tasted from Greece, France, and the United States, the Greek ones boasted almost universally superior flavor and texture—and for several good reasons, which stem from Greek government regulations that control the feta-making process.

First, the milk itself is rich and complex: At least 70 percent of it must be sheep's milk, which contains twice as much fat as cow's milk; any remainder must be goat's milk. Because Greek sheep and goats eat uniquely diverse diets, their milks contain fatty acids that impart distinctively gamy, savory flavors to the feta. Second, Greek feta is produced via a slower, more methodical process that encourages the development of exceptionally complex flavors. Our favorite fetas, made by Real Greek Feta and Dodoni, work equally well in our salad. Avoid crumbled fetas, which are produced from cow's milk and lack the complexity and rich, dense texture of the real deal.

Give Green Bell Peppers a Chance!

Even if you don't care for the grassy, vegetal, faintly bitter flavor of green bell pepper, consider using one here. Those qualities (which are due to flavor compounds in unripe peppers called methoxypyrazines) uniquely balance the horiatiki, complementing the fresh, sweet, briny, and rich flavors of the other components.

HORIATIKI SALATA (HEARTY GREEK SALAD)

SERVES 4 AS A MAIN DISH OR 6 TO 8 AS A SIDE DISH
TOTAL TIME: 25 MINUTES, PLUS 30 MINUTES SALTING

Soaking the sliced onion in ice water tempers its heat and bite. Use only large, round tomatoes here, not Roma or cherry varieties, and use the ripest in-season tomatoes you can find. A fresh, fruity, peppery olive oil works well here if you have it. We prefer to use feta by Real Greek Feta or Dodoni in this recipe. The salad can be served with crusty bread as a light meal for four. Our recipe for Horiatiki Salata (Hearty Greek Salad) for Two is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/oct20.

- 1¾ pounds tomatoes, cored
- 1¼ teaspoons table salt, divided
- ½ red onion, sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano, plus extra for seasoning
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1 English cucumber, quartered lengthwise and cut into ¾-inch chunks
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into 2 by ½-inch strips
- 1 cup pitted kalamata olives
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed
- 5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1 (8-ounce) block feta cheese, sliced into ½-inch-thick triangles

1. Cut tomatoes into ½-inch-thick wedges. Cut wedges in half crosswise. Toss tomatoes and ½ teaspoon salt together in colander set in large bowl. Let drain for 30 minutes. Place onion in small bowl, cover with ice water, and let sit for 15 minutes. Whisk vinegar, oregano, pepper, and remaining ¾ teaspoon salt together in second small bowl.

2. Discard tomato juice and transfer tomatoes to now-empty bowl. Drain onion and add to bowl with tomatoes. Add vinegar mixture, cucumber, bell pepper, olives, and capers and toss to combine. Drizzle with ¼ cup oil and toss gently to coat. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to serving platter and top with feta. Season each slice of feta with extra oregano to taste. Drizzle feta with remaining 1 tablespoon oil. Serve.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Salade Lyonnaise

With an Italian assist, we crafted a version of this iconic salad of crisp bitter greens, poached egg, and salty cured pork that would be at home in any French bistro.

BY STEVE DUNN

There's a reason salade lyonnaise has long been iconic not only in its namesake city of Lyon but also throughout France. The combination of bitter greens, salty bacon, rich poached egg, and punchy vinaigrette is simply perfect. The pungent greens stand up to the tart vinaigrette and are sturdy enough to hold up under the weight of the egg. Thick batons of bacon, or lardons, retain meaty chew even when they are browned and crisped. The vinaigrette, whisked together in the warm pan used to brown the bacon, has just enough acidity to balance the pork's richness and the egg's flowing yolk and tender whites. For my own rendition of this French classic, I wanted to ensure that I hit that same spot-on balance of crisp and chewy, cool and warm, and rich and bitter.

For a meal that comes together in less than 30 minutes, poach the eggs in advance.

Gathering the Ingredients

The most traditional versions of salade lyonnaise feature just a single green—frisée, a member of the chicory family with a bitter taste and frilly, resilient leaves that soften only slightly under a warm vinaigrette. Though frisée's feathery looks brought a certain elegance to the dish, on its own, the green made the salad feel spartan. Its wiry spikes also allowed too much of the dressing to fall to the bottom of the bowl. In search of a second green, I experimented with dandelion greens and two of frisée's cousins, escarole and chicory. While each did a fine job of filling out the salad, tasters liked chicory best, with escarole coming in a close second. Both brought additional pungency to the mix, along with leaves that were a little more supple and broad enough to better capture the dressing.

Next I considered the lardons. In France, these are often sliced from ventreche, pork belly that's unsmoked, salt cured, and fashioned into a roll, making it more similar to Italian pancetta than smoked American bacon. Ventreche can be hard to find in the United States, however, and pancetta seemed to be my best bet. But since presliced pancetta is often cut into rounds that aren't thick enough to make plump lardons, I bought the pork from the deli counter and made sure to ask for a generous ½-inch-thick slab.

Back in the test kitchen, I cut the pancetta into lardons about ¼ inch wide, which I then sautéed in a tablespoon of extra-virgin olive oil to ensure even browning. The lardons' meaty, chewy texture was perfect, but they tasted too salty, so I blanched them for about 5 minutes in a couple of cups of water in the skillet before browning them.

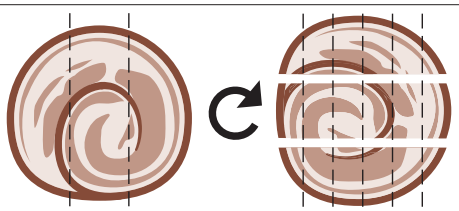
Put a Dressing—and an Egg—on It

The vinaigrette can make or break this salad. Too little acid and the greens taste overwhelmingly bitter and the salad seems overly rich.

I began by standardizing the amount of fat for the dressing. Since some of the fat from the pancetta was lost to the water during blanching, I upped the oil I was using to brown the lardons to 2 tablespoons. To keep the oil amount consistent, I poured off all but 2 tablespoons of the fat left in the pan after crisping them. Leaving the lardons in the pan, I then added some minced shallot, which I sautéed briefly to soften its raw edge. I took the pan off the heat and thought about how much vinegar to add.

How to Make Lardons

Lardons are thick batons of bacon that French cooks use in dishes including salade lyonnaise, coq au vin, and boeuf bourguignon. Lardons are often sliced from ventreche, an unsmoked, salt-cured rolled style of bacon. Since ventreche isn't readily available in the United States, we chose the best substitute: pancetta. Here's how to turn a ½-inch-thick slice of this Italian salt-cured pork into nicely sized lardons.



1. Cut ½-inch-thick pancetta slice vertically into thirds.

2. Rotate each strip 90 degrees and cut into ¼-inch-wide pieces.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Poached Eggs 101

PERFECT POACHED EGGS

MAKES 4 EGGS TOTAL TIME: 25 MINUTES

Use the freshest eggs possible for this recipe.

- **4 large eggs**
- **1 tablespoon distilled white vinegar**
- **Table salt for poaching eggs**

1. Bring 6 cups water to boil in Dutch oven over high heat. Meanwhile, crack eggs, one at a time, into colander. Let stand until loose, watery whites drain away from eggs, 20 to 30 seconds. Gently transfer eggs to 2-cup liquid measuring cup.

2. Add vinegar and 1 teaspoon salt to boiling water. Remove pot from heat. With lip of measuring cup just above surface of water, gently tip eggs into water, one at a time, leaving space between them. Cover pot and let stand until whites closest to yolks are just set and opaque, about 3 minutes. If after 3 minutes whites are not set, let stand in water, checking every 30 seconds, until whites are set.

3. Using slotted spoon, carefully lift and drain each egg over Dutch oven. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve.

MAKE-AHEAD POACHED EGGS

For convenience, you can poach the eggs for our Salade Lyonnaise 15 minutes ahead—or even a few days in advance.

Poach 15 Minutes Ahead: Transfer poached eggs to large pot of 150-degree water and let stand, covered, for up to 15 minutes.

Poach, Refrigerate, and Reheat: Drop poached eggs into ice water to cool, then drain. Refrigerate for up to 3 days. When ready to reheat, bring 3 inches water to simmer in large saucepan, remove saucepan from heat, add eggs, and let stand for 1½ minutes.

WHY DRAIN EGGS BEFORE POACHING THEM?

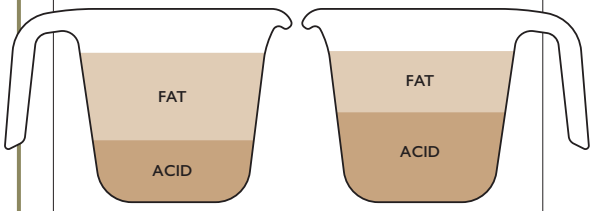
Cracking the eggs into a colander before poaching them rids them of loose, watery whites that would otherwise turn into wispy tendrils in the water, marring the eggs' appearance. But don't worry that *all* the whites will drain off. Every egg white contains a thick portion and a thin portion. The thicker portion clings tightly to the yolk, while the thinner portion is looser and can break away to slip through the colander holes. In the freshest eggs, 60 percent of the white is thick, but as the egg ages, it drops to 50 percent and below.

1. The thin, watery part of the egg whites drains through the colander, while the thicker part stays put.

2. Transferring the eggs to a 2-cup liquid measuring cup makes adding the eggs to the boiling water easy.

Punch Up the Dressing

Using a standard vinaigrette—with a 3:1 ratio of fat to acid—in salade lyonnaise results in a flabby, greasy salad. To counter the richness of the pancetta lardons and the poached egg, we created a dressing that was equal parts fat and acid.



SALADE LYONNAISE

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

Order a ½-inch-thick slice of pancetta at the deli counter; presliced or diced pancetta is likely to dry out or become tough. If you can't find chicory or escarole, dandelion greens make a good substitute. If using escarole, strip away the first four or five outer leaves and reserve them for another use. Serve this salad with crusty bread as a light lunch or dinner. The test kitchen's favorite Dijon mustard is Trois Petits Cochons Moutarde de Dijon.

- **1 (½-inch-thick) slice pancetta (about 5 ounces)**
- **2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**
- **1 tablespoon minced shallot**
- **2 tablespoons red wine vinegar**
- **4 teaspoons Dijon mustard**
- **1 head frisée (6 ounces), torn into bite-size pieces**
- **5 ounces chicory or escarole, torn into bite-size pieces (5 cups)**
- **1 recipe Perfect Poached Eggs**

1. Cut pancetta vertically into thirds, then cut each third crosswise into ¼-inch-wide pieces. Combine pancetta and 2 cups water in 10-inch nonstick or carbon-steel skillet and bring to boil over medium-high heat. Boil for 5 minutes, then drain. Return pancetta to now-empty skillet. Add oil and cook over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned but still chewy, 4 to 6 minutes.

2. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons fat from skillet, leaving pancetta in skillet. Add shallot and cook, stirring frequently, until slightly softened, about 30 seconds. Off heat, add vinegar and mustard and stir to combine.

3. Drizzle vinaigrette over frisée in large bowl and toss thoroughly to coat. Add chicory and toss again. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Divide salad among 4 plates. Gently place 1 egg on top of each salad, then season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve immediately.

Our standard formula for vinaigrette is 3 parts fat to 1 part acid, but because of the rich lardons and eggs in the mix, the salad tasted fatty. I decided a 1:1 ratio would give the dressing the boldness it needed. I stirred 2 tablespoons of red wine vinegar (the acid) along with 4 teaspoons of mustard into the hot fat in the pan, which sent up wafts of bacon-y aroma into the air, and then drizzled this warm mixture over the salad, plated it, and topped each serving with a poached egg. I was gratified to find that the vinaigrette brought the perfect acidic punch to the salad, especially after I broke the egg with the side of my fork and stirred the rich yolk gently into the greens. There was just one problem: While the warm dressing had nicely wilted the frisée, leaving it softened but still crisp, the chicory had lost its crunch.

To avoid this I tried a two-stage approach to incorporating the dressing. First I placed the frisée in the mixing bowl and drizzled the warm dressing on top. After an initial toss with my tongs, the dressing had cooled quite a bit, so when I added the chicory and tossed everything again, it kept its crisp bite.

With that, my salade lyonnaise had it all: a perfect balance of lightness and indulgence, coolness and warmth, and crispness and chewiness.

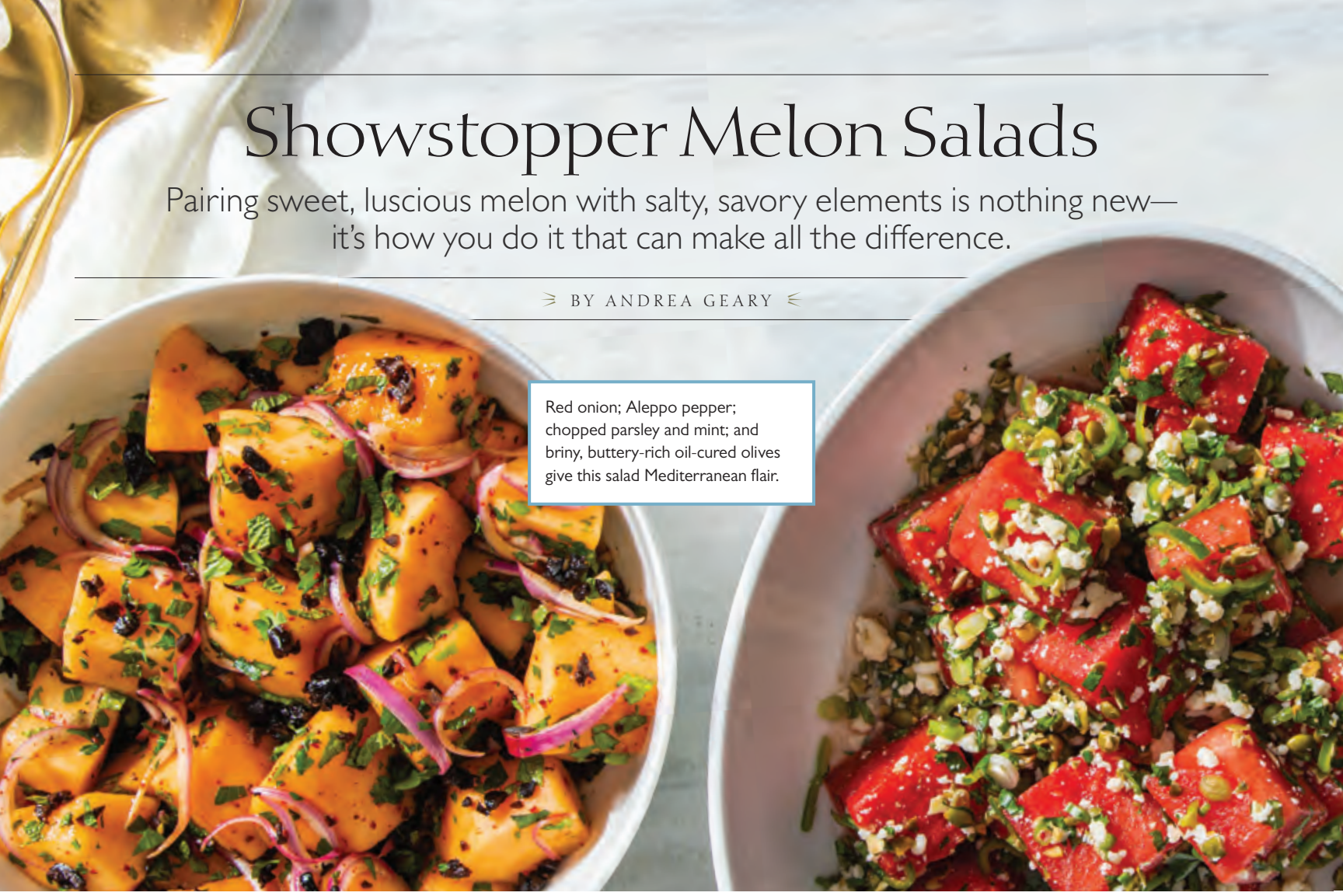
FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20**

ILLUSTRATION: SAMANTHA MARCHESI

Showstopper Melon Salads

Pairing sweet, luscious melon with salty, savory elements is nothing new—it's how you do it that can make all the difference.

BY ANDREA GEARY



Red onion; Aleppo pepper; chopped parsley and mint; and briny, buttery-rich oil-cured olives give this salad Mediterranean flair.

I crave melon in the summer, and it turns out the urge might be physiological: We're drawn to water-rich foods in hot weather because they keep us hydrated and because they require less energy to digest than high-fat or high-protein foods. But after weeks of melon wedges, slices, cubes, and balls, I find myself wanting something more exciting, with a bit more texture and even salty, savory flavors. Enter melon salad.

At its root, it's a pretty old concept. Greeks have been combining watermelon with salty feta cheese for centuries or perhaps millennia, and the pairing is genius: The sweetness of the fruit balances the brininess of the cheese, and the salty, crumbly cheese makes the melon seem even sweeter and more explosively juicy.

Somewhere along the line, cooks began to riff off this concept, pairing melon with all sorts of other salty, savory, and/or creamy ingredients and drizzling the whole thing with oil and vinegar. But these innovations can be problematic. Often the components don't fully meld—or, worse, they overpower the melon—and the dressing can taste watered-down.

My mission was to rethink melon salad to make it more cohesive and balanced and to devise some enticing combinations that could be eaten as refreshing side dishes.

STRATEGIES FOR NEXT-LEVEL MELON SALAD

In addition to incorporating salty and savory elements into my melon salads, I came up with these best practices.

Keep it melon-focused. Other sweet, juicy fruits will only compete with the melon, while additions such as tomatoes and cucumbers are distractingly similar to underripe melon and should also be avoided. If the melon lacks sweetness, give it a boost with a bit of sugar or honey.

Keep secondary components small. Chunky pieces fall to the bottom of the bowl, but smaller ones cling to the melon and hold on to the dressing while they do so, ensuring that each piece is coated with flavor and texture.

Leave the melon large. Fewer cut surfaces means less liquid will be exuded to water down the dressing. Larger pieces also accentuate the contrast between the melon's well-seasoned exterior and sweet, juicy interior.

Add some heat. A touch of fresh or dried chile adds an interesting dimension to ripe melon, which—though luscious—lacks zing.

Incorporate richness. Nuts, seeds, cheese—even olives—all work well to balance the leanness of the fruit.

Add lots of herbal essence. The fresh, grassy, aromatic flavors complement the sweet fruit.

Make an oil-free, citrusy dressing. Oil just slips off the melon's wet surface. Instead, use a dressing that's bright, intense, and oil-free. I prefer the fruitiness of lemon or lime juice to vinegar, which can taste a little harsh with melon.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

In this twist on watermelon and feta salad, lime juice balances the sweet melon, and cotija cheese and pepitas provide richness. Serrano chiles add zip while scallions and cilantro contribute savoriness.

Shallot, garlic, Thai chiles, and fish sauce make a savory and salty dressing for sweet honeydew in this Thai-inspired combo. Cilantro, mint, and peanuts complete the dish.

CANTALOUPE SALAD WITH OLIVES AND RED ONION

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 20 MINUTES

Taste your melon as you cut it up: If it's very sweet, omit the honey; if it's less sweet, add the honey to the dressing. We like the gentle heat and raisiny sweetness of ground dried Aleppo pepper here, but if it's unavailable, substitute ¾ teaspoon of paprika and ¼ teaspoon of cayenne pepper. This salad makes a light and refreshing accompaniment to grilled meat or fish and couscous or steamed white rice.

- ½ red onion, sliced thin
- ⅓ cup lemon juice (2 lemons)
- 1–3 teaspoons honey (optional)
- 1 teaspoon ground dried Aleppo pepper
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1 cantaloupe, peeled, halved, seeded, and cut into 1½-inch chunks (6 cups)
- 5 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, divided
- 5 tablespoons chopped fresh mint, divided
- ¼ cup finely chopped pitted oil-cured olives, divided

Combine onion and lemon juice in large bowl and let sit for 5 minutes. Stir in honey, if using; Aleppo pepper; and salt. Add cantaloupe, ¼ cup parsley, ¼ cup mint, and 3 tablespoons olives and stir to combine. Transfer to shallow serving bowl. Sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon parsley, remaining 1 tablespoon mint, and remaining 1 tablespoon olives and serve.

HONEYDEW SALAD WITH PEANUTS AND LIME

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 20 MINUTES

Taste your melon as you cut it up: If it's very sweet, omit the sugar; if it's less sweet, add the sugar to the dressing. This salad makes a light and refreshing accompaniment to grilled meat or fish and steamed white rice.

- ⅓ cup lime juice (3 limes)
- 1 shallot, sliced thin
- 2 Thai chiles, stemmed, seeded, and minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1–2 tablespoons sugar (optional)
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- 1 honeydew melon, peeled, halved, seeded, and cut into 1½-inch chunks (6 cups)
- 5 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro, divided
- 5 tablespoons chopped fresh mint, divided
- 5 tablespoons salted dry-roasted peanuts, chopped fine, divided

1. Combine lime juice and shallot in large bowl. Using mortar and pestle (or on cutting board using flat side of chef's knife), mash Thai chiles, garlic, and salt to fine paste. Add chile paste; sugar, if using; and fish sauce to lime juice mixture and stir to combine.

2. Add honeydew, ¼ cup cilantro, ¼ cup mint, and ¼ cup peanuts and toss to combine. Transfer to shallow serving bowl. Sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon cilantro, remaining 1 tablespoon mint, and remaining 1 tablespoon peanuts and serve.

WATERMELON SALAD WITH COTIJA AND SERRANO CHILES

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 20 MINUTES

Taste your melon as you cut it up: If it's very sweet, omit the sugar; if it's less sweet, add the sugar to the dressing. Jalapeños can be substituted for the serranos. If cotija cheese is unavailable, substitute feta cheese. This salad makes a light and refreshing accompaniment to grilled meat or fish.

- ⅓ cup lime juice (3 limes)
- 2 scallions, white and green parts separated and sliced thin
- 2 serrano chiles, stemmed, halved, seeded, and sliced thin crosswise
- 1–2 tablespoons sugar (optional)
- ¾ teaspoon table salt
- 6 cups 1½-inch seedless watermelon pieces
- 3 ounces cotija cheese, crumbled (¾ cup), divided
- 5 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro, divided
- 5 tablespoons chopped roasted, salted pepitas, divided

Combine lime juice, scallion whites, and serranos in large bowl and let sit for 5 minutes. Stir in sugar, if using, and salt. Add watermelon, ½ cup cotija, ¼ cup cilantro, ¼ cup pepitas, and scallion greens and stir to combine. Transfer to shallow serving bowl. Sprinkle with remaining ¼ cup cotija, remaining 1 tablespoon cilantro, and remaining 1 tablespoon pepitas and serve.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20

Celebrate Spring with Pea Salad

A trio of sweet peas, each treated differently, turns this salad into a showpiece.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Stir-frying or sautéing fresh snow peas and sugar snap peas or even frozen English peas is fine most of the year. But in spring, when these legumes are actually in season (and the only time fresh English peas are available), cooking them beyond the briefest blanch feels like a shame. This year, I decided to showcase all three peas in a knockout spring salad. Each variety would bring something different to the mix: English peas would add pops of earthy-sweet flavor, snap peas would contribute lots of crunch, and snow peas would provide a more delicate crispness and mineral-y notes.

Though I knew I didn't want to thoroughly cook the peas, a brief dip in boiling water can actually improve their flavor and texture (and also set their bright-green color). That's because these legumes start converting their sugars into starch from the moment they're picked, so they can taste less sweet when eaten raw. A quick dunk in boiling salted water softens the peas' starchy structure, making the remaining sugar more available to taste. The peas' skins can also toughen after a few days off the vine, and moist heat can counteract that. Just 60 to 90 seconds followed by shocking in ice water did the trick for sugar snap and English peas (shelled first), but snow peas, which are naturally more tender, lost too much of their crunch, so I left them raw.

Any standout salad needs ingredients in a variety of shapes to make it interesting, so I cut the snap peas into bite-size chunks, which maintained their crunch (and allowed a peek at the peas inside the pods). I thinly sliced the raw snow peas on the bias to help them tangle with the other components.

To break up the legumes with more flavors and textures, I gathered a few other spring ingredients: Bright-red radishes sliced into half-moons contributed color and crunch, peppery baby arugula provided fluff and bulk, and lots of fresh mint leaves left whole or torn acted as a secondary salad green.

As for the dressing, I wanted something creamy that would cling and add richness without being cloying. I whisked minced garlic that I'd soaked in lemon juice (to mellow its sharp edge) together with tangy Greek yogurt, punchy Dijon mustard, extra-virgin olive oil, salt, and pepper. But when I dressed the salad with this mixture, the creamy coating dulled its appearance. The simple fix: I spread the dressing onto the bottom of a serving dish and then placed the salad—tossed with a little olive oil and lemon juice—on top. Constructed this way, the salad kept its arresting appearance, and I could toss it all together at the table just before serving it.

This showpiece salad is a striking way to capture ephemeral spring peas, if only for a moment: They'll be gone in a flash.

Three Peas, Three Types of Prep

To bring out the best in each pea (and for an easy-to-eat salad), we treat them in different ways.

ENGLISH PEAS
Blanched for more sweetness

SUGAR SNAP PEAS
Cut into bite-size pieces; blanched for tenderness and sweetness

SNOW PEAS
Left raw for crisp texture; sliced into fork-friendly slivers

SPRING PEA SALAD

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES

If you can't find fresh English peas, you can substitute ¾ cup of thawed frozen peas (there is no need to blanch them). The English peas and sugar snap peas can be blanched, shocked, patted dry, and refrigerated for up to 24 hours before serving. The test kitchen's favorite Greek yogurt is made by Fage.

- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon lemon juice, divided
- 4 ounces sugar snap peas, strings removed, cut on bias into ½-inch pieces
- ½ teaspoon plus pinch table salt, divided, plus salt for blanching
- 9 ounces shell-on English peas, shelled (about ¾ cup)
- 5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- ¼ cup plain Greek yogurt
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 2 ounces (2 cups) baby arugula
- 4 ounces snow peas, strings removed, sliced thin on bias
- 4 radishes, trimmed, halved, and sliced into thin half-moons
- ⅓ cup fresh mint leaves, torn if large

1. Mince garlic and immediately combine with 2 tablespoons lemon juice in medium bowl; set aside. Fill large bowl halfway with ice and water. Nestle colander into ice bath. Line large plate with double layer of paper towels.

2. Bring 1 quart water to boil in medium saucepan over high heat. Add snap peas and 1 tablespoon salt and cook until snap peas are bright green and crisp-tender, about 1 minute. Using spider skimmer or slotted spoon, transfer snap peas to colander set in ice bath. Add English peas to boiling water and cook until bright green and tender, about 1½ minutes. Transfer to colander with snap peas. Once peas are chilled, lift colander from ice bath and transfer peas to prepared plate.

3. Whisk ¼ cup oil, yogurt, mustard, pepper, and ½ teaspoon salt into garlic mixture until combined. Spread dressing evenly over bottom of large shallow bowl or serving platter.

4. In separate large bowl, toss arugula, snow peas, radishes, mint, and chilled peas with remaining 1 teaspoon lemon juice, remaining pinch salt, and remaining 1 tablespoon oil until evenly coated. Pile salad on top of dressing. Serve immediately, combining salad with dressing as you serve.

Plating the salad on top of the dressing ensures that it stays bright and attractive.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/APR20

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Don't Forget Broccoli

Skillet roasting brings this easy-to-overlook vegetable to new heights.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Broccoli has always been there for us: It is reasonably priced, is available year-round, and boasts stellar nutritional stats. How do we show our appreciation? We toss it haphazardly into stir-fries, steam it to a vibrant (but flavorless) jade green, or—perhaps most insultingly—dip squeaky raw florets into bottled ranch dressing. Doesn't broccoli deserve better?

I wanted a stovetop recipe that would come together quickly and achieve rich browning to enhance the meaty stems and delicate florets. It made sense to start by taking the same general approach that we use for other skillet-roasted vegetables: Steam first, brown second.

I cut a little over a pound of broccoli crowns into wedges to create flat sides for browning and then carefully arranged them so that as many as possible were flush with the pan surface. Next, I drizzled the wedges with 2 tablespoons each of oil and water, added a sprinkle of salt, covered the pan, and cranked the heat. After about 4 minutes, the broccoli was bright green and starting to soften, so I pressed the wedges against the skillet with my spatula for maximum contact with the pan and then replaced the lid. Once the stems were crisp-tender and the undersides had colored, I flipped all the wedges to brown the second side and moved any pieces that were on top so that they had contact with the skillet. I then left the lid off so that any remaining water would evaporate.

This worked pretty well, but the broccoli wasn't as browned as I had envisioned. That's because broccoli has lots of undulations and textures that make contact with the pan trickier. Increasing the oil from 2 tablespoons to 5 helped fill the gaps between broccoli and skillet for optimal heat transfer and deep browning.

I had devised an easy, quick method that produced crisp-tender broccoli, with stalks and florets outlined by pleasing bits of sweet, nutty browning. Now to gild the lily.

Since sauces and vinaigrettes sogged out my favorite part of the broccoli—the beautifully crisped tips of the florets—I made two dry toppings. Both call for umami-rich, crunchy, well-toasted seeds: One combines sesame seeds with orange zest and salt—my take on the Japanese dry condiment gomasio—and the other features sunflower seeds supported by nutritional yeast and smoked paprika.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20

Arrange the broccoli so that as many cut surfaces as possible are flush with the bottom of the pan.

SKILLET-ROASTED BROCCOLI

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 35 MINUTES

Make one topping recipe before cooking the broccoli, if desired. Our recipe for Parmesan and Black Pepper Topping is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/jun20.

- 1 recipe topping (optional) (recipes follow)
- 1¼ pounds broccoli crowns
- 5 tablespoons vegetable oil
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons water

1. Sprinkle one-third of topping, if using, onto platter. Cut broccoli crowns into 4 wedges if 3 to 4 inches in diameter or 6 wedges if 4 to 5 inches in diameter.

2. Add oil to 12-inch nonstick or carbon-steel skillet and tilt skillet until oil covers surface. Add broccoli, cut side down (pieces will fit snugly; if a few pieces don't fit in bottom layer, place on top). Sprinkle evenly with salt and drizzle with water. Cover and cook over high heat, without moving broccoli, until broccoli is bright green, about 4 minutes.

3. Uncover and press gently on broccoli with back of spatula. Cover and cook until undersides of broccoli are deeply browned and stems are crisp-tender, 4 to 6 minutes. Off heat, uncover and turn broccoli so second cut side is touching skillet. Move any pieces that were on top so they are flush with skillet surface. Continue to cook, uncovered, pressing gently on broccoli with back of spatula, until second cut side is deeply browned, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Transfer to platter; sprinkle with remaining topping, if using; and serve.

SESAME AND ORANGE TOPPING

MAKES ABOUT 2 TABLESPOONS TOTAL TIME: 5 MINUTES

Toast the sesame seeds in a dry skillet set over medium heat, shaking the skillet occasionally.

- 2 tablespoons toasted sesame seeds, divided
- ½ teaspoon grated orange zest
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt

Using spice grinder or mortar and pestle, grind 1 tablespoon sesame seeds, orange zest, and salt to powder. Transfer to small bowl. Add remaining 1 tablespoon sesame seeds and toss with your fingers until sesame seeds are evenly distributed.

SMOKY SUNFLOWER SEED TOPPING

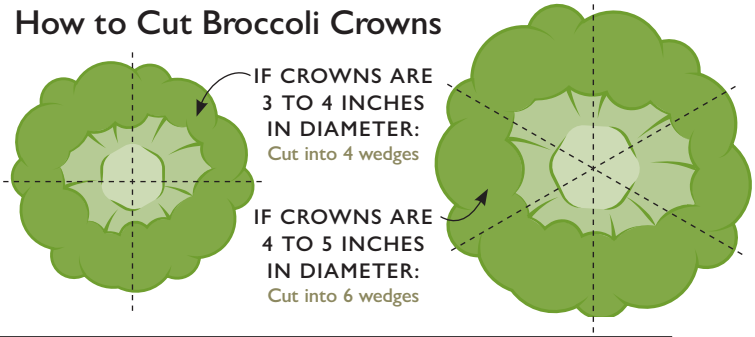
MAKES ABOUT 3 TABLESPOONS TOTAL TIME: 5 MINUTES

Nutritional yeast is a nonleavening form of yeast with a nutty flavor; look for it in natural foods stores.

- 2 tablespoons raw sunflower seeds, toasted
- 1 tablespoon nutritional yeast
- ½ teaspoon grated lemon zest
- ¼ teaspoon smoked paprika
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt

Using spice grinder or mortar and pestle, grind all ingredients to coarse powder.

How to Cut Broccoli Crowns



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Why and How to Grill Stone Fruit

The right technique coaxes smoky sweetness from ripe peaches, plums, or nectarines.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

I would never argue that there's a better way to enjoy a juicy, fragrant peach, plum, or nectarine than to devour it raw. But one of the great things about the abundance of fruit at this time of year is that you don't need to limit yourself to just one way of eating it. So consider grilling: It might just be the next best use for peak-season stone fruit. Heating fruit draws out juices, takes aromas to new heights, and intensifies sweetness through caramelization—all of which pair perfectly with the hint of smoke the grill leaves behind. Grilling fruit is also a nice way to take advantage of the heat of your grill before or after you cook the main course.

Before I continue with the mechanics of the recipe, an aside about ripeness: There is no point in grilling rock-hard fruit since it will likely scorch before it softens. A ripe stone fruit will be fragrant and yield when pressed gently with your fingertip. But the best way to know if fruit is ready is to eat a piece, which is why you always ought to buy a few more than you need for a recipe.

Back to the grilling process. It's not as simple as throwing a few halved, pitted peaches, plums, or nectarines onto a hot grill. There are two main issues to address. One, their juicy cut faces need a coating of some kind to prevent sticking and promote browning. Two, the fruit tends to char or dry out on the outside before the flesh fully softens.

Brushing the fruit with melted butter helps produce flavorful browning.

Most recipes I found used either sugar or fat to encourage browning on the cut side. In my tests, granulated or brown sugar or maple syrup did little to improve browning and nothing to prevent sticking. Nor did they add much flavor or sweetness: Only so much sugar would adhere, and what did stick tended to melt off fairly quickly on the hot grill. Besides, ripe fruit already has all the sugar it needs, whether for flavor or browning, and any additional ingredients are better applied postgrilling so that they stay in place. Fat was a better choice: It kept the fruit from sticking and helped increase browning where the fruit touched the cooking grate. The next decision was whether to use oil or butter. Very little oil clung to the wet flesh, but melted butter congealed and adhered nicely, allowing a thick layer to be applied. As a bonus, the small amount of protein in the butter encouraged flavorful Maillard browning.

Over high heat—whether on charcoal or gas—grill marks formed in about 5 minutes. But that was only half the battle, because at that point the fruit remained a little too firm within. I wanted the flesh to be soft enough that a paring knife would easily pierce it, an indication that it had achieved a custardy softness. Some recipes call for flipping the halves to continue cooking, but that only burned the bit of skin that touched the grate before the fruit fully softened. Sliding the halves to the cooler side of the grill worked better, especially when I kept the lid down. But it took a long time—up to 20 minutes—for the flesh to turn truly tender, and by then the fruit was often a bit dry and shriveled on the outside.

That's when it occurred to me that I might try moving the fruit to an enclosed vessel to retain both heat and moisture—in other words, grill first and steam second. So after about 5 minutes on the grill, I transferred the halves cut side up to a metal baking pan, covered the pan with foil, and placed it on the cooler side of the grill to continue cooking. After 15 minutes or so, the halves were tender, juicy, and still plump. Once they'd cooled slightly, their skins were easy to slip off if desired.

While the fruit tasted great on its own, I also had plenty of ideas for how to use it in simple recipes. I started with the peaches, which I cut into cubes and used as the centerpiece of a salad with juicy ripe tomatoes, fresh basil, creamy burrata, and lots of peppery extra-virgin olive oil. I used the nectarines for a dessert, creating a sort of deconstructed crisp with a quick and crunchy almond-flecked stovetop topping and scoops of vanilla ice cream. Finally, for the plums, I put together a quick and tangy plum-ginger chutney that was lovely paired with grilled pork or lamb.

ACHIEVING PERFECTLY GRILLED STONE FRUIT

1. Brush cut side of halved, pitted fruit with melted butter.

2. Grill cut side down over direct heat until grill marks form.

3. Transfer cut side up to pan, cover, and cook over indirect heat until tender.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

GRILLED STONE FRUIT

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

For the best results, use high-quality, ripe, in-season fruit with a fragrant aroma and flesh that yields slightly when gently pressed. Using a metal baking pan on the cooler side of the grill won't harm the pan, but you can use a disposable aluminum pan if preferred; do not use a glass dish. Serve as a side for grilled pork or lamb or use the fruit in one of the recipes that follow.

- 1½ pounds ripe but slightly firm stone fruit, halved and pitted
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

1. Brush cut side of fruit with melted butter.

2A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open bottom vent completely. Light large chimney starter three-quarters filled with charcoal briquettes (4½ quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour evenly over half of grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

2B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all burners to high; cover; and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave primary burner on high and turn off other burner(s).

3. Clean and oil cooking grate. Arrange fruit cut side down on hotter side of grill and cook (covered if using gas) until grill marks have formed, 5 to 7 minutes, moving fruit as needed to ensure even cooking.

4. Transfer fruit cut side up to 13 by 9-inch baking pan and cover loosely with aluminum foil. Place pan on cooler side of grill. If using gas, turn primary burner to medium. Cover and cook until fruit is very tender and paring knife slips in and out with little resistance, 10 to 15 minutes. When cool enough to handle, discard skins, if desired. Let cool completely. Serve.

GRILLED PLUM AND GINGER CHUTNEY

SERVES 8 TO 10 (MAKES 2 CUPS) TOTAL TIME: 1¾ HOURS

This recipe can also be made with peaches or nectarines. The chutney works well with grilled pork or lamb.

- 1 recipe Grilled Stone Fruit, using plums, skins discarded
- ¼ cup sugar
- ¼ cup cider vinegar
- 1 shallot, minced
- 2 tablespoons whole-grain mustard
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- ½ teaspoon coriander seeds, toasted
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes

Cut plums into ½-inch chunks. Place in medium saucepan. Add sugar, vinegar, shallot, mustard, ginger, coriander seeds, salt, and pepper flakes and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until thickened and glossy, 6 to 8 minutes. Let cool for 15 minutes and serve. (Chutney can be refrigerated in airtight container for up to 3 days.)

From top to bottom: Grilled Plum and Ginger Chutney, Grilled Nectarines with Crisp Almond Topping and Ice Cream, Grilled Peach and Tomato Salad with Burrata and Basil

GRILLED NECTARINES WITH CRISP ALMOND TOPPING AND ICE CREAM

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1½ HOURS

This recipe can also be made with peaches or plums. We like pairing vanilla ice cream with these nectarines, but other flavors will work, too. For a more rustic dessert, leave the skins on in step 3.

- ½ cup (2½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup sliced almonds
- ¼ cup packed (1¾ ounces) brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon water
- 1 recipe Grilled Stone Fruit, using nectarines
- 1 pint vanilla ice cream

1. Stir flour, almonds, sugar, and salt in medium bowl until combined. Add melted butter, vanilla, and water and stir until clumps form and no dry flour remains.

2. Transfer flour mixture to 10-inch nonstick skillet and cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until clumps break down into finer pieces and topping is fragrant and just beginning to brown, 7 to 9 minutes. Spread topping on large plate and let cool and crisp, at least 15 minutes.

3. Using your fingers, slip off nectarine skins and discard, if desired. Divide nectarines among individual serving bowls. Add scoop of ice cream to each bowl, sprinkle topping evenly over ice cream and nectarines, and serve.

GRILLED PEACH AND TOMATO SALAD WITH BURRATA AND BASIL

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

This recipe can also be made with nectarines or plums. If burrata is unavailable, sliced fresh mozzarella makes a suitable substitute.

- 12 ounces ripe tomatoes, cored and cut into ½-inch pieces
- ¾ teaspoon table salt, divided
- 1 recipe Grilled Stone Fruit, using peaches, skins discarded
- 1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
- 5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 8 ounces burrata cheese, room temperature
- ⅓ cup chopped fresh basil

1. Toss tomatoes with ¼ teaspoon salt and let drain in colander for 30 minutes. Cut each peach half into 4 wedges and cut each wedge in half crosswise.

2. Whisk vinegar and remaining ½ teaspoon salt together in large bowl. Whisking constantly, slowly drizzle in ¼ cup oil. Add tomatoes and peaches and toss gently to combine; transfer to shallow serving bowl. Place burrata on top of salad and drizzle with remaining 1 tablespoon oil. Season with pepper to taste and sprinkle with basil. Serve, breaking up burrata with spoon and allowing creamy liquid to meld with dressing.

Consider Celery Root

An earthy, buttery puree brings elegance—and intrigue—to your holiday table.

BY JULIA COLLIN DAVISON

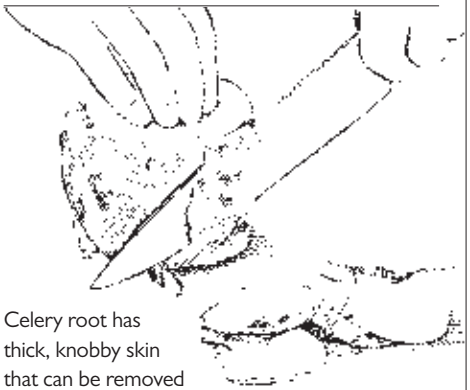
I adore celery root. Its ivory flesh cooks up earthy and nutty-sweet, with celery-like undertones (celery root is the same plant species as stalk celery but a different variety grown for its roots) and a light texture. Puree the cooked root with touches of butter and cream, and you've got a dish that's neutral enough to stand in for mashed potatoes yet still offers plenty of personality.

Working with peeled chunks of celery root, I found that braising them in small amounts of water and butter produced the purest taste. And yet I soon found myself in a conundrum: It took 45 minutes for the pieces to turn fully tender, but cooking times longer than 30 minutes produced less celery flavor and more slightly cabbagey sourness. I needed to cook the root as quickly as possible.

Small pieces would soften faster, so I used the food processor to blitz the large, dense chunks into tiny bits. I also added a touch of baking soda to the cooking water, because an alkaline environment would help the root break down. Indeed, after just 15 minutes, the mixture had cooked into a mush that I processed with a pour of heavy cream.

The flavor of the puree was delightful, with a mellow vegetal backbone, but since celery root contains only 5 or 6 percent starch, the consistency was loose. Many recipes call for thickening the puree with potato, and sure enough, a small starchy russet provided just enough body. Finally, a couple savory, herb-forward toppings gave the simple dish holiday pizzazz.

HOW TO PEEL CELERY ROOT



Celery root has thick, knobby skin that can be removed with a chef's knife after you've trimmed off the top and bottom. Cut down around the sides of the vegetable, working from top to bottom and angling the knife as needed.

The puree reheats well, so it's ideal for making ahead.

CELERY ROOT PUREE

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES

When buying celery root, look for one with few roots for easy peeling and minimal waste. Once it's prepped, you should have about 1½ pounds of celery root. If desired, garnish the puree with Bacon, Garlic, and Parsley Topping or Shallot, Sage, and Black Pepper Topping (recipes follow); make the topping while the celery root cooks. (If you're making the puree in advance, make the topping as close to serving as possible.) Alternatively, garnish the puree with 1 tablespoon of minced fresh herbs such as chives, parsley, chervil, or tarragon. Our recipe for Celery Root Puree for a Crowd is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/dec20.

- 1¾–2 pounds celery root, peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks
- 1 (6-ounce) russet potato, peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 cup water
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- ⅓ cup heavy cream

1. Working in 2 batches, pulse celery root and potato in food processor until finely chopped, about 20 pulses per batch; transfer to bowl. (You should have about 4½ cups chopped vegetables.)

2. Melt butter in large saucepan over medium heat. Stir in celery root–potato mixture, water, salt, and baking soda. Cover and cook, stirring often (mixture will stick but cleans up easily), until vegetables are very soft and translucent and mixture resembles applesauce, 15 to 18 minutes.

3. Uncover and cook, stirring vigorously to further break down vegetables and thicken remaining cooking liquid, about 1 minute. Transfer vegetable mixture to clean, dry food processor. Add cream and process until smooth, about 40 seconds. Season with salt to taste. Transfer to bowl and serve. (Puree can be cooled and refrigerated for up to 2 days. Before serving, microwave puree on medium-high power in covered bowl, stirring often, until hot throughout, 7 to 10 minutes.)

BACON, GARLIC, AND PARSLEY TOPPING

MAKES ABOUT ¼ CUP TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

If desired, freeze the bacon for 15 minutes to make it easier to chop.

- 2 slices bacon, chopped fine
- ¼ cup water
- 4 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley

Combine bacon, water, and garlic in 8-inch nonstick skillet and cook over medium-high heat until water has evaporated and bacon and garlic are browned and crispy, 8 to 10 minutes. Off heat, stir in parsley.

SHALLOT, SAGE, AND BLACK PEPPER TOPPING

MAKES ABOUT 3 TABLESPOONS TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

For the best results, do not substitute dried sage.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 small shallot, minced
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh sage
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- Pinch table salt

Melt butter in 8-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add shallot and sage; cook, stirring frequently, until shallot is golden and sage is crisp, about 3 minutes. Off heat, stir in pepper and salt.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/DEC20

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Roasted Carrots, No Oven Required

A skillet can color carrots and concentrate their flavor three times faster than your oven.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Roasting deepens carrots' earthy sweetness like no other cooking method, but the process monopolizes your oven for at least 45 minutes. I wanted great roasted carrots—with streaks of char, a tender bite, and a concentrated flavor—in less time and on the stove.

To soften them quickly, I needed to steam the carrots first. I selected 1½ pounds of large carrots from the bulk bin, since their thickness would translate into more cut surfaces for browning than skinnier bagged carrots. I cut them crosswise and then lengthwise into even pieces. When I placed the carrots in a nonstick skillet with ½ cup of water, ½ teaspoon of salt, and a tablespoon of oil, they didn't fit in a single layer, but steaming fixed that: After about 8 minutes of covered cooking, the carrots had shrunk enough that, with a shake of the skillet, they settled into an even layer.

Most of the water evaporated during that time, too, but to cook off more moisture and create as much deep browning and char as I could, I kept the heat on medium-high and let the carrots cook undisturbed for about 3 minutes. I then flipped the pieces so their pale sides were on the bottom and cooked them for a couple minutes more. This method was speedy—less than 15 minutes—but while the carrots were browned, no one would mistake them for oven-roasted.

I had two fixes: First, I increased the oil to 2 tablespoons, since fat facilitates the transfer of energy between the cooking surface and the food and would allow the sugars in the carrots to caramelize fully. Second, while the first side of the carrots seared, I pressed them against the skillet with my spatula for maximum contact with the pan.

The finished carrots were richly browned, with concentrated sweet-savory flavor. If I hadn't made them myself, I would have sworn these carrots had been roasted in the oven.

SKILLET-ROASTED CARROTS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 30 MINUTES

We prefer large carrots from the bulk bin for this recipe. After cutting the carrots crosswise, quarter lengthwise any pieces that are larger than 1½ inches in diameter and halve lengthwise any pieces that are ¾ to 1½ inches in diameter. Leave whole any carrots that are narrower than ¾ inch. If desired, top the carrots with Smoky Spiced Almonds and Parsley or Spicy Maple Bread Crumbs (recipes follow) before serving; make the topping before cooking the carrots. Our recipes for Mustard Bread Crumbs and Chives and Za'atar Bread Crumbs and Cilantro are available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/feb20.

Thicker carrots offer more surface area for browning.

- ½ cup water
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1½ pounds large carrots, peeled, cut crosswise into 3- to 4-inch lengths, and cut lengthwise into even pieces
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1. Mix water and salt in 12-inch nonstick skillet until salt is dissolved. Place carrots in skillet, arranging as many carrots flat side down as possible (carrots will not fit in single layer). Drizzle oil over carrots. Bring to boil over medium-high heat. Cover and cook, without moving carrots, until carrots are crisp-tender and water has almost evaporated, 8 to 10 minutes.

2. Uncover and gently shake skillet until carrots settle into even layer. Continue to cook, not moving carrots but occasionally pressing them gently against skillet with spatula, until water has completely evaporated and undersides of carrots are deeply browned, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Stir carrots and flip pale side down. Cook until second side is lightly browned, about 2 minutes. Transfer to serving dish and serve.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20

SMOKY SPICED ALMONDS AND PARSLEY

MAKES ¼ CUP
TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES, PLUS 10 MINUTES COOLING

- ¼ cup sliced almonds, chopped fine
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika
- ⅛ teaspoon table salt
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley

Combine almonds, oil, paprika, salt, and cayenne in 12-inch nonstick skillet. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until almonds are fragrant and crisp, 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer to small bowl and let cool completely, about 10 minutes. Stir in parsley.

SPICY MAPLE BREAD CRUMBS

MAKES ¼ CUP
TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES, PLUS 10 MINUTES COOLING

- 3 tablespoons panko bread crumbs
- 2 teaspoons maple syrup
- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- ⅛ teaspoon table salt
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper

Combine all ingredients in 12-inch nonstick skillet. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring constantly, until panko is crunchy and caramel-colored, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer to small bowl and let cool completely, about 10 minutes.

Crunch Factor

To take these tender, sweet-savory carrots to the next level, finish them with a crunchy topping. We like smoky spiced almonds or boldly seasoned panko bread crumbs.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Braised Red Cabbage

The secret to silky cabbage that cooks in less time turns out to be basic.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Red cabbage is inexpensive, long storing, widely available, and strikingly beautiful. Because it takes longer to mature than other varieties, it's also impressively sturdy. For that reason, a quick sauté can leave it unappealingly tough, so I prefer a tenderizing braise. The cabbage not only turns silky but also melts into a uniform and vivid bright purple, making it a cheerful dish to enjoy in late fall and winter, when food tends toward the brown and beige sections of the color wheel.

As I cast my mind back over the many braised red cabbage recipes I'd eaten and made, a theme emerged: The dish always has a sweet-and-sour profile. Research revealed that this isn't a coincidence. Red cabbage gets its color from pH-sensitive compounds called anthocyanins, and if the cooking liquid skews even a little alkaline (tap water rarely comes in at a perfect 7 on the pH scale), the cabbage can turn an unappetizing blue color. A little acid in the form of wine, vinegar, or citrus juice keeps things rosy, and then some sugar balances it out.

Vinegar punches up red cabbage's flavor—and keeps its color bright—but don't add it too soon, or you'll prolong the cooking.

My usual cooking method is to fry some chopped bacon, reserve it as a garnish, and then sauté some alliums (often shallots) in the leftover fat. Then I add the thinly sliced cabbage and water or stock with a shot of acidic liquid (typically vinegar). It's a simple way to do things, but I find that it generally takes more than an hour for the cabbage to fully soften.

Years ago, I learned that adding some acid to the cooking water can keep vegetables firm by strengthening the pectin in their cell walls. It's a handy trick if you're boiling potatoes for a salad, but now it occurred to me that adding the color-preserving vinegar to my cabbage at the outset was probably slowing the cooking.

I tried braising the cabbage in plain water without any vinegar, and sure enough it took just 30 minutes to soften. But now, unsurprisingly, the cabbage was blue. Would adding vinegar at this point correct the color? I poured a glug of red wine vinegar into the pot to find out, and happily, the bright-purple color returned instantly.

The bacon and shallots provided plenty of savory backbone, and the sugar and vinegar supplied the right sweet-and-sour profile, but the cabbage cried out for a couple finishing touches. A freshly grated apple added toward the end of cooking contributed freshness, and a generous spoonful of Dijon mustard gave the dish a subtle but pervasive piquancy. A handful of bright-green chopped parsley accented the deep purple of the cabbage nicely. And that's how I raised my braising game.

HOW TO SLICE CABBAGE

Turning a whole head of cabbage into thin slivers isn't intuitive. Here's how we like to do it.

1. Quarter cabbage through base; cut core out of each quarter.

2. Separate each quarter into thin stacks; slice stacks crosswise into thin strips.

BRAISED RED CABBAGE WITH APPLE, BACON, AND SHALLOTS

SERVES 6 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

Red cabbage is the sturdiest variety of cabbage. Do not substitute another variety—the cooking time will be different. To make grating easier, peel the apple and then grate all around the core. Don't worry if the cabbage takes on a bluish cast in step 1; the addition of vinegar in step 2 will correct the color. This cabbage makes a great accompaniment to rich meats such as pork and beef.

- 4 slices bacon, chopped
- 2 shallots, minced
- 1 head red cabbage (2 pounds), cored and sliced ¼ inch thick
- 1 cup water
- 1¼ teaspoons table salt
- 1 Pink Lady or Gala apple
- 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar, plus extra for seasoning
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, divided
- ¼ teaspoon pepper

1. Cook bacon in Dutch oven over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until fat is rendered and bacon is browned and crispy, 8 to 10 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer bacon to paper towel–lined plate; let cool. Add shallots to fat left in pot and cook, stirring occasionally, until golden and slightly softened, 2 to 3 minutes. Add cabbage, water, and salt; increase heat to high; and bring to boil. Adjust heat to maintain simmer. Cover and cook until cabbage is tender but still intact, about 30 minutes, stirring halfway through cooking. While cabbage is cooking, peel apple and grate on large holes of box grater.

2. Stir apple, vinegar, sugar, and mustard into cabbage. Increase heat to high and continue to cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until liquid has evaporated, 2 to 5 minutes longer. Off heat, stir in 1 tablespoon parsley and pepper and season with salt and extra vinegar to taste. Transfer to shallow serving bowl, sprinkle with bacon and remaining 1 tablespoon parsley, and serve.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/DEC20

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE KLISE; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Spanish Migas

This hearty one-dish meal takes leftover bread from stale to sublime.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Like most bakers, I typically have a hunk (or three) of stale bread lying around my kitchen. As such, I am well acquainted with the satisfaction that comes from breathing new life into a hardened loaf. A prime example is the outstanding Spanish dish known as migas ("migas" means "crumbs"). It involves moistening crumbs (and larger pieces of bread) with water and then frying them in fat along with lots of garlic, chorizo, and smoked paprika. Some of the water evaporates as the bread sizzles, but much of it is pushed into the bread starch, creating crisp and chewy morsels imbued with the flavors of garlic and pork. It's great stuff.

Some cooks include a second pork product such as pork belly, bacon, or Spanish ham for depth (and more fat); others fold in produce like peppers, hearty greens, mushrooms, or even grapes. The mix-ins are cut into bite-size pieces and tossed with the bread to create a hearty hash that can be served as tapas or topped with eggs for breakfast, brunch, or dinner.

Making great migas is primarily about getting the bread right: The proper texture, which I fondly refer to as "crunchewy," is best accomplished by starting with a rustic, crusty loaf; removing the thick bottom crust; and soaking it in water. I came up with a method that works with bread of any degree of freshness: Begin with ⅓ cup of water for 5 cups of cubed bread, and then gently knead until the pieces break down. If the bread resists falling apart, add water 1 tablespoon at a time until it yields.

With the bread ready, I fried slices of soft Spanish-style chorizo in olive oil (harder, more aged sausage dried out too quickly during frying) with smashed whole garlic cloves. I included thick-cut bacon to provide a layer of smokiness as well as extra fat for frying the bread, which I did after removing the meat and garlic from the pan with a slotted spoon. Once the pieces were golden and crisp on the outside, I sautéed red bell and Cubanelle peppers. The former offered sweetness, and the latter provided a slight bitter counterpoint. Once I returned the meat to the pan, I drizzled on sherry vinegar to help balance the richness and added a colorful shower of minced parsley.

Finally, I topped the migas with fried eggs cooked sunny-side up so that the softly set yolks would spill onto the porky, garlicky bread. Not a bad way to use up a leftover loaf.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Frying the bread for this hash infuses it with the heady flavors of chorizo, bacon, garlic, and paprika.

SPANISH MIGAS WITH FRIED EGGS

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

Fresh or stale bread can be used here. Buy fully cooked Spanish-style chorizo that is somewhat soft; if you can't find it, substitute linguica. Anaheim chiles can be used in place of the Cubanelles. Serve as a hearty breakfast or brunch or with a salad for dinner.

- ⅓ cup water, plus extra as needed
- 1 teaspoon table salt, divided
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika, divided
- 5 (¾-inch-thick) slices rustic, crusty bread (9 ounces), bottom crust removed, cut into ½- to ¾-inch cubes (5 cups)
- 6 large eggs
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 6 ounces Spanish-style chorizo sausage, halved lengthwise and sliced ¼ inch thick
- 2 slices thick-cut bacon, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 4 garlic cloves, smashed and peeled
- 2 Cubanelle peppers, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- ½ teaspoon sherry vinegar
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley, divided

1. Whisk water, ½ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon paprika in large bowl until salt is dissolved. Add bread and knead gently with your hands until liquid is absorbed and half of bread has broken down into smaller pieces. If bread does not break down, add extra water, 1 tablespoon at a time, and continue to knead until you have mix of bigger and smaller pieces interspersed with a few crumbs. Set aside. Crack 3 eggs into small bowl. Repeat with remaining 3 eggs and second small bowl. Set aside eggs.

2. Heat oil, chorizo, bacon, and garlic in 12-inch nonstick or carbon-steel skillet over medium heat, stirring frequently, until bacon fat is rendered and bacon is just beginning to crisp at edges, 6 to 8 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer chorizo and bacon to medium bowl; discard garlic. Reserve 2 tablespoons fat. Pour remaining fat over bread mixture and toss to combine. Add bread to now-empty skillet and cook over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until smallest pieces are browned and crisp throughout and larger pieces are crisp on exterior and moist within, 12 to 15 minutes. Return bread mixture to now-empty bowl.

3. Add 1 tablespoon reserved fat, Cubanelle and bell peppers, remaining ½ teaspoon salt, and remaining ½ teaspoon paprika to now-empty skillet. Cook over high heat until peppers are softened and slightly blistered, 3 to 5 minutes. Return chorizo mixture to skillet with peppers and cook, stirring frequently, until heated through, about 30 seconds. Sprinkle with vinegar and 2 teaspoons parsley and toss to combine. Transfer to bowl with bread and toss to combine. Transfer to wide serving bowl.

4. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon reserved fat in now-empty skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Swirl to coat skillet. Working quickly, pour 1 bowl of eggs in 1 side of skillet and second bowl of eggs in other side. Cover and cook for 1 minute. Remove skillet from heat and let sit, covered, for 15 to 45 seconds for runny yolks (white around edge of yolk will be barely opaque), 45 to 60 seconds for soft but set yolks, and about 2 minutes for medium-set yolks. Transfer eggs to top of migas, sprinkle with remaining 1 teaspoon parsley, and serve.

Getting to "Crunchewy"

Properly hydrating the bread (either fresh or stale loaves) for migas ensures the proper crunchy-chewy texture once it is fried. Add ⅓ cup of water to 5 cups of bread cubes, and then knead in more as needed until you have a mix of bigger and smaller pieces interspersed with a few crumbs.

How to Make Crumpets

Holey and spongy, crispy and chewy, crumpets can be hard to find in the United States. Homemade versions have fallen short—until now.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Ten years. That's how long I've been trying to make crumpets at home. When I lived in Scotland, I routinely bought packages of the thick, yeasted rounds at the grocery store, toasted them, and then slathered them with butter and jam or creamed honey. They reminded me of the English muffins I'd eaten growing up, but with their own charming features: exteriors that crisp up when toasted and moist, slightly elastic interiors full of deep holes that capture anything spread across them.

Leftovers freeze well and toast up nicely.

Making my own crumpets seemed logical when I moved back to the United States and realized that they're not nearly as widely available. Plus, I figured homemade specimens would easily outclass the commercial ones. But even after trying no less than 15 recipes, I hadn't made a single crumpet as good as one from the supermarket. The biggest problem? Their holes didn't reach all the way to the top—and a crumpet without holes at the top is just a dense, yeasty, chewy pancake.

A holey honeycomb structure is a crumpet's defining feature, and I was determined to find a way to reproduce it. And while I was taking on that challenge, I decided I would also figure out a way to skip using crumpet rings so that everyone could make these treats at home.

Few home cooks own crumpet rings, so we make three large rounds in an 8-inch nonstick skillet and cut them into quarters for sharing.

The Hole Problem

I started by mixing flour, baking powder, yeast, and salt with warm water until I had a thick batter. The two leaveners work in tandem to create a crumpet's unique interior structure: Baking powder creates air bubbles when the batter is mixed, yeast causes the holes to expand when the batter rests, and both yeast and baking powder cause the holes to expand when the batter cooks.

I let the batter rest until it had doubled in volume, about 40 minutes. Following other recipes, I then added a little more water, though I didn't yet understand the purpose of this second addition except that it loosened up the now-thick batter. Then, instead of portioning the batter into 3- or 4-inch crumpet rings set in a skillet, I poured about a third of it into an 8-inch nonstick skillet that I'd lightly greased and heated over a low flame for about 5 minutes. I kept the heat down as the crumpets cooked; every recipe I'd read called for a low-and-slow approach. Subjecting the batter to at least 12 minutes of gentle heat allows it to cook all the way from bottom to top without burning the underside; plus, there is no need to flip the crumpet before the surface is dry, which would smear any uncooked batter into the holes.

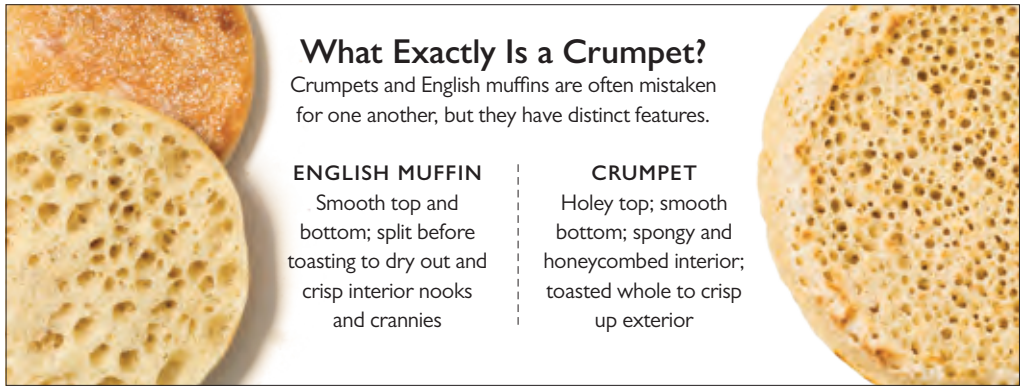
This approach seemed promising: Bubbles rose to the top all over the crumpet and started to burst at the edges, a tantalizing harbinger of holey-ness to come. But after about 10 minutes, the bubbles in the center stopped bursting and I found myself busily—absurdly—popping them with a toothpick. However, this extra effort was all for naught: The batter in the center was still quite loose, so the holes just filled in. Desperate to cook the batter on top, I flipped the crumpets, which just pushed batter into the few holes that had formed.

I didn't know what was causing the failure, so I tried tweaking every variable I could think of, including the hydration of the batter and the amount I poured into the pan. Nothing helped.

Critical Evidence

I'd dug deep when researching crumpet recipes, but I went back to look for anything that might explain why the center tunnels hadn't made it to the top. I even enlisted my colleagues to do the same. That's when *Cook's Illustrated* intern Claire Toliver handed me a lifeline in the form of an obscure scientific paper she found online: D.L. Pyle's "Crumpet Structures: Experimental and Modelling Studies."

Contrary to everything I'd read, Pyle revealed that the biggest key to crumpets' unique structure



What Exactly Is a Crumpet?

Crumpets and English muffins are often mistaken for one another, but they have distinct features.

ENGLISH MUFFIN
Smooth top and bottom; split before toasting to dry out and crisp interior nooks and crannies

CRUMPET
Holey top; smooth bottom; spongy and honeycombed interior; toasted whole to crisp up exterior

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

is not low heat but actually very high heat. It causes the water in the batter to convert rapidly to steam, which quickly expands the carbon dioxide bubbles and powers their upward expansion before the batter has a chance to firm up. (Also, much of the carbon dioxide formed during the rising phase is dissolved in the liquid batter, and the heat forces that carbon dioxide out of solution.) Now I understood the purpose of that second addition of water: Because it doesn't have as much time to be absorbed by the flour, it provides "steam power" that facilitates the creation of the tunnels, giving the crumpets the appropriate light, spongy honeycomb structure. And according to the paper, crumpets should cook through in a mere 3 minutes, not 12.

The Heat Is On

With renewed hope, I mixed up the same formula, but this time I cranked the heat to high just after adding the batter. It was thrilling to watch bubbles rise to the surface and then break, leaving holes that remained open as the top dried out. But as soon as I smelled carbon and saw wisps of smoke emanating from the skillet—then lifted the crumpet to see its charred bottom—I knew I still had work to do.

Fortunately, I realized that the crumpets needed just a quick blast of heat to mostly establish the tunnels; Pyle's paper actually notes that roughly 75 percent of the structure is established within the first 30 seconds of cooking. So I reduced the heat to medium-low after the first 45 seconds of cooking to avoid burning. The only drawback: Without high heat continuing to dry out the batter, the surface of the crumpet remained raw and loose, obscuring the holes. But I came up with two clever fixes.

First, I replaced a portion of the all-purpose flour with cake flour. Because the latter is bleached, its starch granules are better able to absorb water, and they gel at a lower temperature and set sooner, so there was less raw batter left after cooking. Second, I removed the teaspoon or two of residual raw batter by lifting it off with the back of a flat spatula, revealing the holes beneath, and then flipped the crumpet to thoroughly dry out the surface. (I returned the excess batter to the bowl for the next crumpet.)

Once they'd cooled, I cut the crumpets into wedges, toasted them, and then spread them with butter and jam. After 10 years, I'd found a way to make proper spongy, honeycombed crumpets. My own personal holey grail.

THE HOLE POINT

Holes that run from top to bottom are a crumpet's most defining feature, but they're woefully absent in most homemade versions. Here's how we made sure ours are full of them.

CRANK UP THE HEAT

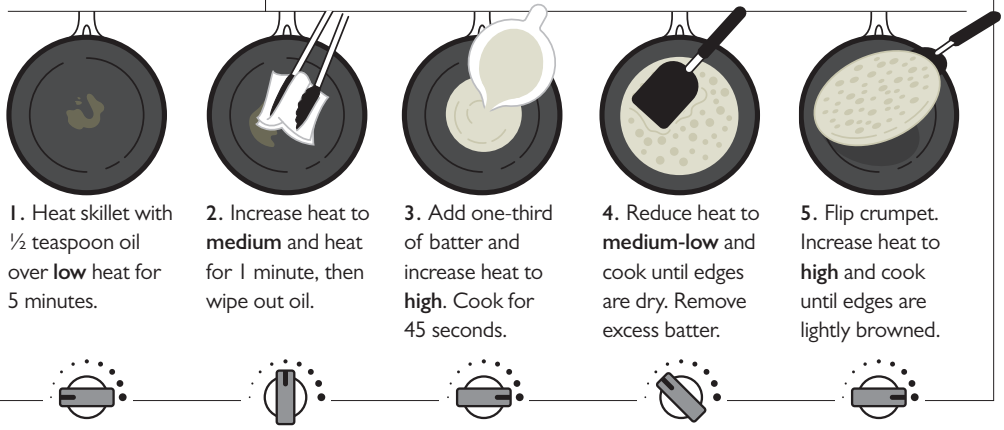
An initial blast of high heat rapidly converts water in the batter to steam, so air bubbles expand and form tunnels that break the batter's surface.

REMOVE EXCESS BATTER

Laying a spatula on the surface and pulling up sharply removes a small amount of raw batter without smearing it over the holes.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

RECIPE SHORTHAND | THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF COOKING CRUMPETS



CRUMPETS

SERVES 6 (MAKES 3 LARGE CRUMPETS)
TOTAL TIME: 50 MINUTES, PLUS 40 MINUTES RESTING

Because the heavily leavened batter will continue to rise as you cook, we call for dividing it into thirds rather than measuring by volume. (The cooked crumpets will all be about the same size.) We developed this recipe on a gas stovetop, which is very responsive. If you're using an electric stovetop, use two burners: Heat the skillet on one burner set to low for 5 minutes, and then increase the heat to medium for 1 minute before adding the batter and set the second burner to high. Move the skillet between the medium and high burners for the appropriate heat level. A digital timer is helpful for this recipe.

- 1 cup (5 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 cup (4 ounces) bleached cake flour
- 2 teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- ¾ teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1½ cups warm water (105 to 110 degrees), divided
- ½ teaspoon vegetable oil
- Salted butter and jam or creamed honey

1. Whisk all-purpose flour, cake flour, yeast, baking powder, and salt together in 8-cup liquid measuring cup. Add 1¼ cups warm water and whisk until smooth. Cover and let rise in warm place until doubled in volume, about 40 minutes.

2. Heat oil in 8-inch nonstick skillet over low heat for at least 5 minutes. While skillet heats, add remaining ¼ cup warm water to batter and whisk until smooth.

3. Increase heat to medium and heat skillet for 1 minute. Using paper towel, wipe out skillet, leaving thin film of oil on bottom and sides. Pour one-third of batter into skillet and increase heat to high. Cook for 45 seconds (bubbles will be visible just under surface of entire crumpet). Reduce heat to medium-low and continue to cook until edges are risen, set, and beginning to dry out, about 4 minutes longer. (Gently lift edge and peek at underside of crumpet occasionally; reduce heat if underside is getting too dark, and increase heat if underside doesn't appear to be browning.)

4. Slide skillet off heat. Place dry, flat spatula on top of crumpet and pull up sharply to remove excess batter and reveal holes. Scrape excess batter from spatula back into measuring cup. Repeat procedure until holes are exposed over entire surface. Flip crumpet, return skillet to burner, increase heat to high, and cook until edges of second side are lightly browned, 1 to 2 minutes. Invert crumpet onto wire rack. Immediately add half of remaining batter to skillet. Return skillet to high heat and repeat cooking process (omitting 5-minute preheat). Repeat with remaining batter. Let crumpets cool completely.

5. To serve, cut each crumpet into 4 wedges and toast until crumpets are heated through and exteriors are crisp. Spread crumpets generously with butter and jam or honey and serve. (Untoasted crumpets can be transferred to zipper-lock bag and refrigerated for up to 1 week or frozen for up to 1 month.)

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/APR20

A Fresh Look at Crepes

Brittany, France, is famous for buckwheat crepes filled with savory ingredients. Once you've mastered them, it's easy to swap in other whole-grain flours.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Brittany, France, is renowned for its crepes—but not only the lightly sweet, relatively neutral type that you might sprinkle with sugar or smear with jam. Galettes bretonnes are dark and savory, with a distinctive earthiness that makes them an integral part of a dish, not just an understated wrapper. That's because they are made from rich, mineral-y buckwheat, which thrives in the cool Breton climate. A galette complète is the classic preparation; it consists of a crepe glossed with salted butter and folded around salty-nutty ham and Gruyère and an oozy egg.

Crepes are simply thin, unleavened pancakes, and after a bit of practice—our recipes yield two more crepes than are needed for the fillings—you'll be able to cook them with confidence. They also keep beautifully, and a stash of savory crepes can be a secret weapon for a stylish meal in a hurry.

I suspected that simply swapping buckwheat for all-purpose flour in our sweet crepe recipe wouldn't be exactly right, since buckwheat is unrelated to wheat and is gluten-free, but doing so would at least get the development process started. I whisked buckwheat flour together with salt (omitting the sugar), milk, eggs, and melted salted butter and then heated a nonstick skillet over low heat for 5 minutes. Thorough heating is imperative for even browning. I swirled ⅓ cup of batter around the pan to create a thin pancake, and when the surface was dry and the edges were browned, I loosened the sides with a rubber spatula and flipped the crepe with my fingertips to brown the second side.

Due to the lack of structure-forming gluten, these crepes had little flexibility and the dry fragility of burnt parchment. This explained why many recipes call for blending in some gluten-forming all-purpose flour. I followed suit, ultimately finding that a mixture with 75 percent buckwheat flour and 25 percent all-purpose flour yielded tender yet resilient crepes.

The all-purpose flour also helped balance the buckwheat's robust flavor. But for some, its mineral-y, bitter edge was still too strong, so I doubled the butter and salt, which made the crepes nutty and smooth.

Instead of building each galette complète individually in a skillet (the typical approach), I assembled four on a baking sheet and popped them into a hot oven.

In the galette complète, a nutty buckwheat crepe frames a filling of thinly sliced ham, melted Gruyère, and a sunny-side up egg.

With my galettes complètes complete, I saw an opportunity to experiment with other whole-grain flours. Rye and whole-wheat seemed ideal, since both have loads of character. And because these flours are gluten-forming, I suspected that I might be able to use 100 percent rye flour or 100 percent whole-wheat flour in my recipe. A few tests proved that I was correct; after adjusting the hydration levels, I was churning out stacks of big-personality crepes—and fresh fillings to go with them.

The buckwheat, whole-wheat, and rye crepes each paired well with all the fillings I came up with, but I particularly like the rye crepes with a smoked salmon, pickled shallot, and caper-studded crème fraîche combo inspired by blini toppings. The earthy whole-wheat crepes are a lovely match for a rich mixture of cremini mushrooms and asparagus bound with cream and Pecorino Romano cheese; they are also terrific stuffed with garlicky sautéed cherry tomatoes and lemony ricotta cheese.

BUCKWHEAT CREPES

MAKES 10 CREPES TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

The crepes will give off steam as they cook, but if at any point the skillet begins to smoke, remove it from the burner and turn down the heat. Salted butter is traditional, though unsalted butter can be substituted. If using unsalted butter, add an additional ¼ teaspoon of salt to the batter. Stacking the crepes on a wire rack allows excess steam to escape so that they won't stick together.

- ½ teaspoon vegetable oil
- ¾ cup (3⅜ ounces) buckwheat flour
- ¼ cup (1¼ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 2 cups milk
- 3 large eggs
- 4 tablespoons salted butter, melted and cooled

1. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over low heat for at least 5 minutes.

2. While skillet heats, whisk buckwheat flour, all-purpose flour, and salt together in medium bowl. In second bowl, whisk together milk and eggs. Add half of milk mixture to flour mixture and whisk until smooth. Add melted butter and whisk until incorporated. Whisk in remaining milk mixture until smooth.

3. Using paper towel, wipe out skillet, leaving thin film of oil on bottom and sides. Increase heat

MAKING CREPES (IT'S ALL IN THE WRIST)

LIFT AND TILT Lift skillet off heat and tilt slightly away from you. Pour ⅓ cup batter into far side of skillet.

SWIRL Turn your wrist to rotate pan clockwise and spread batter over entire skillet bottom.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

to medium and let skillet heat for 1 minute. Test heat of skillet by placing 1 teaspoon batter in center and cooking for 20 seconds. If mini crepe is golden brown on bottom, skillet is properly heated; if it is too light or too dark, adjust heat accordingly and retest.

4. Lift skillet off heat and pour ⅓ cup batter into far side of skillet; swirl gently in clockwise direction until batter evenly covers bottom of skillet. Return skillet to heat and cook crepe, without moving it, until surface is dry and crepe starts to brown at edges, loosening crepe from sides of skillet with rubber spatula, about 35 seconds. Gently slide spatula underneath edge of crepe, grasp edge with your fingertips, and flip crepe. Cook until second side is lightly spotted, about 20 seconds. Transfer crepe to wire rack. Return skillet to heat for 10 seconds before repeating with remaining batter. As crepes are done, stack on rack. Serve.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Crepes can be wrapped tightly in plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 3 days or stacked between sheets of parchment paper and frozen for up to 1 month. Allow frozen crepes to thaw completely in refrigerator before using.

RYE CREPES

Substitute 1 cup (5½ ounces) rye flour for buckwheat flour and omit all-purpose flour. Increase milk to 2½ cups. Substitute unsalted butter for salted butter.

WHOLE-WHEAT CREPES

Substitute 1 cup (5½ ounces) whole-wheat flour for buckwheat flour and omit all-purpose flour. Substitute unsalted butter for salted butter.

GALETTES COMPLÈTES (BUCKWHEAT CREPES WITH HAM, EGG, AND CHEESE)

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

Serve with salad for a light lunch or brunch.

- 4 Buckwheat Crepes
- 4 thin slices deli ham (2 ounces)
- 5½ ounces Gruyère cheese, shredded (1⅓ cups)
- 4 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon salted butter, melted
- 4 teaspoons chopped fresh chives

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper and spray with vegetable oil spray.

2. Arrange crepes spotty side down on prepared sheet (they will hang over edge). Working with 1 crepe at a time, place 1 slice of ham in center of crepe, followed by ⅓ cup Gruyère, covering ham evenly. Make small well in center of cheese. Crack 1 egg into well. Fold in 4 sides, pressing to adhere.

3. Brush crepe edges with melted butter and transfer sheet to oven. Bake until egg whites are uniformly set and yolks have filmed over but are still runny, 8 to 10 minutes. Using thin metal spatula, transfer each crepe to plate and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon chives. Serve immediately.

Earthy, faintly spicy rye crepes make an ideal wrapper for smoked salmon, crème fraîche, and pickled shallots.

RYE CREPES WITH SMOKED SALMON, CRÈME FRAÎCHE, AND PICKLED SHALLOTS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

Our favorite smoked salmon is Spence & Co. Traditional Scottish Style Smoked Salmon.

- ⅓ cup distilled white vinegar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 shallots, sliced thin
- ¾ cup crème fraîche
- 3 tablespoons capers, rinsed and chopped
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped chives
- 1½ teaspoons grated lemon zest plus 1½ tablespoons juice
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 8 Rye Crepes
- 8 ounces smoked salmon

1. Combine vinegar and sugar in small bowl and microwave until sugar is dissolved and vinegar is steaming, about 30 seconds. Add shallots and stir to combine. Cover and let cool completely, about 30 minutes. Drain shallots and discard liquid.

2. Combine crème fraîche, capers, chives, lemon zest and juice, salt, and pepper in medium bowl.

3. Place crepes on large plate and invert second plate over crepes. Microwave until crepes are warm, 30 to 45 seconds (45 to 60 seconds if crepes have cooled completely). Working with 1 crepe at a time, spread 2 tablespoons crème fraîche mixture across bottom half of crepe, followed by 1 ounce smoked salmon and one-quarter of shallots. Fold crepes in half and then into quarters. Transfer to plate and serve.

WHOLE-WHEAT CREPES WITH CREAMY SAUTÉED MUSHROOMS AND ASPARAGUS

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 45 MINUTES

You can substitute white mushrooms for the cremini, if desired. Our recipe for Whole-Wheat Crepes with Sautéed Cherry Tomatoes and Ricotta is available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/apr20.

- 1½ pounds cremini mushrooms, trimmed and sliced ¼ inch thick
- ¼ cup water
- ½ teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 shallot, minced
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 8 ounces asparagus, trimmed and cut on bias ¼ inch thick
- ⅔ cup heavy cream
- 6 tablespoons grated Pecorino Romano cheese
- ½ teaspoon grated lemon zest
- 8 Whole-Wheat Crepes

1. Combine mushrooms and water in 12-inch nonstick skillet and cook over high heat, stirring occasionally, until skillet is almost dry and mushrooms begin to sizzle, 4 to 8 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-high. Add oil and toss until mushrooms are evenly coated. Continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until mushrooms are well browned, 4 to 8 minutes longer. Reduce heat to medium.

2. Push mushrooms to sides of skillet. Add butter to center. Once butter has melted, add shallot, salt, and pepper to center and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add asparagus and cook, stirring occasionally, until just tender, about 1 minute. Reduce heat to medium-low, add cream, and cook, stirring occasionally, until reduced by half, about 1 minute. Off heat, add Pecorino and lemon zest, stirring until cheese is melted and mushroom mixture is creamy.

3. Place crepes on large plate and invert second plate over crepes. Microwave until crepes are warm, 30 to 45 seconds (45 to 60 seconds if crepes have cooled completely). Working with 1 crepe at a time, spread ⅓ cup mushroom mixture across bottom half of crepe. Fold crepes in half and then into quarters. Transfer to plate and serve.

Yeasted Doughnuts

The plush, tender chew and satiny glaze of freshly fried doughnuts is irresistible. The satisfaction of making them yourself is unbeatable.

BY ANNIE PETITO

One dough; more than half a dozen colorful, flavorful ways to embellish it.

The best doughnuts are the freshest doughnuts, and the freshest doughnuts are the ones you make yourself.

That's true for all doughnuts but especially true for yeasted doughnuts. When you bite into one that's freshly fried, the soft, gently elastic dough yields in a way that feels satisfying and indulgent even before you taste just how buttery it is, and the glossy glaze dissolves in your mouth without a trace of graininess. Those ephemeral qualities won't just satiate your craving for sweets; they'll delight you—and ruin your taste for anything that's more than a few hours out of the oil.

That's what happened to me, and it's why I spent the better part of two months sweating over my ideal yeasted doughnut formula. I rolled, cut, and fried my way through cloyingly rich doughs and leaner ones with bready chew; battled gas bubbles that made the doughnuts puff up—and deflate—like balloons; and learned that the pale ring that forms around the doughnut's midsection is a sign of a properly risen, light doughnut. The results—as iconic as what you'd get from the best doughnut shop, but fresher—were worth it. Plus, knowing that I can churn out pro-caliber sweets has been so empowering that I've since wondered, as Homer Simpson famously did, if there's anything doughnuts can't do.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20**

D'oh

Yeasted doughnuts are made from bread dough enriched with fat, sugar, and dairy. You stir together flour, sugar, and yeast in a stand mixer; moisten the dry ingredients with milk or water and eggs and mix to form a cohesive mass; work in salt and softened butter (waiting to add the salt and fat allows plenty of gluten to develop); and knead until the mixture forms a satiny dough. Then you let it rise for as little as 1 hour or as long as overnight; roll it out to about ½ inch thick; cut out rings (or rounds, if you're filling them); let them rise again; and deep-fry them. Last comes the sweet part: glazing or frosting them and then filling them with jam or cream if desired.

The trick was calibrating how enriched the dough should be to produce moist doughnuts with light chew and restrained sweetness. Getting it right was largely a question of how much fat, sugar, and water I added in relation to the flour, so I started by making doughnuts from four classic doughs that span a range of richness and sweetness: brioche; challah; American sandwich bread; and the plush, feathery Japanese milk bread called shokupan, which contains more fat and gluten than ordinary sandwich bread.

Butter made up nearly half the brioche dough, which explained why its doughnuts fried up heavy. The leaner, lower-hydration challah and sandwich formulas were dry. The moderately rich, relatively wet milk bread dough yielded moist, airy doughnuts, but their crumb was too chewy. And when I fried them, those aforementioned air bubbles left gaping holes between the crust and crumb.

Making more tender doughnuts was simply a matter of minimizing gluten development: I switched from bread flour to all-purpose, which contains fewer gluten-forming proteins, and boosted the sweetness and fat in the dough (both of which interfere with

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

gluten development) by adding a bit more granulated sugar and using all milk instead of a combination of milk and water. And I did away with the big gas bubbles by slightly lowering the dough's hydration: Less liquid made the crumb tighter, so the gas bubbles that formed during fermentation couldn't grow big and coarse. Ultimately, I landed on a formula that made a drier dough but doughnuts that were still moist and tender.

Burden of Proof

Before glazing, frosting, and filling the doughnuts, I thought about how the timing of the first and second rises affected when the doughnuts would be ready to eat. If I wanted them for breakfast, I didn't want to spend the better part of the morning waiting for the dough to rise, so I mixed up more dough, let it rise at room temperature for an hour (to jump-start yeast activity, which would slow down in the fridge), and refrigerated it overnight. This cold fermentation step built more convenient timing into the recipe and allowed the dough to develop more complex flavor and its gluten to relax so that it was pliable. I easily rolled out the chilled dough into a 10 by 13-inch rectangle and then stamped out 12 rings with 3- and 1-inch cutters.

The drawback to working with chilled dough was that the doughnuts took 2 hours to rise at room temperature, so I sped up the process by setting up a loaf pan with boiling water on the bottom rack of my oven and the doughnuts and their holes (set on a parchment-lined baking sheet) on the middle rack. In the steamy environment, the doughnuts puffed up in about 30 minutes.

Fry, Fry Away

During that time, I heated 2 quarts of oil to 360 degrees in a roomy Dutch oven (a wok would also work well), where I could fry four doughnuts at a time. When I placed them in the oil, the rings floated calmly like inner tubes—no messy splatter—for about 60 to 90 seconds per side. I fished them out when they were golden brown with pale rings around their midsections—a visual cue that the dough had risen properly and expanded evenly during frying—and transferred them to a rack to cool slightly while I mixed up the glaze.

Confectioners' sugar and hot water produced a thin, opaque fluid that dried sheer; those ingredients also made a satiny base for my chocolate, coffee, and matcha frostings. And as an homage to Homer Simpson himself, I made a vivid magenta raspberry frosting and topped it with rainbow sprinkles. (To make jelly and Boston cream, I dropped the oil temperature to 330 degrees, since frying at a lower temperature for a bit longer ensured that the holeless rounds cooked through, and I piped in raspberry jam and pastry cream, respectively.)

The kitchen looked like a proper doughnut shop: pillowy rings, rounds, and holes embellished in more than half a dozen sweet, colorful ways. Making and eating them made me feel like a pro—and so happy.

YEASTED DOUGHNUTS

MAKES 12 DOUGHNUTS
TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS, PLUS 10 HOURS RESTING

You'll need two large baking sheets and two wire racks for this recipe. You'll also need 3-inch and 1-inch round cutters. For the best results, weigh the flour for the doughnuts and the confectioners' sugar for the glaze. Heating the oil slowly will make it easier to control the temperature when frying. Use a Dutch oven that holds 6 quarts or more. You can omit the glaze and frost the doughnuts with our Chocolate Frosting or Raspberry Frosting (recipes follow). Our recipes for Coffee Frosting, Matcha Frosting, and Boston Cream Doughnuts are available to web subscribers at CooksIllustrated.com/jun20.

Doughnuts

- **4½ cups (22½ ounces) all-purpose flour**
- **½ cup (3½ ounces) granulated sugar**
- **1 teaspoon instant or rapid-rise yeast**
- **1½ cups milk**
- **1 large egg**
- **1½ teaspoons table salt**
- **8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and softened**
- **2 quarts vegetable oil for frying**

Glaze

- **3¼ cups (13 ounces) confectioners' sugar**
- **½ cup hot water**
- **Pinch table salt**

1. FOR THE DOUGHNUTS: Stir flour, sugar, and yeast together in bowl of stand mixer. Add milk and egg and mix with rubber spatula until all ingredients are moistened. Fit stand mixer with dough hook and mix on medium-low speed until cohesive mass forms, about 2 minutes, scraping down bowl if necessary. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and let stand for 20 minutes.

2. Add salt and mix on medium-low speed until dough is smooth and elastic and clears sides of bowl, 5 to 7 minutes. With mixer running, add butter, a few pieces at a time, and continue to mix until butter is fully incorporated and dough is smooth and elastic and clears sides of bowl, 7 to 13 minutes longer, scraping down bowl halfway through mixing. Transfer dough to lightly greased large bowl, flip dough, and form into ball. Cover bowl with plastic. Let sit at room temperature for 1 hour. Transfer to refrigerator and chill overnight (or up to 48 hours).

3. Adjust oven racks to lowest and middle positions. Place loaf pan on lower rack. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper and grease parchment. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter. Press into 8-inch square of even thickness, expelling as much air as possible. Roll dough into 10 by 13-inch rectangle, about ½ inch thick. Using 3-inch round cutter dipped in flour, cut 12 rounds. Using 1-inch cutter dipped in flour, cut hole out of center of each round. Transfer doughnuts and holes to prepared sheet. (If desired, use 1-inch cutter to cut small rounds from remaining dough. Transfer to sheet with doughnuts.) Bring kettle or small saucepan of water to boil.

4. Pour 1 cup boiling water into loaf pan. Place sheet on upper rack, uncovered. Close oven and allow doughnuts to rise until dough increases in height by 50 percent and springs back very slowly when pressed with your knuckle, 45 minutes to 1 hour.

5. FOR THE GLAZE: Whisk sugar, water, and salt in medium bowl until smooth.

6. About 20 minutes before end of rising time, add oil to large Dutch oven until it measures about 1½ inches deep and heat over medium-low heat to 360 degrees. Set wire rack in second rimmed baking sheet and line with triple layer of paper towels. Using both your hands, gently place 4 risen doughnuts in oil. Cook until golden brown on undersides, 1 to 1½ minutes, adjusting burner as necessary to maintain oil temperature between 350 and 365 degrees.

STEP BY STEP | TIME TO MAKE THE DOUGHNUTS

After letting the dough rise overnight, you can have fresh, pro-caliber doughnuts on the table in time for breakfast.

ROLL dough into 10 by 13-inch, ½-inch-thick rectangle.

CUT 12 rounds and holes using 3- and 1-inch cutters.

LET RISE until dough slowly springs back when pressed.

FRY in 360-degree oil until golden brown; flip and repeat.

DIP in glaze and let stand on wire rack until dry.

Using spider skimmer, flip doughnuts and cook until second sides are browned, 1 to 1½ minutes. Transfer doughnuts to prepared rack. Return oil to 360 degrees and repeat with remaining doughnuts. For doughnut holes, transfer all to oil and stir gently and constantly until golden brown, about 2 minutes. Transfer to prepared rack to cool. Let doughnuts sit until cool enough to handle, at least 5 minutes.

7. Set clean wire rack in now-empty sheet. Working with 1 doughnut at a time, dip both sides of doughnut in glaze, allowing excess to drip back into bowl. Place on unlined rack. Repeat with doughnut holes. Let doughnuts and holes stand until glaze has become slightly matte and dry to touch, 15 to 30 minutes, before serving.

CHOCOLATE FROSTING

MAKES 1½ CUPS TOTAL TIME: 20 MINUTES

If the frosting stiffens before you use it, microwave it at 50 percent power, stirring every 30 seconds, until it is smooth and fluid. This frosting can be made up to 48 hours in advance. To frost the doughnuts, dip the top half of one cooled doughnut at a time into the frosting until it is evenly coated, allowing the excess to drip back into the bowl. Invert the doughnut and place it on a wire rack. Let the doughnuts stand until the frosting is dry to the touch, 15 to 30 minutes, before serving.

- 4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine
- ½ cup water
- 2 cups (8 ounces) confectioners' sugar
- 2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- Pinch table salt

Microwave chocolate and water in medium bowl at 50 percent power until chocolate is melted, about 30 seconds. Whisk in sugar, cocoa, and salt until smooth and fluid. Let cool slightly before using.

RASPBERRY FROSTING

MAKES 1 CUP TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

If the frosting stiffens before you use it, add hot water, 1 teaspoon at a time, until the frosting is thick but fluid. To frost the doughnuts, dip the top half of one cooled doughnut at a time into the frosting until it is evenly coated, allowing the excess to drip back into the bowl. Invert the doughnut and place it on a wire rack. Top the doughnuts with rainbow sprinkles, if desired; let them stand until the frosting has become slightly matte and is dry to the touch, 15 to 30 minutes, before serving.

- 8 ounces (1⅔ cups) frozen raspberries, thawed
- 2 cups (8 ounces) confectioners' sugar
- Pinch table salt

Process raspberries in blender until smooth. Strain puree through fine-mesh strainer into bowl or measuring cup. Measure out 6 tablespoons puree for frosting (reserve remaining puree for another use). In medium bowl, whisk sugar, salt, and puree until smooth.

How We Raised the Dough(nut)

Enriched, fried, and coated in sugar, yeasted doughnuts are fundamentally decadent. But thanks to ample—not excessive—richness and sweetness, plus proper rising, our dough fries up plush but light with tender chew and is just the right canvas for glazing, frosting, or filling.

1. SOFT, MOIST CRUMB
A careful balance of fat, sugar, and liquid produced tender doughnuts with delicate chew.

2. THIN, GOLDEN CRUST
Fried in moderately hot oil for about a minute per side, the dough's exterior sets and browns just enough.

3. "MIDRIFF" The pale belt that forms around the dough's midsection during frying shows that the crumb is airy and expanded evenly.

JELLY DOUGHNUTS

MAKES 12 DOUGHNUTS
TOTAL TIME: 1¾ HOURS, PLUS 10 HOURS RESTING

You'll need two large baking sheets and one wire rack for this recipe. You'll also need a 3-inch round cutter and a ¼-inch round pastry tip. For the best results, weigh the flour for the doughnuts. Heating the oil slowly will make it easier to control the temperature when frying. Use a Dutch oven that holds 6 quarts or more.

Doughnuts

- 4½ cups (22½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ½ cup (3½ ounces) sugar
- 1 teaspoon instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1½ cups milk
- 1 large egg
- 1½ teaspoons table salt
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and softened
- 2 quarts vegetable oil for frying

Filling and Coating

- 1 cup (7 ounces) sugar
- 1½ cups seedless raspberry jam

1. FOR THE DOUGHNUTS: Stir flour, sugar, and yeast together in bowl of stand mixer. Add milk and egg and mix with rubber spatula until all ingredients are moistened. Fit stand mixer with dough hook and mix on medium-low speed until cohesive mass forms, about 2 minutes, scraping down bowl if necessary. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and let stand for 20 minutes.

2. Add salt and mix on medium-low speed until dough is smooth and elastic and clears sides of bowl, 5 to 7 minutes. With mixer running, add butter, a few pieces at a time, and continue to mix until butter is fully incorporated and dough is smooth and elastic and clears sides of bowl, 7 to 13 minutes longer, scraping down bowl halfway through mixing. Transfer dough to lightly greased large bowl, flip dough, and form into ball. Cover bowl with plastic. Let sit at room temperature for 1 hour. Transfer to refrigerator and chill overnight (or up to 48 hours).

3. Adjust oven racks to lowest and middle positions. Place loaf pan on lower rack. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment and grease parchment. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter. Press into 8-inch square of even thickness, expelling as much air as possible. Roll dough into 10 by 13-inch rectangle, about ½ inch thick. Using 3-inch round cutter dipped in flour, cut 12 rounds. Transfer doughnuts to prepared sheet. Bring kettle or small saucepan of water to boil.

4. Pour 1 cup boiling water into loaf pan. Place sheet on upper rack, uncovered. Close oven and allow doughnuts to rise until dough increases in height by 50 percent and springs back very slowly when pressed with your knuckle, about 1 hour.

5. About 20 minutes before end of rising time, add oil to large Dutch oven until it measures about 1½ inches deep and heat over medium-low heat to 330 degrees. Set wire rack in second rimmed baking sheet and line with triple layer of paper towels. Using both your hands, gently place 4 risen doughnuts in oil. Cook until golden brown on undersides, 1½ to 2 minutes, adjusting burner as necessary to maintain oil temperature between 325 and 340 degrees. Using spider skimmer, flip doughnuts and cook until second sides are browned, 1½ to 2 minutes. Transfer doughnuts to prepared rack. Return oil to 330 degrees and repeat with remaining doughnuts. Let cool completely, about 20 minutes.

6. FOR THE FILLING AND COATING: Place sugar in small bowl. Spoon jam into pastry bag or zipper-lock bag fitted with ¼-inch round pastry tip.

7. Working with 1 doughnut at a time, coat all sides of doughnut in sugar and return to rack. Insert paring knife through side of 1 doughnut until tip almost reaches opposite edge. Swing knife through doughnut, creating large pocket. Repeat with remaining doughnuts. Stand doughnuts slit side up in 13 by 9-inch baking pan.

8. To fill doughnuts, insert pastry tip ¾ inch into opening and squeeze gently until jam just starts to appear around opening, about 2 tablespoons jam per doughnut. Let doughnuts stand in pan for 10 minutes to allow jam to settle. Serve.

Lahmajun

Long before pizza came along, Armenians were baking crisp, savory meat-and-vegetable-topped flatbreads that some consider the original thin-crust pie.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

I'm Armenian, which means I've been eating lahmajun ("lah-mah-joon") my whole life. My aunties would make it for us when we'd visit, rolling the yeasted dough into paper-thin rounds, spreading the rounds with a film of spiced ground lamb, and baking them until they were crispy and browned. And my mother often brought home boxes of the flatbreads from local Armenian bakeries, keeping them stacked face-to-face between sheets of parchment paper until it was time to reheat them. We'd spray the flatbreads with lemon juice and eat them like pizza (lahmajun predates—and is sometimes considered a precursor to—pizza; see "The Original Pizza?") or turn them into sandwiches by rolling them around a salad of fresh or pickled vegetables.

My love for the dish had always been more than just habitual, but it wasn't until a few years ago that I ate lahmajun so good that it upped my standards for the dish as both an Armenian and a baker. Cooked in a blazing wood-fired oven, the bread had a delicate and crispy paper-thin crust, yet it was still tender within. And the lamb paste—fragrant with garlic and onion; red pepper; tomato; parsley; and earthy, warm spices—tasted rich and vibrant. Part of the difference was the hearth, which made for exceptional browning and rusticity. But the crumb of these flatbreads boasted more flavor and textural contrast between the exterior and interior than premade bakery versions, which tend to be more uniformly tender. In fact, they were more akin to great pizza—and when I made that connection, I realized that sorting out a great recipe was right in my wheelhouse.

Lahmajun is topped with a thin but vibrant layer of ground lamb seasoned with garlic, warm spices, and pepper paste.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

On a Roll

The dough for my Thin-Crust Pizza (January/February 2011) actually seemed like a logical place to start, since it shares many of the assets I had in mind for lahmajun. (This is the same approach to pizza dough I've been using for years, so forgive me if you've heard this one before.) It's a cold-fermented dough that I make in the food processor with bread flour, ice water, a fraction of the amount of yeast you'd normally put into a bread, salt, and a little oil and then shape into a ball that I immediately refrigerate for at least a day. When mixed with water, the bread flour builds up lots of gluten that generates both interior chew and exterior crunch (the gluten sheets that form on the crust's exterior shatter when you bite into them). And the combination of the cold temperature, minimal yeast, and time ensures that the dough ferments gently and gradually, minimizing the formation of large gas bubbles that would make the dough difficult to roll and giving the yeast time to digest sugars in the dough and build up maximum flavor. The lengthy rest also allows the gluten to relax so that the dough is extensible for stretching thin.

But my pizza formula wasn't perfect for lahmajun. For one thing, there was still too much yeast, which made the flatbreads puffy, not flat. They also baked up tough: Lahmajun should be thinner than a typical thin-crust pizza, and the only way to get the dough

really thin was to roll (instead of stretch) it, which overworked the gluten. Upping the dough's hydration (the amount of water in relation to the amount of flour) might have increased tenderness, but doing so would also have made it stickier—and, frankly, the dough was already sticking to the counter, so I was planning to cut back on the water.

For the next few tests, I adjusted the formula until the dough was supple but not sticky and baked up flat. My revised formula contained a mere ⅛ teaspoon of yeast, a little less water, and—in its best, crispiest iteration—King Arthur All-Purpose Flour, which contains more gluten-forming protein than most other all-purpose flours but not as much as bread flour.

After cold-fermenting for 16 hours and resting at room temperature for about 1 hour, the dough was easy to press into 5-inch disks with the heel of my hand. But rolling the disks into paper-thin 12-inch rounds was trickier and still required so much manipulation with the rolling pin that the dough became overworked and snapped back by a couple inches when I transferred it from the counter to the baking peel. The solution was to skip flouring the counter (I merely dusted the dough before rolling to prevent it from sticking to the pin) and use the dough's now-subtle tackiness to anchor it to the counter while I rolled; that way, I didn't have to use as much force to produce thin rounds, and they shrank only a little when I transferred them to the baking peel (see "How to Roll and Top Lahmajun").

Cut and Paste

The lamb topping for lahmajun is more like a meaty veneer than a sauce. It should be moist but not wet; heady from garlic, spices (allspice, paprika, cumin, cayenne), and Turkish pepper paste (for more information, see "Biber Salçası"); and concentrated so that each bite tastes vibrant despite the topping being spread so thin. But those are tricky goals when many of the topping's core components—ground lamb, red bell pepper, onion, and tomato—bring along lots of water.

Some recipes control that water by calling for coarsely chopping the vegetables so that they shed minimal liquid, but I prefer toppings that are finely ground. Blitzing the lamb, vegetables, and seasonings in the food processor guarantees that the topping's texture and flavor will be uniform and replaces most of the knife work with the push of a button. And I found that the trick to keeping the liquid at bay was as simple as going easy on the watery onion, bell pepper, and tomatoes. In fact, I skipped fresh and canned tomatoes in favor of highly concentrated tomato paste.

The real challenge was applying the mixture to the dough, since it's too thick to spread with a spoon or spatula. Lahmajun pros use their hands—arguably the most effective tools for the job—but I came up with a mess-free method: After placing one portion of the topping in the center of a dough round, I covered it with a sheet of plastic wrap. The thin barrier afforded me the dexterity of using my hands but helped me avoid the mess of touching the topping directly. Bonus: I reused the plastic wrap for topping all four dough rounds.

To mimic the wood-fired oven's blazing heat, I set my baking stone on the oven's top rack and ran the oven at 500 degrees for an hour: That way, there would be intense heat both underneath the flatbreads and reflecting onto them from above, with just enough headspace to usher them into and out of the oven. Each round baked up crispy, browned, and fragrant in about 5 minutes, so baking all four of them didn't take any longer than baking a couple of my thin-crust pizzas. I made sure to have lemon wedges ready and waiting, as well as a minty cucumber-tomato salad for rolling up sandwiches. Now I can join the ranks of lahmajun makers in my family.

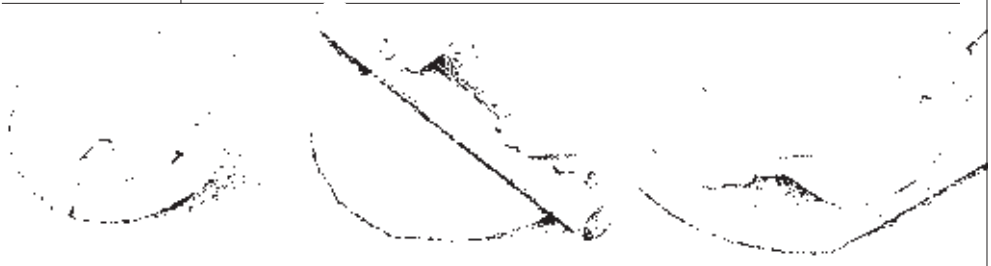
The Original Pizza?

I teach a lot of baking classes, and any time flatbreads are on the agenda, I like to share the perspective of chef, author, and Armenian and Middle Eastern cooking authority Arto der Haroutunian about the relationship between lahmajun and pizza—specifically the tendency for lahmajun to be referred to as "Armenian pizza." He suggests that Middle Eastern meat-and-vegetable-topped flatbreads actually predate Italian versions, so pizza would actually be better thought of as "Italian lahmajun."

This idea has some backing. Scholars agree that flatbreads have been made in the Middle East for more than 14,000 years, and versions topped with meat began appearing in that region around 200 BCE. Flatbreads have also been made in Italy for at least 2,000 years, but pizza as we know it today (bread, cheese, tomatoes) didn't evolve until the 18th century.

In any case, the notion that pizza and I might share the same ancestral homeland goes a long way to explaining my lifelong passion for it.

STEP BY STEP | HOW TO ROLL AND TOP LAHMAJUN



1. Using heel of your hand, press dough ball into 5-inch disk.

2. Using rolling pin, gently roll into 12-inch round.

3. Dust top with flour. Peel dough from counter and flip, floured side down, onto floured baking peel.

4. Place ½ cup topping in center of dough. Cover with 12-inch square sheet of plastic wrap.

5. Using your fingertips, gently spread filling evenly across dough, leaving ⅛-inch border.

6. Peel back plastic and remove (save plastic for use with remaining dough).

INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT

Biber Salçası

A thick, cardinal-red paste made from either sweet or a combination of sweet and hot peppers, biber salçası is a Turkish-made product that's widely used throughout the Levant. Produced by roasting, pureeing, and cooking down or sun-drying the peppers, the paste adds concentrated savory sweetness and depth (and zippy heat, in the case of the spicy version) to classic Levantine dishes such as lahmajun, muhammara, kofte, and red lentil soup, but it can also be used to add those qualities to any dishes where you might otherwise add tomato paste or chiles: soups, stews, and pasta and pizza sauces.

Storage note: Once opened, biber salçası doesn't keep as well as tomato paste, but it does freeze nicely. If you have a large jar, divide any leftovers among several smaller containers and freeze them for later use.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

LAHMAJUN (ARMENIAN FLATBREAD)

SERVES 4 TO 6

TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR, PLUS 17 HOURS RESTING

You'll need a baking peel for this recipe; if you don't have one, use an overturned rimmed baking sheet instead. King Arthur All-Purpose Flour gives these flatbreads the perfect balance of crispness and tenderness, but if it's unavailable, substitute any major brand of all-purpose flour. We strongly recommend weighing the flour and the water. Jarred biber salçası (Turkish red pepper paste) can be found in Middle Eastern grocery stores or online. Be sure to use the mild variety; if it's unavailable, increase the tomato paste in the topping to 2 tablespoons and increase the paprika to 4 teaspoons. Eighty-five percent lean ground beef can be substituted for the lamb, if desired. Eat the lahmajun out of hand, either whole, cut into halves or quarters, folded in half, or rolled into a cylinder. If desired, omit the lemon wedges and serve with Cucumber-Tomato Salad (recipe follows). If serving with the salad, use a slotted spoon to distribute 1 cup of salad evenly along the center third of each lahmajun. Fold the outer thirds of the lahmajun over the filling, one side at a time. Turn the rolled lahmajun seam side down and cut in half crosswise.

Dough

- 3¼ cups (16¼ ounces) King Arthur All-Purpose Flour
- ⅛ teaspoon instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1¼ cups (10 ounces) ice water
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1½ teaspoons table salt
- Vegetable oil spray

Topping

- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into 1-inch pieces
- ¼ small onion
- ¼ cup fresh parsley leaves and tender stems
- 2 tablespoons mild biber salçası
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 1 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 6 ounces ground lamb, broken into small pieces

Lemon wedges

1. FOR THE DOUGH: Process flour and yeast in food processor until combined, about 2 seconds. With processor running, slowly add ice water; process until dough is just combined and no dry flour remains, about 10 seconds. Let dough rest for 10 minutes.

2. Add oil and salt and process until dough forms shaggy ball, 30 to 60 seconds. Transfer dough to lightly oiled counter and knead until uniform, about 1 minute (texture will remain slightly rough). Divide dough into 4 equal pieces, about 6⅔ ounces each. Shape dough pieces into tight balls and transfer, seam side down, to rimmed baking sheet coated with oil spray. Spray tops of balls lightly with oil spray. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 16 hours or up to 2 days.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: In now-empty processor, process bell pepper, onion, parsley, biber salçası, tomato paste, garlic, allspice, paprika, cumin, salt, pepper, and cayenne until smooth, scraping down sides of bowl as needed, about 15 seconds. Add lamb and pulse to combine, 8 to 10 pulses. Transfer to container, cover, and refrigerate until needed (topping can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours).

4. One hour before baking lahmajun, remove dough from refrigerator and let stand at room temperature until slightly puffy and no longer cool to touch. Meanwhile, adjust oven rack to upper-middle position (rack should be 4 to 5 inches from broiler element), set baking stone on rack, and heat oven to 500 degrees.

5. Place 1 dough ball on unfloured counter and dust top lightly with flour. Using heel of your hand, press dough ball into 5-inch disk. Using rolling pin, gently roll into 12-inch round of even thickness. (Use tackiness of dough on counter to aid with rolling; if dough becomes misshapen, periodically peel round from counter, reposition, and continue to roll.) Dust top of round lightly but evenly with flour and, starting at 1 edge, peel dough off counter and flip, floured side down, onto floured baking peel (dough will spring back to about 11 inches in diameter). Place one-quarter of topping (about ½ cup) in center of dough. Cover dough with 12 by 12-inch sheet of plastic and, using your fingertips and knuckles, gently spread filling evenly across dough, leaving ⅛-inch border. Starting at 1 edge, peel away plastic, leaving topping in place (reserve plastic for topping remaining lahmajun).

6. Carefully slide lahmajun onto stone and bake until bottom crust is browned, edges are lightly browned, and topping is steaming, 4 to 6 minutes. While lahmajun bakes, begin rolling next dough ball.

7. Transfer baked lahmajun to wire rack. Repeat rolling, topping, and baking remaining 3 dough balls.

8. Serve with lemon wedges.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/OCT20

Lahmajun can be eaten by the slice like pizza or turned into a sandwich by folding it around a bright salad.

CUCUMBER-TOMATO SALAD

SERVES 4 TO 6

TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 15 MINUTES RESTING

Use the ripest in-season tomatoes you can find. This salad is best eaten within 1 hour of being dressed. Be sure to drain excess liquid before placing the salad on the lahmajun.

- 1 English cucumber, quartered lengthwise and cut into ¼-inch pieces
- 2 tomatoes, cored and cut into ¼-inch pieces
- ¾ teaspoon table salt
- ½ cup pitted green olives, chopped coarse
- ¼ cup fresh mint leaves, shredded
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon pepper

Toss cucumber, tomatoes, and salt together in colander set over bowl. Let drain for 15 minutes, then discard liquid. Transfer cucumber-tomato mixture to medium bowl. Add olives, mint, oil, lemon juice, and pepper and toss to combine.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Getting Started with Sourdough Starter

Making starter is simple, but nurturing the flour-water mixture into a mature culture can be confusing. I've mapped out the process and answered common questions.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

A sourdough starter—also called a culture or levain—is a mixture of flour, water, and microorganisms that flavors and leavens bread. Wild yeasts and bacteria are naturally present on wheat kernels and on flour ground from them, but it takes time and proper care for them to multiply and transform the initial mixture into a bubbly, boozy-scented leavener.

First, you mix flour and water and let the mixture sit for a day or longer until the dormant microorganisms on the flour wake up. After that, you "refresh" (or "feed") the nascent culture on a daily or twice-daily basis by moving a portion of it to a new mixture of flour and water and discarding the remainder. (Don't worry about waste—you can save the leftover portion as backup and for use in other applications.) After a few weeks, the starter will have built up a sufficient amount of the appropriate yeasts and bacteria it needs, and it can be used in baking.

INGREDIENTS AND EQUIPMENT

For the best results, weigh your ingredients and use organic flour (which is richer in microorganisms than conventional flour) and bottled or filtered water (which is free of the chlorine in tap water that can kill those essential microorganisms) to create the starter. Be sure to include both white and either whole-wheat or rye flour in the bulk flour mixture; whole-grain flours are more nutritious than white flour and are more likely to contain the bacteria and yeast we want, making them ideal nourishment for the nascent culture. (Once the starter is mature, you maintain it with just white flour; nonorganic is fine.) Placing the starter in a clear jar will allow for easy observation of activity beneath the surface.

Organic bread or King Arthur all-purpose flour

Organic whole-wheat or rye flour

Warm room-temperature (70- to 80-degree) bottled or filtered water

2 small lidded containers, such as 4-ounce canning jars

1 larger lidded container, such as a 16-ounce canning jar

HOW TO MAKE SOURDOUGH STARTER

The key difference between my starter and most others is scale. Typical formulas start with several cups of flour, and you might churn through a few pounds before you can bake a single loaf of bread; my starter takes just a few teaspoons to get going and uses just a few cups total before it's ready to bake with. (Making a tiny starter is an idea that I came up with last spring, when flour and yeast were scarce due to the pandemic—I affectionately dubbed it "quarantinystarter." But I quickly realized that this is a smarter, substantially less wasteful approach to maintaining sourdough starter under any circumstances.) Once the starter is ready for use, it can easily be scaled up to the necessary proportions. **Note that the time frame of each step is approximate:** How quickly your starter moves from one step to the next will depend on the flour you're using to refresh it and how hospitable the environment is for yeast and bacteria activity. Let visual cues be your guide and use the day count as a reference.

STEP 1 CREATE AND PROOF INITIAL STARTER

1 to 3 days

Create bulk batch of flour mixture by combining 1½ cups bread or all-purpose flour with 1½ cups whole-wheat or rye flour in sealable container (weighing ingredients will become vital later, but volume is fine here). Using spoon, mix 4 teaspoons (⅓ ounce; 10 grams) flour mixture and 2½ teaspoons (⅓ ounce; 10 grams) water in small jar. Cover with plastic wrap or loosely with lid and let sit at warm room temperature (70 to 80 degrees).

VISUAL CUE TO MOVE TO NEXT STEP

Starter is bubbly, wet-looking (there might be liquid pooled on top), and fragrant—even pungent.

STEP 2 REFRESH ONCE DAILY

4 to 10 days (timing may vary widely)

Stir starter well and transfer 2 teaspoons (⅓ ounce; 10 grams) to clean jar; reserve remaining starter as backup in original jar and store in refrigerator (see "Save the Leftovers!"). Stir 4 teaspoons (⅓ ounce; 10 grams) flour mixture and 2½ teaspoons (⅓ ounce; 10 grams) water into starter mixture until no dry flour remains. Cover with plastic wrap or loosely with lid and let sit at warm room temperature for 24 hours. Repeat every 24 hours.

VISUAL CUE TO MOVE TO NEXT STEP

Starter is bubbly and fragrant less than 12 hours after the previous refreshment.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

STARTER FAQs

You've sent me dozens of great questions since I began the **#QuarantinyStarter** project last spring. Here, I respond to the most common ones.

My house typically runs cold. Where's the best place to keep my starter?

If your kitchen is below 70 degrees, try storing your starter in one of the following places (but make sure that these areas—or anywhere that you might store your starter—aren't more than a degree or so above 80 degrees, which can encourage the growth of unwanted molds).

- On top of the refrigerator
- In a turned-off oven with the light turned on
- On a wire rack set over a heating pad or seedling mat set to low

Why do you refresh just a portion of the starter?

Moving just 30 percent of your starter to a new home and adding more flour and water dilutes the waste by-products of fermentation that could harm the microorganisms you are trying to propagate. The process also ensures that the amount of starter you maintain is manageable and doesn't quadruple each day.

My starter looks inactive; should I start over?

Probably not. Visible activity tends to slow down after the first five days, but things are happening regardless. The only sign that you need to start over is significant visible mold, which can grow if the starter is stored at a temperature above 80 degrees.

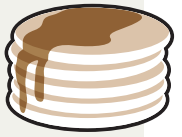
How can so little starter be enough to bake bread?

Once it's mature, a starter of any size can be scaled up. Maintaining a small amount simply minimizes waste.

SAVE THE LEFTOVERS!

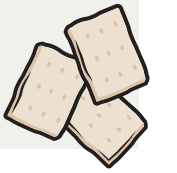
The daily or twice-daily process of refreshing sourdough starter generates a leftover portion that you should save as backup in case something happens to the current batch. Eventually, you can also collect generations of backup starter and put them to work in other, nonbread applications.

Backup: The first time you refresh your nascent starter, keep the remainder as backup in the original jar in the fridge. When you refresh your starter again the next day, throw away the backup (when you're refreshing the starter just once daily, as in Step 2, the backup is not mature enough to use in other applications, so you should dispose of it), clean out the jar thoroughly, use that jar to store the day's newly refreshed culture, and refrigerate the rest as the new backup.



Backup for Cooking ("Sourdough Discard"):

Once you reach Step 3 and are refreshing the culture twice daily, you can collect generations of backup (some sources refer to leftover starter as "sourdough discard") in a single sealed jar—you'll need a third, larger one—and refrigerate them for up to two weeks. Once you have amassed a cup or two of this sourdough discard, you can use it to flavor all sorts of doughs and batters by replacing a portion of the flour and/or liquid with this flavorful culture. For our free recipes for sourdough pancakes, biscuits, and crackers, go to **CooksIllustrated.com/oct20.** (Note that this sourdough discard cannot be used in place of a leavener.)



STEP 3 REFRESH TWICE DAILY

10 to 20 days

Refresh starter as before every 12 hours. At this stage, in addition to saving leftover starter as backup, you can collect generations of backup starter in a larger sealed jar; store it in the refrigerator to keep on hand for use in other nonbread applications such as pancakes, biscuits, and crackers (see "Save the Leftovers!"). If at any point the starter activity slows down or stops altogether, return to refreshing the culture once daily.

VISUAL CUE TO MOVE TO NEXT STEP

Starter doubles or triples in volume within 12 hours of being refreshed and smells yeasty/bready/yogurt-y.

STEP 4 CHECK READINESS FOR BAKING

CONDUCT A "FLOAT TEST"

Place a blob of starter in a jar with water. If the starter floats, it's producing and retaining ample amounts of carbon dioxide, meaning the yeast population has increased sufficiently.

STEP 5 MAINTAIN AND BAKE WITH MATURE STARTER

For information on how to scale up and bake with mature starter; information on how to store, maintain, and cook with the remainder; and our recipes for Almost No-Knead Sourdough Bread and Classic Sourdough Bread (Pain au Levain), go to **CooksIllustrated.com/oct20.**

Oatmeal Dinner Rolls

Can't choose between plush, soft rolls and those with the more interesting flavors and textures of whole grains? Great news: You don't have to.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Years ago, I developed a popular recipe for light, fluffy dinner rolls. The key to the recipe's success? A baking technique commonly called by its Chinese name, tangzhong, thanks to being widely popularized by Taiwanese cook Yvonne Chen in her recipe for fluffy Hokkaido milk bread. The term, which loosely translates as "hot-water roux," refers to a pudding-like mixture made by cooking a small amount of flour in water until the two form a gel. Mixing that gel into my dough enabled me to add a high proportion of water without making the dough unworkably soft and sticky, because some of the water was effectively "locked away" in the gel. When the rolls hit the oven, that abundance of water turned to steam and inflated the rolls, making them light and soft. The gel also extended the shelf life of the rolls, so they remained moist even on the next day.

I've made those rolls at home more times than I can count, and the *Cook's Illustrated* team has gone on to apply the tangzhong technique to other classic white breads such as sticky buns and challah. But recently I started wondering: Why stop at white bread? Wouldn't it be great to use tangzhong to add moisture and softness to breads that often lack those qualities, specifically breads with added whole grains? And then I realized I already had.

Back in cooking school, I learned to make a recipe that went like this: Pour boiling water over steel-cut oats and let the mixture sit until the oats have absorbed the water. Then build your dough by adding bread flour, more water, a bit of brown sugar, yeast, and salt. After rising for about an hour, the dough was easy to shape into a loaf—not too sticky or soft. The resulting bread was surprisingly moist and plush, and it stayed soft longer than most other breads—even longer than my Fluffy Dinner Rolls (January/February 2016). When I recently analyzed the recipe, I noticed that the proportion of water to flour in that dough was higher than in most dinner rolls. In fact, it approached 70 percent, a hydration

The crumb gets its complex sweetness—along with its rich brown color and a little extra moisture—from molasses.

How Oats Make Moister Bread That Lasts Longer

Given the high hydration of this dough, one might expect that this dough would be extremely soft and too sticky to handle. Here's why it isn't: The recipe contains oats, and before adding them to the other ingredients, we soak them in some of the water (boiled first), which causes them to gel and essentially lock away this moisture. This technique is called tangzhong, and we've employed it in other bread recipes, but only with refined white flour.

It turns out that oats are even better at "hiding" extra liquid in a dough. That's because, as a whole-grain product, oats contain more pentosans—a type of carbohydrate—than refined white flour, which has had its pentosan-rich bran layer milled away.

Pentosans are more absorbent than starch and can hold up to 10 times their weight in water. The upshot for our oatmeal rolls: With so much water in the dough, the rolls bake up exceptionally moist and stay that way longer.

UNSOAKED OATS
Loose, sticky dough

SOAKED OATS
Stiffer, drier dough

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

SHAPING ROLLS

Set piece of dough on unfloured counter. Loosely cup your lightly floured hand around dough and lightly move your hand in small circular motions to form smooth ball.

I associate with wet, sticky, unmanageable doughs. But this dough was easy to work with because using the soaked oats acted similarly to tangzhong, with all its associated virtues. (When I did a little investigating, I found out that oats are even more effective than refined white flour at holding on to water in a dough; see "How Oats Make Moister Bread That Lasts Longer.") That old recipe seemed like a promising starting point for a new dinner roll: one with a plush crumb and an extended shelf life that still offered complexity in terms of flavor and texture.

Rolling Right Along

I made the steel-cut oat dough as I had learned it decades ago, but instead of shaping it into a single loaf that I baked in a loaf pan, after the first rise, I divided it into 12 pieces, which I rolled into balls and arranged in a greased 9-inch round cake pan. (High-moisture doughs can spread if they're baked free-form; placing the rolls close together would allow them to support each other and encourage upward rather than outward expansion. For more information, see "Why Bake Rolls in a Cake Pan?") I let the dough rise again and then baked the rolls. It was a good start: The crumb was fluffy and soft. But I'd had to wait 45 minutes for the coarse steel-cut oats to absorb that first addition of water, and sometimes oats near the surface of the bread dried out in the oven and became a little hard. The solution was to use rolled oats. These hydrated so quickly, in fact, that the mixture was still too hot to add the yeast. To be safe, I incorporated some cold water along with the rest of the ingredients.

When the rolls were baked, the oats in the dough mostly melted into the bread but left a subtle and pleasant nubby texture; the oats I'd sprinkled on top delivered a crisp texture and toasty flavor. Still, these rolls looked and tasted a lot like my fluffy dinner rolls. That wasn't a bad thing, but I was after something a little heartier and nuttier here.

Pumping Up Personality

I was using bread flour because I needed its higher protein for lift (the oats have no gluten-forming proteins to contribute structure, so they're freeloaders in this formula), but was there room for something with a bit more personality? I replaced one-third of the bread flour with whole-wheat flour, which turned out to be a good move. It provided more nutty flavor and a heartier texture, but it didn't noticeably compromise the rolls' lift. I was getting there.

For the next batch, I added just a bit of richness in the form of butter. Rather than leave it to soften at room temperature or melt it in the microwave, I added it with the oats so that the hot water would melt it while the oats were hydrating. Finally, I considered the brown sugar. Presumably it had been added to that old cooking school recipe because, with its molasses notes, it provided a bit more character to the bread than white sugar would have. But why not go whole hog? I swapped the brown sugar for molasses itself, which added even more moisture; a complex, bittersweet flavor; and a rich color.

I still love my original fluffy white dinner rolls, but it's nice to have options.

OATMEAL DINNER ROLLS

MAKES 12 ROLLS

TOTAL TIME: 1½ HOURS, PLUS 1¾ HOURS RISING

For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount. We strongly recommend measuring the flour by weight. Avoid blackstrap molasses here, as it's too bitter. If you prefer, you can portion the rolls by weight in step 2 (2¼ ounces of dough per roll). To make 24 rolls, double this recipe and bake the rolls in two 9-inch round cake pans. These rolls freeze well; thaw them at room temperature and refresh in a 350-degree oven for 8 minutes.

- ¾ cup (2¼ ounces) old-fashioned rolled oats, plus 4 teaspoons for sprinkling
- ⅔ cup boiling water, plus ½ cup cold water
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces
- 1½ cups (8¼ ounces) bread flour
- ¾ cup (4⅛ ounces) whole-wheat flour
- ¼ cup molasses
- 1½ teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 1 large egg, beaten with 1 teaspoon water and pinch table salt

1. Stir ¾ cup oats, boiling water, and butter together in bowl of stand mixer and let sit until butter is melted and most of water has been absorbed, about 10 minutes. Add bread flour, whole-wheat flour, cold water, molasses, yeast, and salt. Fit mixer with dough hook and mix on low speed until flour is moistened, about 1 minute (dough may look dry). Increase speed to medium-low and mix until dough clears sides of bowl (it will still stick to bottom), about 8 minutes, scraping down dough hook halfway through mixing (dough will be sticky). Transfer dough to counter, shape into ball, and transfer to lightly greased bowl. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise until doubled in volume, 1 to 1¼ hours.

Why Bake Rolls in a Cake Pan?

We have three reasons for baking our oatmeal rolls in the confined space of a cake pan versus individually on a baking sheet. First, arranging the dough balls close together encourages upward, not outward, expansion. Second, since the rolls essentially bake in a single mass, if a few are slightly bigger or smaller, they'll still bake evenly with the rest. Finally, there's less exposed surface area for moisture to escape, so the sides remain soft rather than turn crusty.

2. Grease 9-inch round cake pan and set aside. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter, reserving plastic. Pat dough gently into 8-inch square of even thickness. Using bench scraper or chef's knife, cut dough into 12 pieces (3 rows by 4 rows). Working with 1 piece of dough at a time, form dough pieces into smooth, taut balls. (To round, set piece of dough on unfloured counter. Loosely cup your lightly floured hand around dough and, without applying pressure to dough, move your hand in small circular motions. Tackiness of dough against counter and circular motion should work dough into smooth ball.) Arrange seam side down in prepared pan, placing 9 dough balls around edge of pan and remaining 3 dough balls in center. Cover with reserved plastic and let rise until rolls are doubled in size and no gaps are visible between them, 45 minutes to 1 hour.

3. When rolls are nearly doubled in size, adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Brush rolls with egg wash and sprinkle with remaining 4 teaspoons oats. Bake until rolls are deep brown and register at least 195 degrees at center, 25 to 30 minutes. Let rolls cool in pan on wire rack for 3 minutes; invert rolls onto rack, then reinvert. Let rolls cool for at least 20 minutes before serving.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/DEC20

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Homemade Mayo That Keeps

Have you been shortchanging your sandwich game because homemade mayo often fails to come together and lasts only a few days? We've got a better recipe.

BY LAN LAM

If you've eaten homemade mayonnaise, you know that its custardy richness and delicate tang are clean and clear in a way the commercial stuff just isn't. It lights up anything it touches—from egg or potato salad to lobster rolls to boiled artichokes to green goddess dressing—and is the only condiment worth slathering onto a BLT or high-summer tomato sandwich. It's the preparation President Calvin Coolidge waxed nostalgic about (his Aunt Mary's, specifically) to the *Spokesman-Review* and one that fascinated—and often stymied—Julia Child. British food writer Elizabeth David urged her readers to make "plenty of it" when hosting guests, since "this beautiful golden ointment-like sauce is really the pivot and raison d'être of the whole affair."

Homemade mayo lights up anything it touches—from egg or potato salad to a BLT.

There are practical perks, too: Making a batch takes minutes, most of the work can be done in a food processor, and there's a good chance you have all the ingredients (eggs, oil, lemon juice or vinegar, Dijon mustard, salt, and sugar) on hand. But if you haven't made mayonnaise, I'm guessing it's for one of two reasons. First, homemade mayonnaise is prone to "breaking," meaning that the oil and water fail to emulsify and remain a runny, greasy mess instead of forming a thick, creamy spread. Second, unlike commercial mayonnaise that's made with pasteurized eggs (pasteurization kills any potential pathogens in the eggs), homemade versions are typically prepared with unpasteurized raw eggs, which limit their food safety.

But what if there was a truly reliable recipe for homemade mayonnaise with a longer storage time? For the sake of BLTs everywhere, I had to try.

Making a Marriage That Lasts

To understand how mayonnaise works (or why it doesn't), you first have to understand emulsions—combinations of two liquids that don't ordinarily mix, such as oil and water. The only way to combine them is to whisk or process them so vigorously that one of the two ingredients breaks into tiny droplets that are suspended in, and separated by, the other.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/APR20**

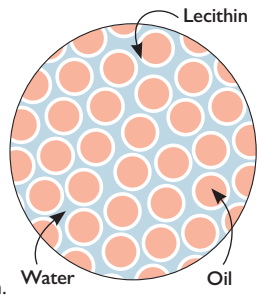
To ensure that your mayo will have clean, bright flavor, treat yourself to a fresh bottle of vegetable oil.

In mayonnaise, it's the oil that gets broken up. (According to food science writer Harold McGee, 1 tablespoon of oil in mayonnaise can break into about 30 billion separate droplets.) Eventually, the droplets are small enough that they remain separated by the water and the two fluids effectively become one. A third ingredient, called an emulsifier, helps stabilize the mixture (for more information, see "Mayo Under the Microscope").

Without an emulsifier in the mix, many of the tiny oil droplets start to find each other and coalesce, eventually "breaking" the mixture back into two separate fluids. And that's where the egg yolks come in: They contain a powerful emulsifier called lecithin that stabilizes the emulsion by surrounding the oil droplets, preventing them from finding one another and merging into greasy pools.

Mayo Under the Microscope

If you were to zoom in on a dense emulsion such as mayo, you would see tons of tiny oil droplets tightly packed together—but not actually touching. Keeping those droplets separate is the key to a stable emulsion. But it's a fragile business because the droplets are attracted to one another, and if they merge, the emulsion fails. That's why emulsions contain emulsifiers (in mayonnaise, these are the lecithin in egg yolks and the polysaccharides in mustard), which form thin barriers around each oil droplet so that they can coexist without coalescing into greasy pools.



A DENSE EMULSION

But there's more to making a successful mayonnaise than simply adding an emulsifier. After whipping up several batches, I realized that using a precise mixing method and a sufficient amount of water is just as critical.

Making Mayo That Keeps

PASTEURIZE THE YOLKS
Heating the yolks to 160 degrees (this takes just a minute or two in the microwave) kills common pathogens, and abundant lemon juice keeps the mayo food-safe for up to one month.

All About That Base

Most mayonnaise recipes that are made in the food processor call for placing all the ingredients except the oil in the processor bowl and then very slowly drizzling in the oil while the machine is running. It's essential that the oil—especially the first few tablespoons—be added gradually, because doing so establishes a "base emulsion" with plenty of oil droplets that are well coated with lecithin. Once formed, this base helps emulsify the remaining oil.

Here's where many food processor recipes get into trouble: As soon as the motor starts running, the yolks and the lemon juice or vinegar get sprayed up the sides of the bowl, so when you first add the oil, there is not enough liquid volume in the bowl to engage the processor blade, and the oil merely collects below the blade in a greasy pool. As you keep drizzling in the oil, there will eventually be enough liquid to engage the blade, but since so much of the water from the yolks and acid is lost to the sides of the processor bowl, there won't be enough of it left to keep the oil droplets separated. And when the oil droplets aren't separated, the emulsion fails.

Given that, I wanted to find a more reliable way to create a base emulsion, so instead of mixing the mayonnaise entirely in the food processor, I started the emulsification by hand. After whisking together the rest of the ingredients in a bowl, I whisked in the first ¼ cup of oil until it was incorporated. A few oil droplets floated to the surface, but enough of it was emulsified that I could move the rest of the mixing to the food processor.

From there, I proceeded as most recipes do, drizzling in the remaining 1¼ cups of oil in a deliberately slow, steady stream. (Adding the oil too quickly is one of the most common causes of broken mayonnaise.) To be sure that I'd captured all the yolk mixture, I scraped down the sides of the bowl and processed for another few seconds. The result was lush and glossy but likely still fairly perishable.

Nuke It

Time to take care of any potential pathogens with DIY pasteurization. To pasteurize liquid eggs, all you have to do is heat them to 160 degrees. It was fast and easy to whisk a couple of yolks until smooth and pop them into the microwave before I started the hand-mixing step, and I made sure to stop and stir them regularly so that they heated evenly. But I soon realized that I couldn't heat the yolks alone; at that temperature, their proteins unraveled and tangled with each other tightly enough to trap water and turn the yolks semisolid. And without that free water, there wasn't enough left to hold the oil droplets (never mind that their semisolid state would make them impossible to blend).

To keep the yolks fluid, I heated them with two added ingredients: 3 tablespoons of water, which was enough to help keep the proteins separate from one another but not so much that it noticeably diminished the mayo's flavor or creaminess, and the 4 teaspoons of lemon juice I was already using in the mayonnaise, which contributed more water.

From there, I wasted no time whisking in that initial ¼ cup of oil to help the yolk mixture cool down (further prevention against those yolk proteins thickening the mixture). I also made a point of adding the mustard at this stage, since it, too, is an emulsifier—albeit a weaker one than egg yolk—that contains water and would support the base emulsion.

A few minutes later, I had gorgeously dense, satiny mayonnaise that I could transfer to an airtight container for weeks of safekeeping in the refrigerator.

THE MOST RELIABLE WAY TO MAKE MAYO

One of the biggest deterrents for making mayonnaise is that it can fail to form an emulsion, creating a greasy, runny mess. Here is our solution.

A. WHISK IN SOME OIL Incorporating the first ¼ cup of oil by hand reliably establishes a base emulsion.

B. PROCESS REMAINING OIL Slowly incorporating the rest of the oil using a food processor breaks the oil into tiny droplets that stay well emulsified.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

MAKE-AHEAD HOMEMADE MAYONNAISE

MAKES 1½ CUPS TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

Since the oil is a major part of this recipe, use a freshly opened bottle for the best results. This recipe was designed for a food processor; we don't recommend substituting other appliances. Trois Petits Cochons Moutarde de Dijon is the test kitchen's favorite Dijon mustard.

- 3 tablespoons water
- 2 large egg yolks
- 4 teaspoons lemon juice
- 1½ cups vegetable oil, divided
- ¾ teaspoon table salt
- ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard
- ¼ teaspoon sugar

1. Gently stir water, egg yolks, and lemon juice in bowl until no streaks of yolk remain. Microwave, stirring gently every 10 seconds, until mixture thickens slightly and registers 160 to 165 degrees, 1 to 2 minutes. Immediately add ¼ cup oil, salt, mustard, and sugar; whisk to combine. (Tiny droplets of oil will float to top of mixture.)

2. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer into bowl of food processor. With processor running, slowly drizzle in remaining 1¼ cups oil in thin stream, about 2 minutes. Scrape bottom and sides of bowl and process 5 seconds longer. Transfer to airtight container and refrigerate for up to 1 month.

How to Fix Failed Mayo

Because the success of making mayonnaise in the food processor depends on having enough volume in the bowl—and that can vary, depending on the shape of the bowl—there is always a chance that mayonnaise will not form a proper emulsion. We came up with an easy way to fix it if it doesn't.

Transfer mayonnaise mixture to 2-cup liquid measuring cup. Place 4 teaspoons water in bowl and, while whisking vigorously, very slowly drizzle in about ½ cup mayonnaise mixture (consistency should resemble heavy cream). Transfer to food processor and slowly drizzle in remaining mayonnaise. Once all mayonnaise has been added, scrape bottom and sides of bowl and process for 5 seconds. (Consistency will be slightly looser than unbroken mayonnaise but still thick and creamy.)

Brewing the Best Iced Tea

Whether you sip it daily or want a special beverage for summertime meals, here is how to make a lively, full-flavored brew.

BY LAN LAM

Iced tea sure is popular: Of the 3.8 billion gallons of tea consumed in the United States in 2018, a whopping 80 percent of it was iced. I count myself among the many who regularly quench their thirst with the stuff, so I was happy to steep and sip my way through dozens of pitchers to develop guidelines for making the best possible versions of black and green iced tea. Overall, I found that you don't need to be quite as persnickety about iced tea as you do about hot (particularly if you're adding flavorings). But you do need to take steps to avoid watery or overextracted brews. Here, I offer advice on what kind of tea to use; describe a novel brewing method; and give recipes for adding sweetness, fruit, and herbs.

Our unique hot-and-cold brewing method produces an outstanding summer cooler.

Splurge on Loose-Leaf for Plain Iced Tea

When I compared iced tea made from loose-leaf tea with iced tea made from tea bags (using the same type and brand for consistency), I found that the former produced a more flavorful, complex drink. That's because most tea bags are filled with tiny broken tea leaves, called "dust" or "fannings," that remain after the higher-quality whole leaves are sifted. These dregs have very little interior that's not exposed to air, so aromas and volatile oils readily escape from the broken surfaces.

Tea Bags Are Fine for the Flavored Kind

When I made our flavored iced tea recipes using equal weights of bagged and loose-leaf tea, the differences were too subtle to justify the extra expense of loose-leaf. That said, stick with good-quality bagged tea.

Make a Lively Infusion

I found that 1½ tablespoons of black tea per quart of water produced a vibrant yet not overly strong brew. If using green tea, which is generally subtler, increase the amount to 2 tablespoons.

Employ a Hybrid Brewing Method

Iced tea can be brewed using either cold or boiling water. In a side-by-side comparison, a cold-water, 24-hour infusion tasted flat. That's because a number of the compounds that give tea balanced astringency and bitterness are extracted more effectively in hot water than in cold water (see "Leverage Your Leaves"). But iced tea brewed for 4 minutes in water that had been brought to a boil lacked sufficient intensity. Making the tea stronger by brewing longer in hot water only made the tea overly bitter and mouth-drying. Increasing the amount of tea worked, but I ultimately came up with a thrifty method that produced the same great flavor without extra tea. First, steep the tea in 3 cups of water that has been brought to a boil (or 175-degree water for green tea) for 4 minutes. Then add 1 cup of ice water and continue to steep for 1 hour. At the cooler temperature, full-flavored aromatic compounds continue to infuse the water and the bitter and astringent ones do not.

Tea 101

Evaluate these qualities when you sip tea straight, whether iced or hot.

Taste: As with wine, the flavor of tea ranges from light and delicate to full and pungent. And all teas contain bitter polyphenols, but the exact content varies depending on a number of variables, including terroir, oxidation, and aging.

Aroma: Distinctive aromas that span a broad spectrum are a big component of the flavor of tea. Expect fruity, leathery, floral, or even smoky aromas in black teas. Green teas tend to feature grassy, mineral, floral, and marine scents.

Texture: Great tea isn't just about taste, it's also about mouthfeel. Polyphenols can cause astringency, or a pleasant drying sensation, that lingers on the palate. Some infusions also contain compounds that give tea a lingering creaminess.

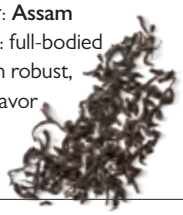
PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Teas to Try

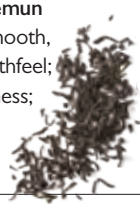
Here are a few of my favorite teas to serve iced (and hot).

[BLACK]

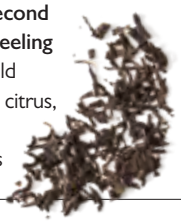
VARIETY: **Assam**
PROFILE: full-bodied tea with robust, malty flavor



VARIETY: **Keemun**
PROFILE: a smooth, creamy mouthfeel; slight smokiness; and hints of cocoa



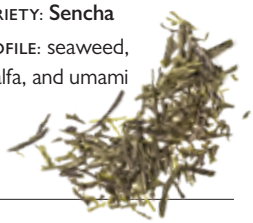
VARIETY: **Second Flush Darjeeling**
PROFILE: mild sweetness, citrus, and light floral notes



[GREEN]

VARIETY: **Gunpowder** or **Dragon Well** (slightly sweeter)
PROFILE: astringency and grassy, vegetal flavors

VARIETY: **Sencha**
PROFILE: seaweed, alfalfa, and umami



ICED BLACK TEA

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 2 HOURS STEEPING AND CHILLING

You can substitute decaffeinated tea if desired. Do not substitute tea bags for the loose-leaf tea. Your ice water should be half ice and half water. This recipe can easily be doubled. Sweeten with Rich Simple Syrup, if desired. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount.

- 1½ tablespoons loose-leaf black tea
- 3 cups boiling water
- 1 cup ice water
- Lemon wedges

1. Place tea in medium bowl. Add boiling water and steep for 4 minutes. Add ice water and steep for 1 hour. Strain through fine-mesh strainer into pitcher (or strain into second bowl and transfer to pitcher). Refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 3 days.

2. To serve, pour into ice-filled glasses and garnish each serving with lemon wedge.

RASPBERRY-BASIL ICED BLACK TEA

Two tea bags can be substituted for the loose-leaf tea.

Mash 1½ cups thawed frozen raspberries, 3 tablespoons chopped fresh basil, 2 tablespoons sugar, and 2 teaspoons lemon juice in bowl until no whole berries remain. Add mixture to tea with ice water. Garnish each serving with basil sprig. Omit lemon.

Leverage Your Leaves

Tea can be expensive—so brew with economy in mind. We make a full-flavored drink not by adding extra leaves but by using a smart method.

HOT STEEP: 4 minutes
A short, hot steep draws out compounds such as caffeine, theobromine, and polyphenols that make tea pleasantly bitter and astringent.

COOL STEEP: 1 hour
Adding ice water slows the extraction of bitter and astringent compounds. Continuing to steep for 1 hour magnifies full-flavored aromatic compounds.

GINGER-POMEGRANATE ICED BLACK TEA

Two tea bags can be substituted for the loose-leaf tea. If you prefer a more pronounced ginger flavor, add the full 2 tablespoons of grated ginger.

Add ⅔ cup pomegranate juice, 2 tablespoons sugar, and 1½ to 2 tablespoons grated fresh ginger to tea with ice water. Substitute lime wedges for lemon.

ICED GREEN TEA

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 2 HOURS STEEPING AND CHILLING

Chinese green tea will produce a grassy, floral tea, whereas Japanese green tea is more savory. You can substitute decaffeinated tea if desired. Do not substitute tea bags for the loose-leaf tea. To ensure that your water is at the proper temperature, start with 2½ cups of boiling water; add cold water, a little at a time, and stir with an instant-read thermometer until the water registers 175 degrees; and then measure out 3 cups. Your ice water should be half ice and half water. This recipe can easily be doubled. Sweeten with Rich Simple Syrup, if desired.

- 2 tablespoons loose-leaf green tea
- 3 cups hot water (175 degrees)
- 1 cup ice water
- Lemon wedges

1. Place tea in medium bowl. Add hot water and steep for 4 minutes. Add ice water and steep for 1 hour. Strain through fine-mesh strainer into pitcher (or strain into second bowl and transfer to pitcher). Refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 3 days.

2. To serve, pour into ice-filled glasses and garnish each serving with lemon wedge.

CUCUMBER-LIME ICED GREEN TEA

Three tea bags can be substituted for the loose-leaf tea.

Shred ½ English cucumber on large holes of box grater. Add shredded cucumber, 2 tablespoons sugar, ½ teaspoon grated lime zest, and 1 tablespoon lime juice to tea with ice water. Substitute lime slices for lemon wedges.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/AUG20**

Simpler Simple Syrup

Granulated sugar can be difficult to dissolve in iced tea, leaving grit in your drink, but sugar in the form of syrup is easy to incorporate. This quick method uses warm water instead of the usual stovetop simmer. *–Nicole Konstantinakos*

RICH SIMPLE SYRUP

MAKES 1 CUP TOTAL TIME: 5 MINUTES, PLUS 10 MINUTES COOLING

Whisk ¾ cup sugar and ⅓ cup warm water in bowl until sugar has dissolved. Let cool completely, about 10 minutes, before transferring to airtight container. (Syrup can be refrigerated for up to 1 month.)

CANTALOUPE-MINT ICED GREEN TEA

Three tea bags can be substituted for the loose-leaf tea.

Remove seeds from ½ small ripe cantaloupe and cut into 4 quarters. Grasping peel, shred flesh on large holes of box grater to yield 1 cup pulp. Add pulp, 3 tablespoons chopped fresh mint, 2 tablespoons sugar, and 1 tablespoon lemon juice to tea with ice water. Garnish each serving with mint sprig. Omit lemon.

Cucumber-Lime Iced Green Tea balances the vegetal flavor of cucumber with the citrusy tang of lime zest and juice.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Our Favorite Holiday Cookies

Behold, five of our best, most festive treats—each with a practical tip—to fill your cookie tin. COMPILED BY ELIZABETH BOMZE

CHOCOLATE CRINKLE COOKIES

MAKES 22 COOKIES

TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS, PLUS 20 MINUTES COOLING

WHY WE LOVE THEM: Unsweetened chocolate and cocoa powder (plus a boost from espresso powder) give these cookies brownie-like richness and depth. Rolling the dough in granulated and then confectioners' sugar yields the perfect crackly exterior.

- 1 cup (5 ounces) all-purpose flour
- ½ cup (1½ ounces) unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1½ cups packed (10½ ounces) brown sugar
- 3 large eggs
- 4 teaspoons instant espresso powder (optional)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 4 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup (3½ ounces) granulated sugar
- ½ cup (2 ounces) confectioners' sugar

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper. Whisk flour, cocoa, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together in bowl.

2. Whisk brown sugar; eggs; espresso powder, if using; and vanilla together in large bowl. Combine chocolate and butter in bowl and microwave at 50 percent power, stirring occasionally, until melted, 2 to 3 minutes.

UNDERBAKE FOR PROPER CHEW

Underbaking is key for producing cookies with chewy centers, but gauging exactly when to take them out is tricky. Your best bet is a visual cue: For crackly cookies like these, look for cracks that appear shiny.

3. Whisk chocolate mixture into egg mixture until combined. Fold in flour mixture until no dry streaks remain. Let dough sit at room temperature for 10 minutes.

4. Place granulated sugar and confectioners' sugar in separate shallow dishes. Working with 2 tablespoons dough (or use #30 scoop) at a time, roll into balls. Drop each ball into granulated sugar directly after shaping and roll to coat. Transfer dough balls to confectioners' sugar and roll to coat evenly. Evenly space dough balls on prepared sheets, 11 dough balls per sheet.

5. Bake cookies, 1 sheet at a time, until puffed and cracked and edges have begun to set but centers are still soft (cookies will look raw between cracks and seem underdone), about 12 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking. Let cool completely on sheet before serving.

THICK AND CHEWY GINGERBREAD COOKIES

MAKES ABOUT 20 COOKIES

TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR, PLUS 1½ HOURS CHILLING AND COOLING

WHY WE LOVE THEM: Lots of butter and brown sugar give these cookies a satisfying chewiness. Rolling the dough thin—but not too thin—and baking the cookies until their edges are just set ensures that they're soft but flat and even. Cinnamon, ginger, and cloves add robust but balanced flavor and warmth. If you want to decorate the cookies, our stiff, glossy Decorative Icing (recipe follows) pipes neatly into clearly defined lines.

- 3 cups (15 ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup packed (5¼ ounces) dark brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon ground ginger
- ¾ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon ground cloves
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 12 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- ¾ cup molasses
- 2 tablespoons milk

1. Process flour, sugar, cinnamon, ginger, baking soda, cloves, and salt in food processor until combined, about 10 seconds. Add melted butter, molasses, and milk and process until soft dough forms and no streaks of flour remain, about 20 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

2. Spray counter lightly with baking spray with flour; transfer dough to counter; and knead until dough forms cohesive ball, about 20 seconds. Divide dough in half. Form each half into 5-inch disk, wrap disks tightly in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 24 hours.

3. Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 350 degrees. Line 2 rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Working with 1 disk of dough at a time, roll disk ¼ inch thick between 2 large sheets of parchment. (Keep second disk refrigerated.) Remove top piece of parchment. Using 3½-inch cookie cutter, cut dough

CHILL THE DOUGH

To keep cookies from spreading and to make shaping easier, refrigerate the dough for at least 1 hour before using it. If you're rerolling cut-out scraps of dough, cover the scraps with plastic wrap and rechill them before using them again.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

into shapes. Peel away scraps from around shapes and space shapes ¾ inch apart on prepared sheets. Wrap scraps in plastic and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes. Repeat rolling and cutting with scraps.

4. Bake cookies until puffy and just set around edges, 9 to 11 minutes, switching and rotating sheets halfway through baking. Let cookies cool on sheets for 10 minutes, then transfer to wire rack. Let cookies cool completely before serving. (Cookies can be stored in wide, shallow airtight container, with sheet of parchment or waxed paper between layers, at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

DECORATIVE ICING

MAKES 1⅓ CUPS TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES

- 2⅔ cups (10⅔ ounces) confectioners' sugar
- 2 large egg whites

Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip sugar and egg whites on medium-low speed until combined, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and whip until glossy, soft peaks form, 2 to 3 minutes, scraping down bowl as needed. Transfer icing to pastry bag fitted with small round pastry tip. Decorate cookies and let icing harden before serving or storing.

FLORENTINE LACE COOKIES

MAKES 24 COOKIES

TOTAL TIME: 2¼ HOURS, PLUS 30 MINUTES CHILLING

WHY WE LOVE THEM: Part confection, part cookie, these lacy, orange-flavored almond disks are made by cooking a loose dough in a saucepan and then baking the rounds until they're deeply caramelized. Our easy method for tempering chocolate makes the elegant zigzag of shiny, snappy chocolate—a florentine's decorative hallmark—surprisingly simple to pull off.

- 2 cups slivered almonds
- ¾ cup heavy cream
- ½ cup (3½ ounces) sugar
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces
- ¼ cup orange marmalade
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¼ teaspoon grated orange zest
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- 4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine, divided

1. Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 350 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper. Process almonds in food processor until they resemble coarse sand, about 30 seconds.

2. Bring cream, sugar, and butter to boil in medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook, stirring frequently, until mixture begins to thicken, 5 to 6 minutes. Continue to cook, stirring constantly, until mixture begins to brown at edges and is thick enough to leave trail that doesn't immediately fill in when spatula is scraped along saucepan bottom, 1 to 2 minutes longer (it's OK if some darker speckles appear in mixture). Off heat, stir in almonds, marmalade, flour, vanilla, orange zest, and salt until combined.

3. Drop 6 level tablespoons dough at least 3½ inches apart on each prepared sheet. When cool enough to handle, use your damp fingers to press each portion into 2½-inch circle. (Don't worry if some butter separates from dough while you're portioning cookies.)

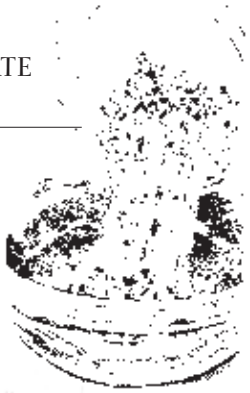
4. Bake until deep brown from edge to edge, 15 to 17 minutes, switching and rotating sheets halfway through baking. Transfer cookies, still on parchment, to wire racks and let cool. Let sheets cool for 10 minutes, line with fresh parchment, and repeat portioning and baking with remaining dough.

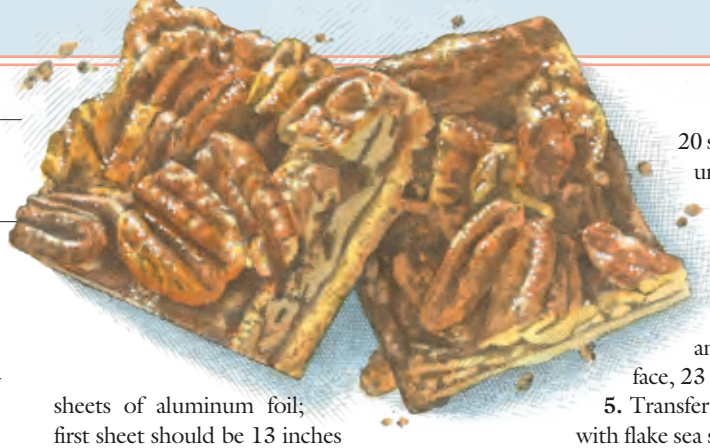
5. Microwave 3 ounces chocolate in bowl at 50 percent power, stirring frequently, until about two-thirds melted, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove bowl from microwave, add remaining 1 ounce chocolate, and stir until melted, returning to microwave for no more than 5 seconds at a time to complete melting if necessary. Transfer chocolate to small zipper-lock bag and snip off corner, making hole no larger than 1/16 inch.

6. Transfer cooled cookies directly to wire racks. Pipe zigzag of chocolate over each cookie, distributing chocolate evenly among all cookies. Refrigerate until chocolate is set, about 30 minutes, before serving. (Cookies can be stored at cool room temperature for up to 4 days.)

TEMPER CHOCOLATE THE EASY WAY

Microwave three-quarters of the chocolate at 50 percent power, stirring frequently so that it doesn't get much warmer than body temperature, until it is about two-thirds melted, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in the remaining chocolate.





ULTRANUTTY PECAN BARS

MAKES 24 BARS

TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR, PLUS 1½ HOURS COOLING

WHY WE LOVE THEM: Unlike most pecan bars that are dominated by sugary goo, these are packed with nuts—a full pound of them—that are lightly bound together by a dump-and-stir topping that's not too sweet. The crust is easy, too: a pat-in-the-pan dough that doesn't even require parbaking.

Crust

- 1¾ cups (8¾ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 6 tablespoons (2⅔ ounces) sugar
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

Topping

- ¾ cup packed (5¼ ounces) light brown sugar
- ½ cup light corn syrup
- 7 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and hot
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 4 cups (1 pound) pecans, toasted
- ½ teaspoon flake sea salt (optional)

1. FOR THE CRUST: Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Make foil sling for 13 by 9-inch baking pan by folding 2 long sheets of aluminum foil; first sheet should be 13 inches wide and second sheet should be 9 inches wide. Lay sheets of foil in pan perpendicular to each other, with extra foil hanging over edges of pan. Push foil into corners and up sides of pan, smoothing foil flush to pan. Lightly spray foil with vegetable oil spray.

2. Whisk flour, sugar, and salt together in medium bowl. Add melted butter and stir with wooden spoon until dough begins to form. Using your hands, continue to combine until no dry flour remains and small portion of dough holds together when squeezed in palm of your hand. Evenly scatter tablespoon-size pieces of dough over surface of pan. Using your fingertips and palm of your hand, press and smooth dough into even thickness in bottom of pan.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: Whisk sugar, corn syrup, melted butter, vanilla, and table salt in medium bowl until smooth (mixture will look separated at first but will become homogeneous), about 20 seconds. Fold pecans into sugar mixture until evenly coated.

4. Pour topping over crust. Using spatula, spread topping over crust, pushing to edges and into corners (there will be bare patches). Bake until topping is evenly distributed and rapidly bubbling across entire surface, 23 to 25 minutes.

5. Transfer pan to wire rack and lightly sprinkle with flake sea salt, if using. Let bars cool completely in pan on rack, about 1½ hours. Using foil overhang, lift bars out of pan and transfer to cutting board. Cut into 24 bars. (Bars can be stored at room temperature for up to 5 days.)

BAKE BAR COOKIES IN METAL PANS

Glass dishes retain heat longer, which can lead to overbaking. Plus, the straight sides and crisp corners of metal vessels produce bars with well-defined, professional-looking edges. Our favorite 8-inch square baking pan is **Fat Daddio's ProSeries Square Cake Pan**; our favorite 13 by 9-inch pan is the **Williams Sonoma Goldtouch Nonstick Rectangular Cake Pan, 9" x 13".**

ALMOND BISCOTTI

MAKES 30 COOKIES

TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS, PLUS 50 MINUTES COOLING

WHY WE LOVE THEM: They're appropriately hard and crunchy but not jawbreakers, thanks to ample butter creating tenderness, whipped eggs that aerate the dough, and not too much gluten. These cookies keep well for up to a month—a real boon for holiday bakers.

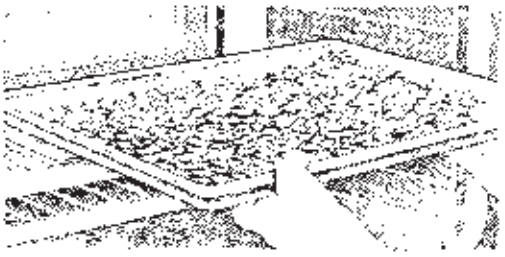
- 1¼ cups whole almonds, lightly toasted, divided
- 1¾ cups (8¾ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- 2 large eggs, plus 1 large white beaten with pinch table salt
- 1 cup (7 ounces) sugar
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- 1½ teaspoons almond extract
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- Vegetable oil spray

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Using ruler and pencil, draw two 8 by 3-inch rectangles, spaced 4 inches apart, on piece of parchment paper. Grease rimmed baking sheet; place parchment on sheet, pencil side down.

2. Pulse 1 cup almonds in food processor until coarsely chopped, 8 to 10 pulses; transfer to bowl and set aside. Process remaining ¼ cup almonds until finely ground, about 45 seconds. Add flour, baking powder, and salt; process to combine, about 15 seconds. Transfer flour mixture to second bowl. Process 2 eggs in now-empty processor until lightened in color and almost doubled in volume, about 3 minutes. With processor running, slowly add sugar until thoroughly combined, about 15 seconds. Add melted butter, almond extract, and vanilla and process until combined, about 10 seconds. Transfer egg mixture to medium bowl. Sprinkle half of flour mixture over egg mixture and, using spatula, fold gently until just combined. Add remaining flour mixture and chopped almonds and fold gently until just combined.

3. Divide batter in half. Using your floured hands, form each half into 8 by 3-inch rectangle, using lines on parchment as guide. Spray each loaf lightly with oil spray. Using rubber spatula lightly coated with oil spray, smooth tops and sides of rectangles. Gently brush tops of loaves with egg-white wash. Bake until loaves are golden and just beginning to crack on top, 25 to 30 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking.

4. Let loaves cool on sheet for 30 minutes. Transfer loaves to cutting board. Using serrated knife, slice each loaf on slight bias ½ inch thick. Lay slices, cut side down, about ¼ inch apart on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Bake until crisp and golden brown on both sides, about 35 minutes, flipping slices halfway through baking. Let cool completely before serving. Biscotti can be stored in airtight container for up to 1 month.



TOAST NUTS BEFORE BAKING TO DEEPEN THEIR FLAVOR

Spread nuts in single layer on rimmed baking sheet and toast in preheated 350-degree oven until fragrant and slightly darkened, 8 to 12 minutes, shaking sheet halfway through toasting to prevent burning.

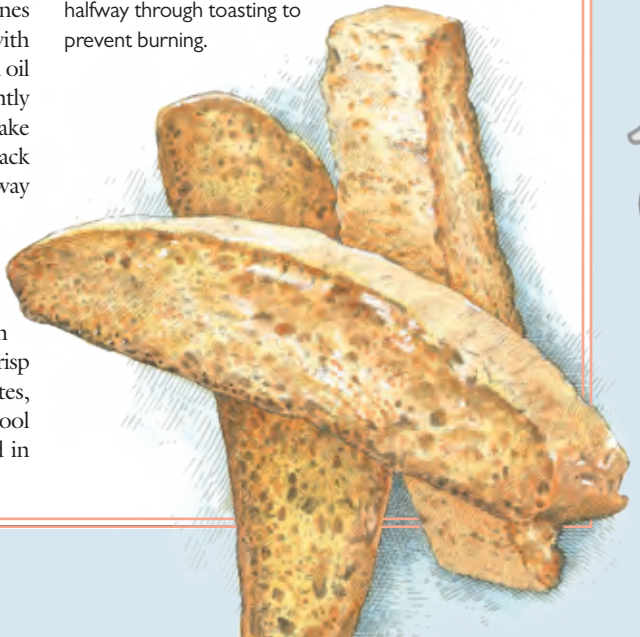


ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Pouding Chômeur

This maple syrup cake was born of the Great Depression—yet it is decidedly rich.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

During the cold winters of the Great Depression, Quebecois found warmth and comfort in dessert. Pouding chômeur ("unemployed person's pudding") transformed a few humble ingredients—stale bread, milk, and brown sugar—into a sweet treat. Then, as the economy improved, the frugal recipe evolved into something quite decadent. The sugar was traded for maple syrup and the milk for cream, and an egg-and-butter-rich cake batter (or biscuit dough) took the place of the bread.

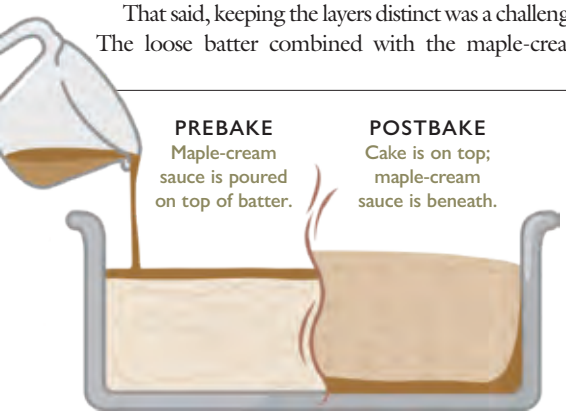
I like the cake version. It's made by spreading a simple batter in a baking dish and then pouring a mixture of maple syrup and heavy cream on top. No matter how slowly you pour, the two layers slosh together and tend to combine. But when the formula is just right, the layers invert during baking and the cake ends up floating atop a thick, bubbling pool of maple-cream sauce. Some of the sauce soaks into the cake, giving it a luscious, gooey consistency. It's just the thing to tuck into on a snowy winter day or in early spring during maple sugaring season.

Tangy crème fraîche cuts through the sweet maple-cream sauce.

For the cake portion, most recipes call for creaming together butter and sugar before adding the eggs, followed by alternating additions of the wet and dry ingredients. This incorporates lots of air, producing a light cake with a fine, tender crumb. But I thought a coarser crumb would be more in line with the dessert's casual, rustic origins. So I switched to a quick-bread method, first whisking together the flour, baking powder, sugar, and salt and then whisking in milk, an egg, vanilla, and melted butter. It worked well: The baking powder gave the cake sufficient volume, and the crumb was indeed coarser. As a bonus, the dessert was now superfast and easy to mix up.

That said, keeping the layers distinct was a challenge: The loose batter combined with the maple-cream sauce, producing a uniformly soggy cake rather than a stratified dessert. To make the batter less likely to blend with the sauce, I made it denser and gave it more structure by adding a second egg and increasing the flour from 1 to 1¼ cups. I also bumped up the melted butter from 4 tablespoons to 6, "waterproofing" the batter so it would remain separate from the sauce. These tweaks resulted in defined layers. And baking on the top rack at 375 degrees produced a lightly crisp, caramelized crust—a lovely contrast to the moist crumb and creamy sauce.

Only one issue remained: The dessert was a tad too sweet. I reduced the sugar in the cake itself to 3 tablespoons, just enough to lend a bit of flavor. Because I needed 1 cup each of maple syrup and cream to retain a fluid base for the sauce, using less syrup to control the sauce's sweetness wasn't an option. But I had another fix: salt. Most recipes don't include it, but just ½ teaspoon in the sauce created balance and contrast, making the dessert even more enjoyable.



Topsy-Turvy Cake

Pouding chômeur is made by pouring a warm mixture of maple syrup and cream onto a cake batter. As the dessert bakes, the cake rises and sets up, and the maple-cream sauce, which has thinned out with more heat, migrates around the batter to settle at the bottom of the dish. In our version, a craggy, caramelized layer also forms when some of the sauce gets trapped on top of the cake and browns. We invert each serving of the cake so the sauce ends up on top and the caramelized layer on the bottom.

POUDING CHÔMEUR (MAPLE SYRUP CAKE)

SERVES 6 TO 8 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR

The cake is best served hot; for this reason, we prefer using a glass baking dish, which retains heat well, but a metal baking pan will also work. The color of syrup labeled Grade A Dark Amber will contrast best against the yellow cake. Serve with a dollop of crème fraîche or a scoop of vanilla or coffee ice cream.

- 1 cup maple syrup, preferably dark amber
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon table salt, divided
- 1¼ cups (6¼ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- ⅔ cup milk
- 2 large eggs
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

1. Adjust oven rack 6 inches from top of oven and heat oven to 375 degrees. Heat maple syrup, cream, and ½ teaspoon salt in medium saucepan over medium heat until simmering, about 5 minutes. Off heat, whisk to combine, then transfer to heatproof 2-cup liquid measuring cup.

2. Whisk flour, sugar, baking powder, and remaining ½ teaspoon salt together in large bowl. Whisk milk, eggs, and vanilla in second bowl until combined. Whisk milk mixture into flour mixture until combined. Add melted butter and whisk until smooth. Transfer batter to 8-inch square baking dish set in rimmed baking sheet and spread into even layer with spatula. Pour syrup mixture slowly down corner of baking dish so it flows gently over top of cake batter.

3. Bake until deep golden brown and toothpick inserted in center of cake layer comes out clean, 30 to 35 minutes. Let cool on wire rack for 10 minutes. Use serving spoon to scoop onto plates, inverting each spoonful so sauce is on top.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/FEB20

PHOTOGRAPHY: KELLER + KELLER; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Next-Level Yellow Sheet Cake

We make everyone's favorite cake even better by combining a fine, plush texture with fresh, homemade flavor. Then we crown it with a rich chocolate frosting.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Yellow sheet cake is a darling of American desserts: It's classic, universally liked, and just right for serving by the square. And yet it never seems to realize its full potential. The crumb is usually OK—moist and relatively coarse—but there's no reason that a sheet cake can't have a truly special texture. I'm talking about an extraordinarily fine, uniform crumb, the kind so tender that it practically dissolves on the palate. I wanted to combine this plush texture with fresh, buttery flavor. And for a cake this good, only a rich, creamy chocolate frosting would do.

A high-ratio formula (more sugar than flour) produces a crumb so fine that it nearly dissolves on the palate.

Formula One

The unique crumb I'm referring to shows up in what is known as a "high-ratio" cake. Most cake formulas are low ratio, meaning they have slightly less sugar by weight than flour, but some are high ratio, meaning—you guessed it—they have more sugar by weight than flour. And that's key because sugar doesn't just sweeten a cake; it also adds moisture and makes the crumb finer and more tender.

Quick experiment: I increased the sugar in a low-ratio yellow cake recipe by 20 percent so that it outweighed the flour. Quick result: The cake collapsed right after I took it out of the oven. This is where bleached cake flour, the signature ingredient in high-ratio cake, comes in. Bleached cake flour differs from all-purpose flour in three ways: It's more finely milled, it has less protein, and (surprise) it's bleached. The first characteristic helps the flour disperse and absorb moisture more evenly, and the second helps make cakes tender. But it's the bleaching that's really important here. Although it whitens the flour, that's not the primary objective: It also alters the starch in such a way that the cake doesn't fall under the weight of extra sugar, liquid, or fat (see "Why Use Bleached Cake Flour?").

I searched for a few high-ratio cake recipes, and the one I liked best went like this: Cream 12¼ ounces of sugar together with butter; whip in the eggs and the liquid (which in this case was buttermilk with a generous amount of vanilla); and then mix in the dry ingredients—9 ounces of bleached cake flour, plus baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Pour the batter into a greased and floured pan and bake it for about 30 minutes.

The vanilla flavor, so important to the subtle profile of a yellow cake, was suitably strong. But the crumb was a bit dry and crumbly, and I noticed something odd with how it looked as I served it.

Shady Results

When I cut into the cooled cake, I found damp, subtly shaded areas in the crumb, mostly toward the bottom half of the cake. What was happening? Turns out, some of the liquid in the batter was settling as it baked.

An emulsifier would help the liquid in the cake stay evenly distributed throughout baking. Luckily, I always keep a superstrong emulsifier in my fridge. You probably do, too—it's called egg yolk. Yolks contain lecithin, a powerful emulsifier. When I added

Why Use Bleached Cake Flour?

It's vital to used bleached cake flour for this cake. That's because exposure to chlorine gas (or other bleaching methods) not only whitens flour but also alters its starch in such a way that the cake doesn't shrink or fall once it is baked. It works in two ways: First, bleaching makes the starch in flour better able to absorb the extra sugar (which dissolves during baking), liquid, and fat present in high-ratio cakes such as this one, thus creating a thicker batter that can hold tiny air bubbles to support a fine, plush texture. Second, bleaching promotes the gelatinization of the starch in the flour, which also develops structure in the crumb.

BLEACHED CAKE FLOUR
Cake stands tall

UNBLEACHED CAKE FLOUR
Cake sags

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

TWO FATS, TWO BENEFITS

Vegetable oil and butter each play a critical role in this cake. Oil helps the crumb stay moist because it's liquid at room temperature, so it's able to bond with free starch molecules and therefore slow the retrogradation process that causes staling. A solid fat such as butter is much less able to bond with starch, so an all-butter cake seems dry. But butter provides one of the few flavors in yellow cake, so its inclusion was nonnegotiable.

YOU NEED BOTH
Butter provides flavor; oil keeps the cake moist.

two extra egg yolks to my batter, the "shadow" that had marred my earlier cake disappeared.

I now had quintessential yellow cake flavor: all butter and vanilla and egg yolks. But the crumb was still a little dry and a little more open and crumbly than I wanted.

Mixing Matters

To address the dryness, I replaced some of the butter with vegetable oil. Not only would this produce a moister cake, but the cake would stay that way for longer (see "Two Fats, Two Benefits"). But this meant that I needed to reconsider my mixing method. The conventional creaming method requires beating the butter and sugar together until the mixture is light and fluffy before adding the remaining ingredients. Half the fat in my new cake was liquid (oil), which can't hold air the way that solid fat (butter) can, so creaming was no longer viable. But reverse creaming? That's different.

Reverse creaming is simple. Just combine the sugar, flour, leavening, and salt in the bowl of your stand mixer, and then add the fat. Mix it until it's combined. Next, add the liquid and eggs and beat the heck out of it, turning up the speed once the mixture is combined. Only a small amount of air gets incorporated during mixing, resulting in a superfine texture. It worked beautifully. The cake had a tender, moist, and fine-grained crumb. On to the frosting.

Frosting on the Cake

This cake is especially perfect for casual summer meals, so it was important that the frosting could stand up to warm, humid weather. American chocolate buttercream, the simple mixture of butter, confectioners' sugar, milk or cream, cocoa powder, and/or melted bittersweet chocolate, holds up well, but I had reservations. Its fine sugar crystals can sometimes feel a little coarse on the tongue.

I came up with a solution: In addition to softened butter, I beat ¼ cup of hot water (instead of milk) into the confectioners' sugar and cocoa powder, which dissolved some of the sugar crystals for a smoother frosting (see "Creamy, Dreamy—and Sturdy—Frosting"). When the butter was well incorporated, I added a couple ounces of melted bittersweet chocolate for deep, dark flavor. At first, the frosting looked far too loose to be spreadable, but after sitting for a few minutes, it was thick and creamy, ready to be smoothed over the top of my cake.

This classic dessert had been upgraded in exactly the way that I had envisioned: Here was a tender, fine-textured cake full of butter and vanilla, topped with rich chocolate frosting.

YELLOW SHEET CAKE WITH CHOCOLATE FROSTING

SERVES 12 TO 15
TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR, PLUS 2½ HOURS COOLING

Use a metal baking pan for this recipe; a glass baking dish will cause the edges of the cake to overbake as it cools. It's important to use bleached cake flour here; substituting unbleached cake flour or a combination of all-purpose flour and cornstarch will cause the cake to fall. To ensure the proper texture, weigh the flour. Our favorite bittersweet chocolate is Ghirardelli 60% Cacao Bittersweet Chocolate Premium Baking Bar.

Cake

- **4** large eggs plus 2 large yolks
- **½** cup buttermilk
- **1** tablespoon vanilla extract
- **2¼** cups (9 ounces) bleached cake flour
- **1¾** cups (12¼ ounces) granulated sugar
- **1¼** teaspoons baking powder
- **¼** teaspoon baking soda
- **½** teaspoon table salt
- **8** tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- **½** cup vegetable oil

Frosting

- **2¼** cups (9 ounces) confectioners' sugar
- **½** cup (1½ ounces) unsweetened cocoa powder
- **8** tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- **¼** cup hot water
- **¼** teaspoon table salt
- **2** ounces bittersweet chocolate, melted

1. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour 13 by 9-inch baking pan. Combine eggs and yolks, buttermilk, and vanilla in 2-cup liquid measuring cup and whisk with fork until smooth.

2. Combine flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt in bowl of stand mixer fitted with paddle. Mix on low speed until combined, about 20 seconds. Add butter and oil and mix on low speed until combined, about 30 seconds. Increase speed to medium and beat until lightened, about 1 minute. Reduce speed to low and, with mixer running, slowly add egg mixture. When mixture is fully incorporated, stop mixer and scrape down bowl and paddle thoroughly. Beat on medium-high speed until batter is pale, smooth, and thick, about 3 minutes. Transfer batter to prepared pan and smooth top. Tap pan firmly on counter 5 times to release any large air bubbles.

3. Bake until toothpick inserted in center comes out with few crumbs attached, 28 to 32 minutes. Let cake cool completely in pan on wire rack, about 2 hours.

4. FOR THE FROSTING: Combine sugar, cocoa, butter, hot water, and salt in bowl of stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment. Mix on low speed until combined, about 20 seconds. Increase speed to medium and continue to mix until smooth, about 1 minute longer, scraping down bowl as necessary. Add melted chocolate and whip on low speed until incorporated. Let sit at room temperature until thickened to spreadable consistency, 30 to 40 minutes.

5. Frost cake. Refrigerate until frosting is set, about 20 minutes, before serving.

Creamy, Dreamy—and Sturdy—Frosting

American chocolate buttercream, the sweetly nostalgic mixture of softened butter, milk or cream, confectioners' sugar, cocoa powder, and/or melted bittersweet chocolate, holds up well in warm weather, but it can have a gritty texture because there's not enough moisture in the mixture to dissolve the very fine sugar crystals. To smooth things out for our version, we beat the sugar, cocoa powder, and softened butter with a little hot water instead of milk, which helps dissolve most of the sugar. Once the mixture is combined, we add melted bittersweet chocolate for even more depth.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/OCT20**

French Almond–Browned Butter Cakes

These buttery, nutty, two-bite treats with chewy centers and crisp shells are a pastry chef's secret weapon. Now they can be yours, too.

BY LAN LAM

Mignardises are tiny treats offered to restaurant guests at the end of a meal. Because they are consumed in one or two bites and need to leave a lasting impression, the best versions feature intense flavors and contrasting textures. Early in my career, one of my tasks as a pastry prep cook was to prepare an assortment of these delicacies, including indulgent truffles, jewel-toned fruit jellies, and glossy macarons. But nothing was as popular as the financiers.

Making these elegant little cakes requires only six ingredients, and they bake in less than 15 minutes.

The thin shells of these miniature cakes crunch satisfyingly when bitten, bringing forth the richness of nutty browned butter and toasted almonds. Inside, the crumb is moist, chewy, and cakey, with an aroma similar to that of almond extract.

For all their nuance and elegance, financiers are incredibly easy to make: Just whisk together almond flour, all-purpose flour, sugar, and salt; stir in egg whites and browned butter; and bake in generously buttered individual molds.

The cakes are done when the edges are well browned and the tops are golden.

Ins and Outs

In this simple recipe, each ingredient plays a unique role. Let's start with the flours. Almond flour is primary; for a batch of two dozen financiers, ⅔ cup of almond flour is enough to infuse the batter with a deep, nutty taste. A small amount (I use 2 tablespoons) of all-purpose flour provides protein and starch that hold on to water from the egg whites and keep the cakes' interiors moist.

Next up is sugar. Sugar is responsible for the financiers' crackly exterior. Many recipes, including mine, contain more sugar than flour. As the cakes bake, the sugar caramelizes, turning pliable. Then, as the cakes cool, the sugar takes on a brittle structure, creating the delightfully crisp shell that is the hallmark of a good financier.

Sugar also affects the interior crumb of the cakes, which should offer repeated resistance as you chew. Specifically, the ratio of sugar to egg whites, which contain a good amount of water, is important. I found the sweet—and chewy—spot with 3 ounces egg whites to 4 ounces sugar.

CRISP EXTERIOR; MOIST, DENSE INTERIOR

Finally, there's the browned butter, which helps define the flavor of the cakes and adds richness. I cooked 5 tablespoons of butter until its milk solids browned and then stirred it into the batter.

Many recipes suggest baking financiers in mini-muffin tins instead of the traditional molds that few home cooks own, so I gave this technique a try. In any pan, a substantial barrier of fat is necessary to prevent the cakes from sticking. Individually coating 24 mini-muffin tin cups with softened butter was tedious, so I used vegetable oil spray instead. (The browned butter offered enough depth that the shortcut didn't sacrifice flavor.)

In a 375-degree oven, my financiers baked evenly, and they emerged well browned. But their tops baked up with domes instead of the relatively flat tops that are their hallmark.

Flat Out

I happened upon the solution when I switched from vegetable oil spray to baking spray with flour. Baking spray helps baked goods release by providing a physical barrier between the pan and the food; the flour it contains also changes the rate at which a batter cooks. The flour particles in the spray form

As Good as Gold

It is said that financiers were created in the late 19th century by a pâtissier named Lasne whose shop was located near the Paris stock exchange. Lasne offered the cakes—a revision of the visitandine cakes prepared in the 1700s by a community of nuns—to bankers looking for treats to enjoy on the go. Fittingly, Lasne baked the cakes in miniature rectangular molds shaped like gold bars.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

DIY BAKING SPRAY

If you don't have baking spray, you can fake it with a little flour and vegetable oil spray: First, lightly spritz the muffin tin. Next, very lightly flour the cups, and then generously spray them again.

a tiny gap where the batter meets the metal—tiny, but important. Here's why: The flour provided some insulation so the sides of the financiers could rise more before setting, resulting in sides that were mostly even with the top.

With my financiers finally looking the part, I customized them with a variety of add-ins, including fresh fruit, dark chocolate chunks, citrus zest, warm spices, and several types of nuts. If you're looking for an easy way to wow your guests with just two bites, you've got to give this recipe a try.

FINANCIERS (ALMOND–BROWNED BUTTER CAKES)

MAKES 24 CAKES

TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES, PLUS 20 MINUTES COOLING

You'll need a 24-cup mini-muffin tin for this recipe. Because egg whites can vary in size, measuring the whites by weight or volume is essential. Baking spray with flour ensures that the cakes bake up with appropriately flat tops; we don't recommend substituting vegetable oil spray in this recipe. To enjoy the crisp edges of the cakes, eat them on the day they're baked; store leftovers in an airtight container at room temperature for up to three days.

- **5 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- **¾ cup (3 ounces) finely ground almond flour**
- **½ cup plus 1 tablespoon (4 ounces) sugar**
- **2 tablespoons all-purpose flour**
- **⅛ teaspoon table salt**
- **⅓ cup (3 ounces) egg whites (3 to 4 large eggs)**

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Generously spray 24-cup mini-muffin tin with baking spray with flour. Melt butter in 10-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Cook, stirring and scraping skillet constantly with rubber spatula, until milk solids are dark golden brown and butter has nutty aroma, 1 to 3 minutes. Immediately transfer butter to heatproof bowl.

2. Whisk almond flour, sugar, all-purpose flour, and salt together in second bowl. Add egg whites. Using rubber spatula, stir until combined, mashing any lumps against side of bowl until mixture is smooth. Stir in butter until incorporated. Distribute batter evenly among prepared muffin cups (cups will be about half full).

3. Bake until edges are well browned and tops are golden, about 14 minutes, rotating muffin tin halfway through baking. Remove tin from oven and immediately invert wire rack on top of tin. Invert rack and tin; carefully remove tin. Turn cakes right side up and let cool for at least 20 minutes before serving.

Even Fancier Financiers

Financiers are ideal party fare: They are a cinch to prepare, they don't require flatware or plates—just grab them with your fingers and pop them into your mouth—and they can be made in advance. What's more, they are easy to customize, so why not make multiple batches, each with a unique flavor? We suggest preparing the batter a day ahead and baking the cakes a few hours before your guests arrive.

STONE FRUIT

Choose tart, slightly underripe plums, peaches, apricots, or nectarines. Cut the fruit into wedges, slice them thin, and shingle two pieces on top of each cake before baking.

RASPBERRIES

Place one small raspberry on its side on the top of each cake before baking. Don't press the berry into the batter or it will sink and stick to the muffin tin.

CHOCOLATE

Place a ½-inch chunk of dark chocolate on top of each cake before baking. Don't press the chocolate into the batter or it will sink and stick to the muffin tin.

NUTS

Sprinkle lightly toasted sliced almonds on top of the batter. Or, instead of using almond flour, grind 3 ounces of untoasted pistachios, hazelnuts, pecans, or whole unblanched almonds with the all-purpose flour in a food processor.

CITRUS OR SPICES

Add ¾ teaspoon of citrus zest or ¼ teaspoon of ground cinnamon, ginger, or cardamom to the batter.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit **CooksIllustrated.com/APR20**

Buttermilk Panna Cotta

Interested in a luxurious make-ahead dessert that comes together with just a few strokes of a whisk? Read on.

BY LAN LAM

I have a long history with panna cotta. I figure I've made at least 1,000 batches, because it has been on the dessert menu of every restaurant I've ever worked at. No wonder: Panna cotta is pure in flavor, endlessly adaptable, and ridiculously easy to make. It is also prepared in advance. Each of these perks makes it a recipe that all cooks should know.

Panna cotta (Italian for "cooked cream") is made by setting sugar-sweetened cream and often milk, yogurt, or buttermilk with gelatin to produce a luscious, wobbly, opaque dessert with a clean, milky taste. The usual procedure is to warm the dairy with sugar and then stir in bloomed gelatin until it dissolves. The mixture is then divided among ramekins, chilled for at least 6 hours, and unmolded (it's also lovely served straight from small glasses).

As easy as panna cotta is to make, you still need to use just the right ratio of ingredients to achieve the perfect lush consistency. Also, the gelatin must be handled properly: Too much yields a firm, rubbery mass, and if there is too little or it is mishandled, you'll end up with dessert soup.

A drizzle of honey and a few fresh berries make a simple, elegant garnish for panna cotta speckled with vanilla bean seeds.

Buttermilk Makes It Better

I've always preferred panna cotta made with equal parts buttermilk and heavy cream. The buttermilk's tangy edge adds depth and moderates the richness of the heavy cream, and the heavy cream plays an important practical role: It can be heated past 150 degrees—the temperature at which I have found that gelatin reliably dissolves and flavorings can be infused into it—without curdling. Curdling happens when a protein in dairy called casein clumps when heated. But heavy cream has enough fat to dilute the casein molecules, preventing clumps. Since lean buttermilk can curdle at temperatures as low as 110 degrees, I like to heat the cream, sugar, and bloomed gelatin and then wait for the mixture to cool before stirring in the buttermilk.

Gelatin 101

Now, about gelatin, the key—and somewhat temperamental—ingredient in panna cotta. I started by "blooming" it, meaning I hydrated it in cold water.

There are two methods for blooming powdered gelatin. The most common is to sprinkle it in an even layer on a dish of cold water, where it slowly hydrates. For my panna cotta, I found that the other approach, called "bulking," was even easier. It's done by whisking the gelatin together with sugar (or another dry ingredient) before mixing it into water—or, in this case, cream, which contains plenty of water. The sugar helps separate the gelatin granules so that they remain independent while they disperse throughout the watery liquid and can hydrate thoroughly and evenly.

Next, I heated the mixture to dissolve the gelatin. As the mixture cooled, it set into a solid gel.

To serve eight, I thickened 4 cups of dairy with 2 teaspoons of gelatin. This was just the right amount to produce a satiny-smooth, lush dessert that managed to be ethereal and creamy at the same time. I whisked the gelatin together with sugar (½ cup for modest sweetness) and a pinch of salt to enhance flavor, added 2 cups of cold cream, and let the mixture sit for 5 minutes. Next, I heated the mixture until it reached 150 degrees and the gelatin had dissolved. Finally, I let the cream-sugar-gelatin combination cool to about 105 degrees before stirring in 2 cups of buttermilk. Now it was ready to be portioned and chilled.

Fancy Finishes

With my basic recipe complete, I capitalized on one of the many advantages of panna cotta: It takes beautifully to flavorings. I made one version infused with an aromatic vanilla bean and then garnished with a drizzle of honey and fresh raspberries and blackberries—an elegant take on berries and cream. Then, for something different yet still luxurious, I steeped grapefruit zest in the cream and garnished the panna cotta with crunchy caramel-coated almonds. But my hands-down favorite was Thai basil–infused panna cotta topped with strawberries that I had macerated with sugar and black pepper.

THE RIGHT WAY TO UNMOLD PANNA COTTA

Many recipes recommend dipping the ramekins in hot water to help release the panna cotta, but we found this method ineffective. The walls of the ramekins are too thick to transfer enough heat to loosen the dessert. Here is a better way.

1. Run paring knife around inside edge of ramekin to loosen panna cotta.

2. Cover ramekin with serving plate and invert panna cotta onto plate, jiggling ramekin if necessary.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

BUTTERMILK-VANILLA PANNA COTTA WITH BERRIES AND HONEY

SERVES 8 TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR, PLUS 6 HOURS CHILLING

Make sure to unmold the panna cotta onto cool plates. If you'd rather not unmold the panna cotta, substitute 5- to 6-ounce glasses for the ramekins.

- ½ cup (3½ ounces) sugar
- 2 teaspoons unflavored gelatin
- Pinch table salt
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 1 vanilla bean
- 2 cups buttermilk
- Honey
- Fresh raspberries and/or blackberries

1. Whisk sugar, gelatin, and salt in small saucepan until very well combined. Whisk in cream and let sit for 5 minutes. Cut vanilla bean in half lengthwise. Using tip of paring knife, scrape out seeds. Add bean and seeds to cream mixture. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until mixture registers 150 to 160 degrees, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat and let mixture cool to 105 to 110 degrees, about 15 minutes. Strain cream mixture through fine-mesh strainer into medium bowl, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible. Gently whisk in buttermilk.

2. Set eight 5-ounce ramekins on rimmed baking sheet. Divide buttermilk mixture evenly among ramekins. Invert second rimmed baking sheet on top of ramekins and carefully transfer to refrigerator. Chill for at least 6 hours or up to 3 days (if chilling for more than 6 hours, cover each ramekin with plastic wrap).

3. Working with 1 panna cotta at a time, insert paring knife between panna cotta and side of ramekin. Gently run knife around edge of ramekin to loosen panna cotta. Cover ramekin with serving plate and invert panna cotta onto plate. (You may need to gently jiggle ramekin.) Drizzle each panna cotta with honey, then top with 3 to 5 berries and serve.

BUTTERMILK-GRAPEFRUIT PANNA COTTA WITH CARAMEL-COATED ALMONDS

Substitute 2 tablespoons grated grapefruit zest (2 grapefruits) for vanilla bean. Omit honey and berries. Sprinkle 1 recipe Caramel-Coated Almonds (recipe follows) on panna cotta before serving.

CARAMEL-COATED ALMONDS

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP TOTAL TIME: 40 MINUTES

The caramel will darken as it cools, so remove the almonds from the pot when the caramel is pale gold.

- ¾ cup water
- ¾ cup vegetable oil
- ½ cup sliced almonds
- ¼ cup (1¾ ounces) sugar
- ¼ teaspoon table salt

Set fine-mesh strainer over medium bowl. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Combine all ingredients in medium saucepan and bring to vigorous simmer over medium-high heat. (Mixture will be very bubbly.) Cook, stirring frequently with rubber spatula, until oil and sugar syrup separate, about 10 minutes. Continue to cook, stirring constantly, until almonds are coated in pale gold caramel, 2 to 4 minutes longer (caramel will darken as it cools). Immediately transfer to prepared strainer. Working quickly, stir and press mixture to remove excess oil. Transfer to prepared sheet and, using spatula, press almonds into single layer. (If caramel sets up too much, briefly warm mixture in low oven.) Let cool for 15 minutes, then break into bite-size pieces. (Almonds can be stored in airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

BUTTERMILK–THAI BASIL PANNA COTTA WITH PEPPERY STRAWBERRIES

Substitute 1 cup fresh Thai basil leaves for vanilla bean. Omit honey and berries. Divide 1 recipe Peppery Strawberries (recipe follows) evenly among panna cotta and garnish with extra basil before serving.

PEPPERY STRAWBERRIES

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP TOTAL TIME: 25 MINUTES

Use a paring knife to hull the strawberries.

- 6 ounces strawberries, hulled and quartered (about 1 cup)
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- Pinch table salt

Place strawberries in bowl. Sprinkle sugar, pepper, and salt over strawberries and toss to combine. Let mixture sit for at least 15 minutes or up to 2 hours before serving.

SCIENCE All About Gelatin

What It Is: Gelatin is made by boiling collagen-rich animal tissue in water to unravel the collagen into long protein strands. The gelatin is then extracted from the liquid and dried to create granules (powder).

How It Works: Achieving properly gelled gelatin is a two-step process. First, it must be bloomed, or hydrated, in cool water. The cool water penetrates slowly through each granule of gelatin, ensuring that it hydrates fully and dissolves. (If you skip blooming and add gelatin directly to hot water, the surface of each granule will rapidly hydrate and stick to its neighbors in clumps, while the interiors of the granules remain unhydrated and undissolved.)

The second step to properly gelled gelatin is heating, which causes the protein molecules to dissolve so that the mixture is fluid. Then, as the mixture cools to about body temperature, the strands tangle together, forming a mesh that slows the flow of the liquid, thickening it. Finally, after enough time has elapsed, that mesh is sturdy enough to stop the liquid from flowing altogether, turning it into a solid gel.

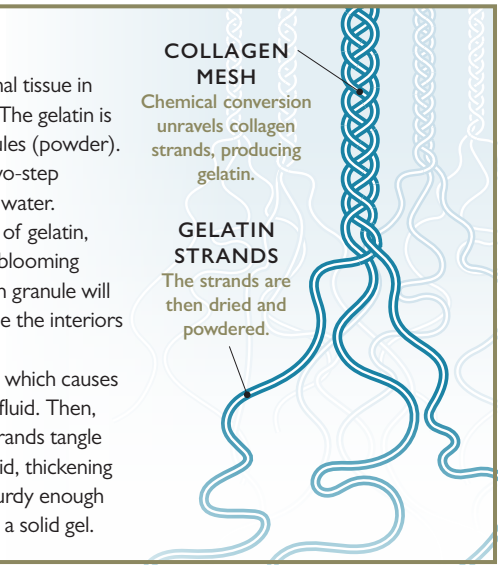


ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/JUN20

The Queen of Tarts

Silky cranberry curd cradled in a nutty, buttery crust has the bracing punch of a lemon tart, but its vivid color makes it look downright regal.

BY LAN LAM

This stunning tart is surprisingly easy to make: The shell is fashioned from a stir-together, pat-in-the-pan dough, and the filling doesn't require baking.

When I first encountered a tart made with cranberry curd (a recipe by David Tanis in the *New York Times*), I was bowled over by its gorgeousness. I loved seeing cranberries in the limelight, since they're so often relegated either to a relish or to an accent role in apple pie or crisp. I got to work showcasing their vivid color and unapologetic tartness in my own version of this dazzling alternative to a lemon curd tart. At the same time, I discovered how to make a sturdy yet delicate almond crust that just happens to be gluten-free, along with a whipped cream topping that doesn't weep or deflate.

In a Nutshell

I thought a nut crust would complement the astringent cranberry filling more than plain pastry, and almond seemed like a good choice since I could enhance its flavor with the nut's sweet, perfumed extract. So I stirred almond flour together with melted butter, sugar, salt, and almond extract; pressed the dough into a tart pan; and baked it in a 350-degree oven. It was rich and beautifully golden—but so fragile that it crumbled apart when I sliced the finished tart. Plus, some of the curd (a placeholder recipe for now) had seeped through to the pan, indicating that I needed something to bind up the crumb. Both flour and cornstarch worked nicely, so I chose the latter to keep the shell gluten-free.

Curd Mentality

Tangy, luscious curd is usually made by heating citrus juice (lemon is classic) with sugar, eggs, and butter until the mixture turns thick and glossy. When the curd will be used as a filling rather than as a spread, flour or cornstarch is added to thicken it to a sliceable consistency. It's then strained to ensure a satiny-smooth texture, transferred to a tart or pie shell, and baked until it's fully set.

Cranberry curd, however, is typically made using the whole fruit, including its pectin-rich flesh and skin. Pectin is a potent gelling agent, so the filling doesn't need the usual number of eggs (six or more per ½ cup of juice) or as much of the flavor-dulling, starchy thickeners to make it sliceably firm. (Any curd made with citrus juice alone, which contains relatively little pectin, requires more thickeners.) So I ran a bunch of tests, simmering a pound of berries with sugar and water, buzzing the syrupy mixture in the food processor, and heating it again with varying

NATURAL THICKENING POWER

The pectin in the cranberries allows the filling to set up with little help from other thickeners.

Cranberry's Secret Weapon: Pectin—and Lots of It

Cranberries are the perfect choice for a just-set, flavor-packed filling. That's because they're so loaded with pectin (which forms a gel in the presence of sugar and acid) that the curd practically thickens itself. In fact, our curd needs only minimal support from other thickeners such as eggs and cornstarch to set up into a sliceable tart filling.

Our cranberry curd sets up so nicely that we even use a portion of it to stabilize the whipped cream we pipe over the dessert. The calcium ions in the cream help the pectin molecules in the curd link, so they form a superstrong gel that traps both water and air. The upshot: a whipped cream topping so stable that it can be piped onto the tart hours before serving.

STEALTH STABILIZER

Mixing in a little cranberry curd gives the whipped cream topping staying power.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW JANJIGIAN

amounts of yolks and cornstarch (plus butter for silky richness). I found that just three yolks and 2 teaspoons of cornstarch provided all the thickening help my curd needed (see "Cranberry's Secret Weapon: Pectin—and Lots of It").

But there were a couple other advantages to making curd with cranberries that I hadn't anticipated. For one thing, I didn't need to pour the fruit puree back into the saucepan and heat it with the yolks and cornstarch to ensure that it solidified and gelled; the cranberry puree was a piping-hot 180 degrees, so I could add the thickeners directly to the food processor and let them cook in the puree's residual heat. The other perk was that the berries' abundance of pectin tightened the curd so effectively that there was no need to bake the filling in the tart shell; it was perfectly set by the time it cooled to room temperature.

The only problem I ran into was cosmetic: As it cooled, the curd developed an unattractive skin—a dry barrier that forms when water evaporates and proteins and sugar concentrate near the surface. Short of pressing a sheet of parchment over the curd, which would wreck its appearance when I pulled it off, I couldn't prevent a skin from forming. But I had an idea for how to get rid of it before I even transferred the filling to the tart shell: After processing in the eggs and cornstarch, I left the mixture to cool in the processor bowl. When a skin spread over its surface and the temperature dropped to 125 degrees—cool enough that little further evaporation would occur—I processed the puree again (adding the butter first for efficiency's sake), obliterating all signs of the skin. I strained the filling, poured it into the baked shell, and left it to fully cool. When I tried a bite, it was uniformly silky from top to bottom.

Finishing Flourish

Rich, billowy whipped cream piped into a pretty design would be perfect for topping my tart, but since it doesn't hold its shape for very long, I'd have to pipe it just before serving. Then I had an idea: Why not make use of the pectin in the filling to help stabilize the whipped cream? It wouldn't take much, since the calcium in dairy also helps strengthen pectin. And that way, I could pipe it well in advance of the meal. I reserved 2 tablespoons of the curd before pouring the rest into the tart shell. Once the tart had cooled, I whipped the reserved puree with a cup of heavy cream and piped the faintly rosy mixture into a simple yet elegant pattern around the filling's perimeter.

With that, the tart was perfect. I savored its three contrasting elements: the crisp, golden, nutty crust with sweet, floral overtones; the satiny magenta filling full of sharp, fruity flavors; and the velvety whipped cream that tempered the whole thing. When the holidays roll around, join me in giving cranberries a stunning breakout moment. You'll be glad you did.

FOR NUTRITION INFORMATION AND MORE
Visit CooksIllustrated.com/DEC20

Substance and Style

Our tart isn't just a looker. Its three complementary components work together to make a perfect finale to a holiday meal.

CRANBERRY CURD TART WITH ALMOND CRUST

SERVES 8 TOTAL TIME: 1½ HOURS, PLUS 4 HOURS RESTING

You'll need a 9-inch tart pan with a removable bottom for this recipe. We strongly recommend weighing the almond flour and cornstarch for the crust. If preferred, you can use a stand mixer or handheld mixer to whip the cream in step 4. The tart crust will be firm if you serve the tart on the day that it's made; if you prefer a more tender crust, make the tart through step 3 up to two days ahead.

Filling

- 1 pound (4 cups) fresh or frozen cranberries
- 1¼ cups (8¾ ounces) plus 1 tablespoon sugar, divided
- ½ cup water
- Pinch table salt
- 3 large egg yolks
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces and softened

Crust

- 1 cup (4 ounces) almond flour
- ½ cup (2 ounces) cornstarch
- ⅓ cup (2⅓ ounces) sugar
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- ¾ teaspoon almond extract

- 1 cup heavy cream

1. FOR THE FILLING: Bring cranberries, 1¼ cups sugar, water, and salt to boil in medium saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally. Adjust heat to maintain very gentle simmer. Cover and cook until all cranberries have burst and started to shrivel, about 10 minutes. While cranberries cook, whisk egg yolks and cornstarch in bowl until smooth. Transfer hot cranberry mixture to food processor. Immediately add yolk mixture and process until smooth (small flecks of cranberry skin will be visible), about 1 minute, scraping down sides of bowl as necessary. Let mixture cool in processor bowl until skin forms and mixture registers 120 to 125 degrees, 45 minutes to 1 hour. While mixture cools, make crust.

2. FOR THE CRUST: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Whisk flour, cornstarch, sugar, and salt in bowl until well combined. Add melted butter and almond extract and stir with wooden spoon until uniform dough forms. Crumble two-thirds of mixture over bottom of 9-inch tart pan with removable bottom. Press dough to even thickness in bottom of pan. Crumble remaining dough and scatter evenly around edge of pan. Press crumbled dough into sides of pan. Press edges to even thickness. Place pan on rimmed baking sheet and bake until crust is golden brown, about 20 minutes, rotating pan halfway through baking.

3. Add softened butter to cranberry puree and process until fully combined, about 30 seconds. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer set over bowl, pressing on solids with rubber spatula to extract puree. Transfer 2 tablespoons puree to medium bowl, then stir in cream and remaining 1 tablespoon sugar. Cover and refrigerate. Transfer remaining puree to crust (it's OK if crust is still warm) and smooth into even layer. Let tart sit at room temperature for at least 4 hours. (Cover tart with large bowl and refrigerate after 4 hours if making ahead.)

4. Whisk cream mixture until stiff peaks form, 1 to 3 minutes. Transfer to pastry bag fitted with pastry tip. Pipe decorative border around edge of tart. Transfer any remaining whipped cream to small serving bowl.

5. TO SERVE: Remove outer metal ring of tart pan. Slide thin metal spatula between tart and pan bottom to loosen tart. Carefully slide tart onto serving platter. Slice into wedges, wiping knife clean between cuts if necessary, and serve, passing extra whipped cream separately. (Leftovers can be covered and refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

DIY RECIPES

Spicy Ginger Syrup

Fresh ginger has a fiery bite, but it fades with heat and time. For a ginger syrup that retains its pungency, we grind lots of ginger with sugar and let it sit until the liquid released from the ginger dissolves the sugar crystals—no cooking required. Salt adds dimension, and red pepper flakes bolster the ginger with heat that's subtle but lasting. A small amount of vinegar adds a hint of acidity. –Andrea Geary

SPICY GINGER SYRUP

MAKES 1¼ CUPS TOTAL TIME: 25 MINUTES

Use this fiery syrup to spice up all sorts of beverages: Mix 1 part syrup and 5 parts seltzer and pour over ice to make a refreshing nonalcoholic ginger beer. Add lime juice and 2 ounces of vodka to your ginger beer and you have a Moscow Mule. Substitute dark rum for the vodka and it's a Dark and Stormy. The syrup also makes a nice addition to iced tea, hot cider, or a hot toddy. There's no need to peel the ginger.

- **1½ cups sugar**
- **8 ounces ginger, sliced into ¼-inch-thick rounds**
- **¼ teaspoon table salt**
- **¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes**
- **2 teaspoons cider vinegar**

Process sugar, ginger, salt, and pepper flakes in food processor until finely ground, about 1 minute, scraping down sides of bowl halfway through processing. Let stand for 5 minutes. Continue to process 1 minute longer, scraping down sides of bowl halfway through processing. Let stand for 5 minutes. Meanwhile, set fine-mesh strainer over medium bowl and line with double layer of cheesecloth that overhangs sides of strainer. Transfer ginger mixture to prepared strainer and let drain until liquid no longer runs freely, about 5 minutes. Gather edges of cheesecloth and squeeze to extract as much liquid as possible. Discard pulp. Stir in vinegar. (Syrup can be refrigerated for up to 2 weeks.)

Cocktail Cherries

To make our own cocktail cherries, we tested our way through fresh, frozen, jarred, and canned sweet and sour cherries; we preserved them in syrups made variously with white, brown, demerara, muscovado, and even caramelized sugar. We hit our sweet (and delicately sour) spot when we soaked jarred sour Morello cherries (similar to but more readily available than Marascas) in a syrup made from unsweetened cherry juice and sugar. –Nicole Konstantinakos

COCKTAIL CHERRIES

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 12½ HOURS COOLING

We used Trader Joe's Dark Morello Cherries in Light Syrup to develop this recipe. You can substitute other jarred or canned cherries; their weight after draining should be 12 ounces. You will need one 1-pint glass jar with a tight-fitting lid for this recipe. Alternatively, you can divide the cherries between two 1-cup glass jars.

- **1 cup unsweetened 100 percent cherry juice**
- **1 cup sugar**
- **1 (24.7-ounce) jar pitted dark Morello cherries in light syrup, drained**

1. Bring cherry juice to simmer in medium saucepan over medium-high heat and cook until juice has reduced to ½ cup, about 5 minutes. Off heat, whisk in sugar until dissolved.

2. Meanwhile, place 1-pint glass jar in bowl and place under hot running water until heated through, 1 to 2 minutes; shake dry.

3. Using slotted spoon, gently pack cherries into hot jar. Using funnel and ladle, pour hot syrup over cherries to cover; you may have some leftover syrup. Let jar cool completely, about 30 minutes. Cover and refrigerate for 12 hours before serving. (Cherries can be refrigerated for up to 2 months.)

Quince Paste

Pureed quince has a tendency to scorch on the bottom unless it's stirred constantly for the last hour of cooking. To make the process more hands-off, we move the last bit of cooking to the oven. –Andrea Geary

MEMBRILLO (QUINCE PASTE)

MAKES ABOUT 3 POUNDS (ONE 8 BY 8-INCH BLOCK)
TOTAL TIME: 4½ HOURS, PLUS 4 HOURS COOLING

This sweet, slightly astringent gel, also known as marmelada, is a great addition to a cheese board. It can be refrigerated for up to six months.

- **3½ pounds quinces, cored and quartered**
- **8 cups water**
- **4 cups sugar**
- **¼ cup lemon juice (2 lemons)**

1. Combine quinces and water in Dutch oven and place parchment paper round over surface to keep fruit submerged. Bring to boil over high heat. Cover, reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer until quinces are very soft and can be easily pierced with knife, about 1½ hours. Drain quinces in colander set in large bowl, reserving liquid (it should measure about 5 cups).

2. Return reserved liquid to pot and bring to boil over medium-high heat. Boil until reduced to 3 cups, 12 to 15 minutes. While liquid boils, process quinces in food processor until very smooth, about 45 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Working in small batches, pass quince puree through fine-mesh strainer set over medium bowl; discard solids (you should have about 4 cups puree).

3. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease 8-inch square baking pan, line with parchment, and set aside. Add puree to reduced liquid in pot. Stir in sugar and lemon juice and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until puree darkens, becomes very thick, and begins to spatter, about 30 minutes.

4. Transfer pot to oven and cook until puree turns dark rusty brown and is thickened and rubber spatula leaves distinct trail when dragged across bottom of pot, 1 to 1½ hours, stirring and scraping sides of pot every 15 minutes. Transfer to prepared pan, smooth top, and let cool completely. Refrigerate until set and firm, at least 4 hours.

Masala Chai

To avoid dusty sediment in the tea, we crush rather than grind the spices before toasting them. We simmer the spices in water for 10 minutes before adding the tea leaves, which ensures that the spices' sweet flavors will hold their own against a strong black tea extraction. The resulting concentrate is sweet, spiced, and bracing enough to stand up to plenty of milk for a balanced masala chai. –Andrea Geary

MASALA CHAI CONCENTRATE

MAKES ABOUT 4 CUPS CONCENTRATE
TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR, PLUS 30 MINUTES COOLING

A boldly flavored tea such as Assam is ideal for this recipe; alternatively, use Irish or English breakfast tea. If desired, crush the spices using a mortar and pestle.

- 3 (2-inch) cinnamon sticks
- 1 star anise pod
- 15 green cardamom pods
- 2 teaspoons whole cloves
- ¾ teaspoon black peppercorns
- 5 cups water
- ¼ cup (1¾ ounces) packed brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh ginger
- Pinch table salt
- 3 tablespoons loose black tea

1. Place cinnamon sticks and star anise on cutting board. Using back of heavy skillet, press down firmly until spices are coarsely crushed. Transfer to medium saucepan. Crush cardamom pods, cloves, and peppercorns and add to saucepan. Toast spices over medium heat, stirring frequently, until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes.

2. Add water, sugar, ginger, and salt and bring to boil. Cover saucepan, reduce heat, and simmer mixture for 10 minutes. Stir in tea, cover, and simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat and let tea and spices steep for 10 minutes. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer. Let cool completely and refrigerate for up to 1 week. Stir before using.

For hot masala chai: Stir ½ cup concentrate and ½ cup milk together in saucepan and heat to desired temperature, or combine in mug and heat in microwave. **For iced masala chai:** Pour ⅔ cup concentrate and ⅓ cup milk over ice in glass; stir to combine.

Lao Gan Ma (Chili Crisp)

Chili crisp can serve as a dipping sauce for dumplings, a sauce for noodles, and as a flavoring for congee (page 53). Once you taste it, you'll think of a thousand other uses (ice cream, fruit, eggs—you name it). –Andrew Janjigian

LAO GAN MA (CHILI CRISP)

SERVES 24 (MAKES ABOUT 1½ CUPS) TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR, PLUS 12 HOURS RESTING

You'll find monosodium glutamate in the spice aisle under the name Accent.

- ½ cup Sichuan chili powder
- ½ cup salted dry-roasted peanuts, chopped
- 2 tablespoons Sichuan peppercorns, crushed
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon monosodium glutamate (optional)
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 2 large shallots, sliced thin
- 4 large garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 1 (1-inch) piece ginger, unpeeled, sliced into ¼-inch-thick rounds and smashed
- 3 star anise pods
- 10 green cardamom pods, crushed
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 2 tablespoons toasted sesame oil

1. Combine chili powder; peanuts; peppercorns; salt; and monosodium glutamate, if using, in heatproof bowl and set fine-mesh strainer over bowl. Cook vegetable oil and shallots in medium saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until shallots are deep golden brown, 10 to 14 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer shallots to second bowl. Add garlic to vegetable oil and cook, stirring constantly, until golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer garlic to bowl with shallots.

2. Add ginger, star anise, cardamom, and cinnamon sticks to vegetable oil; reduce heat to medium; and cook, stirring occasionally, until ginger is dried out and mixture is very fragrant, 15 to 20 minutes. Strain ginger mixture through fine-mesh strainer into bowl with chili powder mixture (mixture may bubble slightly); discard solids in strainer. Stir well to combine. Once cool, stir shallots, garlic, and sesame oil into ginger–chili powder mixture. Transfer to airtight container and let stand for at least 12 hours before using. (Chili crisp can be refrigerated for up to 3 months.)

Spicy Tomato Jam

Tomatoes are rich in glutamates, and when cooked down with fish sauce, they provide a powerful umami punch. Sugar and vinegar supply a sweet-and-sour balance while garlic, ginger, and jalapeño give this jam a spicy finish. –Elizabeth Carduff

SPICY TOMATO JAM

MAKES ABOUT TWO 1-CUP JARS
TOTAL TIME: 50 MINUTES, PLUS 24 HOURS CHILLING

For a spicier jam, add the reserved jalapeño seeds. The star anise pods add a subtle licorice-like flavor, but they can be omitted, if desired. Red Boat 40°N Fish Sauce is our favorite fish sauce. Serve this jam over eggs, on sandwiches, or on crackers with a pungent cheese.

- 2 pounds plum tomatoes, cored and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1¼ cups sugar
- ¾ cup red wine vinegar
- ¼ cup fish sauce
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 large jalapeño chile, stemmed, seeds reserved, and minced
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 2 star anise pods (optional)

1. Combine tomatoes; sugar; vinegar; fish sauce; garlic; jalapeño (and reserved seeds, if desired); ginger; and star anise, if using, in 12-inch nonstick skillet. Bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-high and simmer, stirring often, until mixture is thickened and has darkened in color, 25 to 30 minutes.

2. Discard star anise, if using. Mash jam with potato masher to even consistency. Continue to simmer until rubber spatula or wooden spoon leaves distinct trail when dragged across bottom of skillet, 5 to 10 minutes longer. Transfer jam to two 1-cup jars and let cool completely. Cover and refrigerate for at least 24 hours before serving. (Jam can be refrigerated for up to 3 weeks.)

INDEX

Cook's Illustrated 2020 Annual

Drupes

Many drupes are familiar, even if the botanical classification is not. They're fruits—including items you might not recognize as fruits—with a three-layer structure: a fleshy or fibrous exterior surrounds a shell (or "pit") that surrounds a seed. In some drupes, such as **PEACHES**, the edible portion is the flesh, which easily separates from the pit in freestone fruits; clingstone varieties require more excavation. Dense, rich **OLIVES** change color as they age, shifting from green to brown, red, purple, and finally black. Young **JUJUBES** are smooth and crisp like apples; eventually, they shrivel and look and taste more like dates. To access the lychee-like flesh of **RAMBUTANS**, peel away their spiky skin. **ALMONDS** are edible drupe seeds; when their fuzzy green flesh ripens, they split to reveal the hard shell that houses the teardrop-shaped seed. **PISTACHIOS**, which grow in clusters like grapes and blush like apricots, mature similarly. Enclosed in a caustic shell that dangles from the bottom of a **CASHEW** apple is its eponymous seed. Every red coffee cherry contains two **COFFEE BEANS**. White **COCONUT** meat—part of the plant's seed—is shredded to make its milk and cream. **RASPBERRIES** are aggregates of tiny drupes, often called drupelets.

BACK COVER ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN BURGOYNE


Coffee Beans
Rambutans
Jujubes
Pistachios
Almonds
Peaches
Cashew
Raspberries
Green Olives
Coconut

DRUPES

Shizi Tou (Lion's Head Meatballs), 31

Pasta with Burst Cherry Tomato Sauce and Fried Caper Crumbs, 59

Buttermilk-Vanilla Panna Cotta with Berries and Honey, 107

Skillet Turkey Burgers, 9

Braised Red Cabbage with Apple, Bacon, and Shallots, 78

Skillet-Roasted Carrots, 77

Chicken Schnitzel, 3

Pouding Chômeur (Maple Syrup Cake), 101

Congee (Chinese Rice Porridge), 53

Pan-Seared Shrimp with Peanuts, Black Pepper, and Lime, 39

Dan Dan Mian (Sichuan Noodles with Chili Sauce and Pork), 61

Palak Dal (Spinach-Lentil Dal with Cumin and Mustard Seeds, 47

PHOTOGRAPHY: KELLER + KELLER, STEVE KLISE, CARL TREMBLAY, DANIEL J. VAN ACKERE; STYLING: CATRINE KELTY, KENDRA MCKNIGHT, MARIE PIRAINO, ELLE SIMONE SCOTT, SALLY STAUB