

SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

# COOK'S

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# 2018 ANNUAL

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RECIPES



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# COOK'S<sup>®</sup> ILLUSTRATED

2018 ANNUAL



- |  |                                       |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 2 Roast Beef and Potatoes for Company    | 40 Roasted Salmon for a Crowd         | 72 Creamy Dressings, Hold the Cream   |
| 4 Revamping Ground Beef Enchiladas       | 42 Peruvian Ceviche                   | 74 Game-Changing Turkey Gravy         |
| 6 Why You Should Be Grilling Skirt Steak | 44 Fish for Meat Lovers               | 76 Applesauce for Everyone            |
| 8 Introducing Tacos Dorados              | 46 One-Hour Pizza                     | 78 Irish Brown Soda Bread             |
| 10 Next-Level Grilled Steak              | 48 Really Good Falafel                | 80 Why You Should Make Pita Bread     |
| 12 Chinese Barbecued Spareribs           | 50 White Bean and Mushroom Gratin     | 82 Bringing Back Gougères             |
| 14 Perfect Pork Tenderloin Steaks        | 51 Red Wine Risotto with Beans        | 84 Rethinking Coffee Cake             |
| 16 Slow-Roasted Deviled Pork Chops       | 52 Rome's Greatest Little-Known Pasta | 86 Anytime Pancakes                   |
| 18 Vietnamese Pork with Rice Noodles     | 53 Moroccan Lentil and Chickpea Soup  | 88 Better-Than-the-Box Granola Bars   |
| 20 Real Carne Adovada                    | 54 Brazilian Shrimp and Fish Stew     | 90 Creamy French-Style Scrambled Eggs |
| 22 Next-Level Chicken Piccata            | 56 Really Good (Oven) Fries           | 91 Dark Chocolate Fudge Sauce         |
| 23 Beijing-Style Meat Sauce and Noodles  | 58 Buttery Spring Vegetables          | 92 No-Fear Caramel                    |
| 24 Three-Cup Chicken                     | 59 Sweeter and Easier Than Broccoli   | 94 Chocolate Semifreddo               |
| 26 Roast Chicken with Bread Salad        | 60 How to Grill Tomatoes              | 96 Modern Holiday Showstopper         |
| 28 Grilled Chicken Thighs                | 62 Great Barley Side Dishes           | 99 Foolproof All-Butter Pie Dough     |
| 30 Indoor Pulled Chicken                 | 63 Pasta Salad Rehab                  | 102 Peach Tarte Tatin                 |
| 32 Real Kung Pao Chicken                 | 64 Mexican Corn Salad                 | 104 Italian Chocolate-Almond Cake     |
| 34 One-Pan Chicken and Potatoes          | 65 Burn Your Beans                    | 106 The Lemoniest Lemon Bars          |
| 36 Revamping Chicken Salads              | 66 The Easiest Winter Squash          | 108 Belgian Spice Cookies (Speculoos) |
| 38 Low-Stress Turkey for a Crowd         | 67 Great—Not Grated—Carrot Salads     | 110 DIY Recipes                       |
|  | 68 Fresh Tomato Sauce                 |                                       |
|  | 70 Quick Pasta Sauces, Perfected      |                                       |



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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

# A YEAR OF COOKING: EVERY RECIPE FROM 2018

**M**uch happens over the course of a year here at *Cook's Illustrated*. My dedicated team of cooks, writers, scientists, and editors performs hundreds of recipe tests and runs countless experiments in search of better ways to prepare the foods we love. The result is more than 100 foolproof recipes for the foods we are most passionate about. And you'll find every single one here in this special edition of *Cook's Illustrated*. In true *Cook's Illustrated* fashion, we don't just tell you how to make each dish, we also explain—through our unique narrative articles—why our techniques and tricks work. I could wax poetic about every delicious recipe in this issue, but I'd rather be brief so you can get to cooking. Here are a few of my favorites.

For our showstopping Roast Chicken with Warm Bread Salad (page 27), we place a spatchcocked bird on top of a skillet full of crusty bread cubes. The roasting bird drips intensely flavored juices onto the bread cubes, which crisp and brown deeply. Tossed with arugula and a bright dressing, the warm bread salad just might steal the show from the perfectly roasted chicken.

This year we tackled the perennial challenge of making a quick pizza dough that is deeply flavorful and easy to stretch. After weeks of kitchen time, we discovered that the secrets to One-Hour Pizza (page 47) are using a combination of bread flour and semolina flour for great texture and adding beer and vinegar for long-fermented flavor.

For our Roasted Whole Side of Salmon (page 41), an ideal option for either a weeknight family dinner or a holiday gathering, we guarantee an evenly browned exterior by brushing on a thin layer of honey and then browning the salmon under the broiler. A foil sling under the fish takes the fear out of transferring it to a serving platter.

We set our sights particularly high when we started developing our Thick-Cut Oven Fries (page 57) and discovered that a lightly thickened mixture of cornstarch and water produces a thin, shatteringly crisp coating on creamy planks of Yukon Gold potatoes. These aren't just good oven fries, they are good fries. Period.

My favorite sweet recipe of the year (and trust me, there was a lot of competition) is our Best Lemon Bars (page 107). The buttery pat-in-the-pan crust is a cinch to put together, but the real star is the perfectly tart lemon curd, which gets extra zing from the addition of cream of tartar.

These are only a handful of the foolproof, kitchen-tested recipes included in the *Cook's Illustrated 2018 Annual* special collector's 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 (and since individual issues have a way of going missing, you now have a complete set once again). If you are new to *Cook's Illustrated*, welcome to the family. We've been waiting, and cooking, for you.

Dan Souza  
Editor in Chief



Dan Souza

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# Roast Beef and Potatoes for Company

A tender, juicy roast isn't hard to pull off. Neither are creamy, golden-brown potatoes. But merging the two into a holiday centerpiece? That's where things get tricky.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

Roasting beef with potatoes, a hallowed British tradition, sounds like it will produce the ideal holiday spread. While the meat cooks, the spuds sitting underneath or around it soak up the drippings and transform into a flavor-saturated side dish that impresses just as much as (if not more than) the roast itself. But as smart and serendipitous as that sounds, it's folklore. In my experience, cooking the meat and potatoes together rarely produces the best version of either one; in fact, it pits the two components against one another.

The problem is partly due to a lack of space. Most roasting pans can't accommodate a piece of meat large enough to feed a crowd plus enough potatoes to go alongside. So the options are to cram the potatoes into the pan, which causes them to steam, thwarting flavorful browning, or to include only enough to feed a few guests.

The more fundamental issue is that the two components require radically different cooking methods. Low-and-slow heat is the best way to ensure that a large roast cooks evenly and stays juicy, but it also makes for sparse drippings and, thus, bland potatoes.

On the other hand, the only way to really brown and crisp potatoes in the oven is to crank the heat way up. But who's willing to risk overcooking a pricey roast for the sake of the spuds?

Finding a way to roast enough beef and potatoes for a crowd while allowing the roast to cook up juicy and tender (and release flavorful drippings to infuse and crisp the potatoes) would require real strategy.

## Top Shop

I often default to prime rib for the holidays because of its well-marbled meat and fat cap, which crisps up into a thick crust, making it feel festive. But there are other good options, such as top loin roast. This is the cut that produces strip steaks (its alias is "strip roast"), so it, too, boasts well-marbled meat and a nice fat cap. Plus, it's boneless and uniform, which makes it easy to cook and slice (see "Strip Steak in Roast Form").

I crosshatched the fat cap to help it render and crisp and then salted the meat overnight to ensure that it would be well seasoned and juicy. And for the moment, I cooked the meat and potatoes separately



The roast cooks up nicely juicy and tender. But the beefy-tasting spuds—our take on French fondant potatoes—are the real stars of the dish.

(I'd tackle the merger later). I seared the roast, top and bottom, in a large roasting pan and then transferred it to a 300-degree oven, where it cooked gently until it reached 115 degrees. That's about 10 degrees shy of medium-rare, but the temperature of the meat would climb as it rested.

Potatoes won't crisp in a crowded pan even if the heat is blasting, so I scrapped that goal in favor of an old-school French preparation called fondant potatoes that creates marvelously flavorful results

without crisping. To make them, you halve and brown the spuds on the cut sides and then braise them in fat and stock. The potatoes absorb the flavorful liquid, turning so velvety that they practically dissolve in your mouth (hence their nickname: "melting potatoes"). Not worrying about crisping also meant that I could pack plenty into the pan.

I browned 5 pounds of peeled, halved Yukon Gold potatoes (their starchy yet creamy consistency seemed ideal) in the rendered fat left in the pan, flipped them, poured beef broth around them, and returned them to a 500-degree oven. Thirty minutes later, they were plump and extremely tender. I transferred them to a platter and strained and defatted the remaining broth, which would make a nice jus for serving.

They tasted beefy on the outside but bland within—no surprise since commercial beef broth contains no fat and only moderate beef flavor. But the roast had those qualities in spades. Time for that merger.

## Get Scrappy

One unique feature of top loin roast is the sinewy strips of meat and fat that run along either side of the roast. They're often left behind on the plate, but I decided to use them. I cut them off and sliced them into 1-inch pieces to brown alongside the roast.

The results were worth the minimal knife work: The trimmings gave up loads more fat and fond for the potatoes to soak up. (Starting the meat and trimmings in a cold pan maximized the amount of fat that was rendered, because the fat had time to melt thoroughly before the meat's exterior browned too much.) I even doubled their efficacy by simmering

## SHOPPING

### Strip Steak in Roast Form

Top loin roast, which comes from the short loin in the middle of the cow's back, is the roast that generates strip steaks (it's also called "strip roast"). The well-marbled, tender meat and ample fat cap make it a great alternative to other premium roasts, such as prime rib (it costs about \$4 less per pound than prime rib, too). We trim off the strips of meat and fat that run along the sides of the roast and brown them with the roast to generate lots of flavorful juices for cooking the potatoes.



### MEAT A DIFFERENT CUT

Top loin roast is a great alternative to prime rib.

the browned scraps with the broth before using it to braise the potatoes, which amped up its beefiness and the flavor of the spuds. Further doctoring the broth with garlic and herbs rounded it out; adding gelatin gave the reduced jus unctuous body.

Cooking the meat and potatoes together wasn't tricky once I had extracted all that flavor and fat from the trimmings. But it did require a strategic setup. After searing the meat and scraps, I laid the potatoes cut side down in the pan, keeping them in a single layer to ensure even cooking, and covered them with aluminum foil I poked holes in. That created a "rack" on which I placed the roast; it also allowed juices to drip through to the potatoes and trapped steam that helped the potatoes cook through. When the roast hit 115 degrees, I set it aside to rest; gingerly flipped the potatoes; added my beef-enhanced, strained broth (it simmered while the roast cooked); and finished the potatoes in a 500-degree oven.

It was a success: juicy, tender meat and creamy potatoes that tasted truly beefy.

### BEEF TOP LOIN ROAST WITH POTATOES

SERVES 8 TO 10

Top loin roast is also known as strip roast. Use potatoes that are about 1½ inches in diameter and at least 4 inches long. The browned surfaces of the potatoes are very delicate; take care when flipping the potatoes in step 7. To make flipping easier, flip two potatoes and remove them from the pan to create space before flipping the rest.

- 1 (5- to 6-pound) boneless top loin roast  
Kosher salt and pepper
- 5 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 5 cups beef broth
- 6 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2 small sprigs fresh rosemary
- 2 tablespoons unflavored gelatin
- 4 garlic cloves, lightly crushed and peeled

1. Pat roast dry with paper towels. Place roast fat cap side down and trim off strip of meat that is loosely attached to thicker side of roast. Rotate roast 180 degrees and trim off strip of meat and fat from narrow side of roast. (After trimming, roast should be rectangular with roughly even thickness.)

Cut trimmings into 1-inch pieces. Transfer trimmings to small bowl, wrap tightly in plastic wrap, and refrigerate.

2. Using sharp knife, cut slits ½ inch apart and ¼ inch deep in crosshatch pattern in fat cap of roast. Sprinkle all sides of roast evenly with 2 tablespoons salt and 1 teaspoon pepper. Wrap in plastic and refrigerate for 6 to 24 hours.

3. Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Trim and discard ¼ inch from end of each potato. Cut each potato in half crosswise. Toss potatoes with 2 teaspoons salt and 1 teaspoon pepper and set aside.

4. Place oil in large roasting pan. Place roast, fat cap side down, in center of pan and scatter trimmings around roast. Cook over medium heat, stirring trimmings frequently but not moving roast, until fat cap is well browned, 8 to 12 minutes. Flip roast and continue to cook, stirring trimmings frequently, until bottom of roast is lightly browned and trimmings are rendered and crisp, 6 to 10 minutes longer. Remove pan from heat and transfer roast to plate. Using slotted spoon, transfer trimmings to medium saucepan, leaving fat in pan.

5. Arrange potatoes in single layer, broad side down, in pan. Return pan to medium heat and cook, without moving potatoes, until well browned around edges, 15 to 20 minutes. (Do not flip potatoes.) Off heat, lay 18 by 22-inch sheet of aluminum foil over potatoes. Using oven mitts, crimp edges of foil to rim of pan. With paring knife, poke 5 holes in center of foil. Lay roast, fat side up, in center of foil. Transfer pan to oven and cook until meat registers 115 degrees, 1 to 1¼ hours.

6. While roast cooks, add broth, thyme sprigs, rosemary sprigs, gelatin, and garlic to saucepan with trimmings. Bring to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer into 4-cup liquid measuring cup, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible; discard solids. (You should have 4 cups liquid; if necessary, add water to equal 4 cups.)

7. When meat registers 115 degrees, remove pan from oven and increase oven temperature to 500 degrees. Transfer roast to carving board. Remove foil and use to tent roast. Using offset spatula, carefully flip potatoes. Pour strained liquid around potatoes and return pan (handles will be hot) to oven (it's OK if oven has not yet reached

500 degrees). Cook until liquid is reduced by half, 20 to 30 minutes.

8. Carefully transfer potatoes to serving platter. Pour liquid into fat separator and let settle for 5 minutes. Slice roast and transfer to platter with potatoes. Transfer defatted juices to small bowl. Serve, passing juices separately.



#### Make It a Mini Roast

No need to wait for a crowd to serve our Beef Top Loin Roast with Potatoes. With a smaller piece of meat and a 12-inch skillet, you can make one heck of a family dinner. Our recipe for Skillet Beef Top Loin Roast with Potatoes, which serves 4 to 6, is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/dec18).

## KEY STEPS | BEEFING UP THE FLAVOR OF POTATOES

There are a few reasons the potatoes in this dish are so darn full of beefy flavor: We introduce beefy goodness to them three different times and in three different ways over the course of cooking.



**BROWN IN RENDERED FAT** After searing the roast and the trimmings, we sear the potatoes, broad side down, in the rendered fat to create deeply browned, beefy-tasting surfaces.



**ROAST WITH BEEFY JUICES** We cover the potatoes with a "rack" made from perforated foil and roast the beef on top so its juices drip down onto the potatoes.



**BRAISE IN MEATY BROTH** While the meat rests, we braise the potatoes, browned side up, in a quick enriched broth made from the trimmings, saturating them with more meaty flavor.

#### RECIPES TO MAKE IT A MEAL

Find these recipes in our archive: Citrus Salad with Watercress, Dried Cranberries, and Pecans (January/February 2013) and Chocolate Pots de Crème (November/December 2006).



#### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/dec18)

# Revamping Ground Beef Enchiladas

Say goodbye to the enchiladas you thought you knew. Techniques from both sides of the border produce a quicker—but still deeply flavorful—take on this Tex-Mex staple.

≧ BY STEVE DUNN ≦

In Mexico, if a cook swaps out the cheese or chicken that is typically used as an enchilada filling for beef, there are no shortcuts. Fresh corn tortillas are lightly fried and rolled around a filling of tender, slow-braised shredded beef, and then smothered with a sauce made from dried chiles and topped with crumbled cheese. It's not hard to imagine the resulting enchiladas—they're deeply flavorful, complex, and entirely satisfying. There's only one downside, and it's a big one: The recipe can take quite a while to prepare, given its reliance on slow-cooked meat and a long-simmered sauce.

Then, of course, there are speedier Tex-Mex versions more familiar to Americans using ground beef, store-bought tortillas, loads of shredded cheese, and chili powder-infused tomato sauce. When I tried a few recipes to see how they compared with their Mexican cousins, there were no surprises: The fillings lacked the depth and velvety texture of braised beef, and some sauces were so full of tomato that they tasted Italian rather than Mexican. Many of the enchiladas were also greasy and weighed down with too much cheese. Surely, I could do better. I set out to use ground beef to develop my own quicker—but still deeply flavorful—enchiladas.

## Not So Cheesy

I got started on the filling by sautéing finely chopped onion with plenty of minced garlic. Once the aromatics softened, I added a pound of 80 percent lean ground beef (to mimic the fat content of a beef steak or roast that might be used for the shredded version) seasoned with cumin and salt. I rolled the beef in store-bought corn tortillas that I'd briefly fried, topped them with a generic chile sauce, sprinkled on some cheese, and baked them for about 15 minutes.

It was a deflating first effort: The meat tasted bland, and its relative fattiness caused the greasiness problem I'd encountered in earlier versions. Switching to 90 percent lean beef helped the latter issue but made the filling taste too lean and dry. I needed to improve the texture of the beef without making it greasy.

Mixing the meat with a couple of spoonfuls of my sauce helped hydrate it and also deepened its



Before serving, we allow the enchiladas to sit for 10 minutes, which gives the liquid a chance to be reabsorbed.

flavor, as did including ground coriander for citrusy tang. But the meat still seemed too lean. Some recipes call for sprinkling cheese over the filling prior to rolling it in the tortillas, so I gave that a try using a bit of shredded Monterey Jack, a great melter. But the cheese never fully coated the meat; it just sat in a gooey layer between the meat and the tortilla. To get the creamy-cheesy-beefy filling I had in mind, I doubled the amount of cheese (from 3 ounces to 6), but this time I stirred it directly into the hot beef after it finished cooking. The cheese melted beautifully, enrobing and enriching the beef. Lastly, I freshened up the filling's flavor by stirring in chopped cilantro.

## Chasing Chile Flavor

With a moist and flavorful—and fast—beef filling ready to go, I shifted my attention to the sauce. Many Tex-Mex recipes call for a quick tomato-based concoction augmented with jarred chili powder, but an authentic Mexican enchilada sauce is a slow-cooked affair based on dried chiles. To guarantee complexity,

I started with raisiny, mildly spicy dried anchos. I stemmed and seeded the chiles, tore them into pieces, and toasted them in a skillet to release their flavor before rehydrating them in beef broth (to bolster the ground beef's flavor) in the microwave.

Next, I sautéed a second batch of garlic and onions and, rather than add tomatoes, stirred in  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of tomato paste along with some earthy cumin. The tomato paste contributed concentrated sweetness without tasting overly tomatoey. I whizzed the onion mixture in a blender with the anchos and their hydrating liquid. And to mimic the flavor of a sauce made with multiple types of dried chiles, I also included some canned chipotle chiles in adobo sauce. Just 1 tablespoon added smoky spiciness—and it was as easy as opening a can. Finally, I simmered the sauce until it was thick enough to coat the tortillas.

But reducing the sauce turned out to be too lengthy a process and made me wonder if I could thicken it a different way. I tried using a roux (a cooked paste of flour and fat), as some recipes recommended. But tasters complained that it made the sauce seem artificially thick and robbed it of its vibrant flavor. Blitzing a tortilla into the sauce thickened it nicely (authentic recipes sometimes

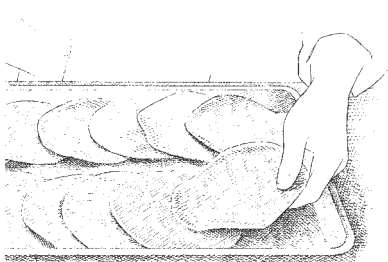
## FREEZE; THEN GRATE



Semisoft cheeses such as Monterey Jack can be a challenge to shred on box or paddle graters. They tend to smear on the grater, break off in clumps, and clog up the holes. We found that freezing a block of cheese for 30 minutes before grating firmed it up so we could shred it more easily.

## Keys to Success

We combined the deep flavor of Mexican enchiladas with the ease and speed of the Tex-Mex type.



### FLEXIBLE TORTILLAS

**Usual Way:** Flash-fry tortillas in oil.

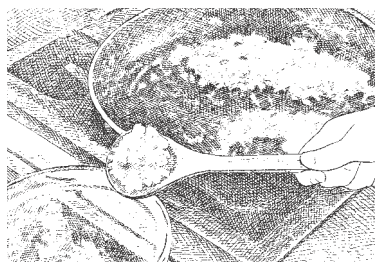
**Our Way:** Brush tortillas lightly with oil and bake briefly.



### DEEP CHILE FLAVOR

**Usual Way:** Slow-cook sauce made with multiple dried chiles.

**Our Way:** Make quick, flavorful sauce using dried anchos and canned chipotles.



### STREAMLINED AROMATICS

**Usual Way:** Season sauce and filling with separate batches of aromatics.

**Our Way:** Sauté 1 big batch of aromatics and add half to each component.



### RICH BEEF FILLING

**Usual Way:** Braise beef, then shred it.

**Our Way:** Sauté ground beef, then mix in shredded cheese for extra richness.

call for using masa harina, or corn flour, for this purpose) but left me one wrapper short when building a dozen enchiladas. Ultimately, reducing the amount of broth from 3 cups to 2 worked best. My chile sauce had deep, faintly sweet, and spicy flavor—all in minutes.

As I prepared to assemble the enchiladas, I realized that the filling and sauce both included a mix of onion and garlic. I sautéed enough for both in a single batch and then split the mixture between the two components, simplifying the process and saving time.

### Rolling Along

It was time to examine the tortillas. The traditional method of flash-frying tortillas in oil softens them enough to be filled and rolled. Could I eliminate the oil by just warming the tortillas in the microwave? I gave it a try and then filled the tortillas, slathered them with sauce, sprinkled them with a modest amount of Monterey Jack cheese, and popped them into a hot oven. Things seemed promising until serving time. The tortillas were so soggy that they fell apart into a raggedy mess when I tried to lift them onto plates. A fellow test cook posited that in addition to softening, the oil in the traditional method actually waterproofed the tortillas and kept them from absorbing too much sauce.

With that in mind, I tried giving the tortillas a light spritz of vegetable oil spray before briefly warming them in the oven. The spray helped but didn't fully mitigate sogginess. I had better luck using a pastry brush to fully cover both sides of the tortillas with a light coating of oil before briefly baking them.

I made a final batch, filling the oiled and baked tortillas with my cheesy cumin-and-coriander-spiced beef, ladling on the chile-laced sauce, and sprinkling extra cheese over the top. After baking for 15 minutes, the cheese was lightly browned and the tortillas were pliable without becoming waterlogged. My colleagues devoured the enchiladas, garnished with fresh cilantro, sour cream, scallions, and lime wedges.

## GROUND BEEF AND CHEESE ENCHILADAS

SERVES 4 TO 6

Don't use ground beef that's fattier than 90 percent lean or the dish will be greasy.

### Sauce

- 1½ ounces (3 to 4) dried ancho chiles, stemmed, seeded, and torn into 1-inch pieces
- 2 cups beef broth
- 1 tablespoon minced canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 onions, chopped fine
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ cup tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- Salt

### Enchiladas

- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 pound 90 percent lean ground beef
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- Salt
- 8 ounces Monterey Jack cheese, shredded (2 cups)
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro
- 12 6-inch corn tortillas
- 2 scallions, sliced thin on bias
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro
- Sour cream
- Lime wedges

**1. FOR THE SAUCE:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Heat anchos in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until fragrant, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer anchos to bowl, add broth, and microwave, covered, until steaming, about 2 minutes. Let stand until softened, about 5 minutes. Transfer anchos and broth to blender and add chipotle.

**2.** Heat oil in now-empty skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onions and cook, stirring occasionally, until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Transfer half of onion mixture to large bowl and set aside. Return skillet with remaining onion mixture to medium heat and add tomato paste and cumin. Cook, stirring frequently, until tomato paste starts to darken, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer onion mixture in skillet to blender with ancho mixture and process until smooth, about 1 minute. Season sauce with salt to taste.

**3. FOR THE ENCHILADAS:** Heat 1 tablespoon oil in now-empty skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add beef, cumin, coriander, and ½ teaspoon salt and cook for 2 minutes, breaking meat into ¼-inch pieces with wooden spoon. Add reserved onion mixture (do not wash bowl) and continue to cook until beef is no longer pink, 3 to 4 minutes longer. Return beef mixture to bowl; add 1½ cups Monterey Jack, cilantro, and ¼ cup sauce and stir to combine. Season with salt to taste.

**4.** Spread ½ cup sauce over bottom of 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Brush both sides of tortillas with remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Arrange tortillas, overlapping, on rimmed baking sheet and bake until warm and pliable, about 5 minutes. Spread ¼ cup filling down center of each tortilla. Roll each tortilla tightly around filling and place seam side down in dish, arranging enchiladas in 2 rows across width of dish.

**5.** Spread remaining sauce over top of enchiladas. Sprinkle with remaining ½ cup Monterey Jack. Bake until cheese is lightly browned and sauce is bubbling at edges, about 15 minutes. Let cool for 10 minutes. Sprinkle with scallions and cilantro. Serve, passing sour cream and lime wedges separately.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](https://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18)

# Why You Should Be Grilling Skirt Steak

If you're not grilling skirt steak, you should be: It's a great cut for marinating, it cooks in minutes, and it's especially beefy, tender, and juicy—as long as you buy the right kind.

≧ BY LAN LAM ≦

**B**ack when I was a line cook at Craigie Street Bistrot in Cambridge, Massachusetts, we had a nightly routine involving skirt steak. The end pieces were never plated because they were too small to show off the beautifully cooked beef, so the chef habitually tossed them into a “meat bucket.” At the end of the night, the tidbits were heated up under the broiler for a postshift snack. Trust me when I tell you (after many, many bites) that this fatty cut is intensely beefy, tender, and juicy—a true cook's treat.

## Finding My Mojo

Skirt steak is long, narrow, and only ½ to 1 inch thick. Because it's so thin, you need to cook it over high heat to ensure that the outside is well browned by the time the interior is tender and juicy. That makes a grill, which is easy to get blisteringly hot, the best tool for the job. As a bonus, a large grill grate can accommodate all the ribbon-like steaks at the same time instead of in batches.

Skirt steak is also a great candidate for a marinade. In the test kitchen, we often shy away from marinating meat because the flavorings don't penetrate much beyond the surface of a thick, smooth cut. But because skirt steak is so thin, with loose, open fibers and lots of nooks and crannies, a marinade can have a big effect (see “A Steak Tailor-Made for Marinating”).

I knew exactly what I wanted to bathe my steaks in: a garlicky, citrusy, Cuban-style *mojo* that would really stand up to the rich, buttery beef. Once I'd perfected the marinade and the steak cookery, I planned on whipping up a complementary sauce to drizzle onto the meat.

## Raising the Steaks

Skirt steaks are often rolled up for packaging because when they are unrolled, they can be nearly 2 feet long. I divided 2 pounds of steak (enough to serve four to six people) into 6- to 8-inch lengths.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/jun18)



Skirt steak's long, narrow shape makes it unwieldy on the plate, so it is typically sliced before serving.

Then came the marinade: I stirred together ½ cup of orange juice and 2 tablespoons of lime juice (my substitute for the difficult-to-find sour orange juice traditionally used in *mojo*) and added the usual seasonings: ground cumin, dried oregano, plenty of minced garlic, and a few red pepper flakes. I also made sure to add a good amount of salt—1½ teaspoons for the 2 pounds of meat. The salt would not only season the meat—it would also dissolve some proteins and loosen the bundles of muscle fibers, making the steak more tender, and hold in water to keep the meat moist.

I pulled out a 13 by 9-inch baking dish, which would be a good vessel for soaking the steaks with minimal overlapping. I refrigerated the steaks for an hour, flipping them at the 30-minute mark to make sure both sides of them got coated with marinade.

When I removed the steaks from the marinade, I thoroughly patted them dry with paper towels since any excess moisture would inhibit browning;

I then rubbed them with a light coating of oil. Over a hot fire (created by distributing 6 quarts of lit coals evenly over half the grill) the steaks cooked to medium (130 degrees) in 6 to 8 minutes. Although we bring most steaks to medium-rare (125 degrees), we have found that the tougher muscle fibers of skirt steak need to hit 130 degrees before they shrink and loosen enough to turn perfectly tender.

I gathered my colleagues grillside to have a taste, and the feedback rolled in: The *mojo* flavor was coming through beautifully, but the steaks could taste even beefier. Also, the browning was good but not great.

## Taking It Outside

I had ideas about how to address both problems, so I reached for the two skirt steaks that had arrived in that morning's delivery. I was surprised to see that one was almost twice as wide as the other. But they looked similar otherwise, so I carried on.

This time I added a little soy sauce to the *mojo* marinade (to compensate, I halved the amount of salt). Soy sauce can be a secret weapon in marinades: Its salt seasons, and its glutamates enhance savory flavor.

Once the steaks were out of the marinade and patted dry, I incorporated an ingredient for better browning: baking soda. Added to the oil I had been rubbing onto the steaks, baking soda would help create more substantial browning by raising the meat's pH. The higher its pH, the better meat is able to hold on to water, so it browns instead of releasing the moisture onto the grill grates and creating steam. A higher pH also speeds up the Maillard reaction, making the treated meat brown even better and more quickly.

I was pleased to see the steaks rapidly develop a deep sear on the grill. This was a signal that they were likely done cooking, so I slid them to the cooler side of the grill to take their temperature (their thinness made temping them on the hotter side risky because they could easily overcook). Sure enough, they registered 130 degrees, so I gave them a 10-minute rest to allow the juices to redistribute throughout the meat. As I sampled a few slices, I was happy to find that the meat was not just deeply seasoned but also had an even beefier flavor than before, thanks to the umami-rich soy sauce.



## Skirt (Steak) Shopping

There are two types of skirt steak: inside and outside. The inside skirt comes from the transverse abdominal muscle and is rather tough; the more desirable outside skirt comes from the diaphragm and is quite tender.

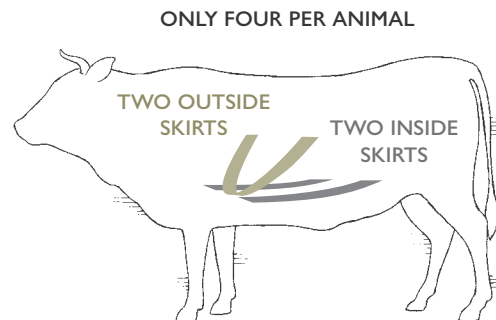


**BUY THE OUTSIDE SKIRT**  
3 to 4 inches wide, 1/2 to 1 inch thick,  
quite tender

**AVOID THE INSIDE SKIRT**  
5 to 7 inches wide,  
1/4 to 1/2 inch thick, very chewy

### WHY SKIRT STEAK IS HARD TO FIND

If you have trouble finding skirt steak, that's because it's a hot commodity: There are only four skirt steaks (two outside, two inside) on each cow.



However, the steaks' texture was a different story: Even though I'd soaked both the narrow and the wide steaks in the same marinade and cooked them on the same grill to precisely 130 degrees, the narrow steak was much more tender than the wide one. It was only after speaking to several butchers that I understood why: It turns out that there are two types of skirt steak—the inside skirt and the outside skirt—that come from separate parts of the cow and therefore have markedly different textures (for more information, see “Skirt [Steak] Shopping”).

### Recycle, Reuse

I prepared one more batch, making sure to use outside skirt steaks. While the meat marinated, I started gathering citrus, garlic, and spices for the mojo sauce I'd been planning. But wait: All the ingredients I needed were already in the leftover marinade. Why not reuse it? I poured it from the baking pan into a saucepan, brought it to a boil to make it food-safe, and took a taste. It needed richness and a little extra acidity to become a sauce, so I stirred in a little lime juice and extra-virgin olive oil. I also tossed in orange and lime zests to give the sauce more of the bright, tropical flavor typical of sour oranges.

Once the steaks were off the grill and had rested, I carefully sliced them against the grain and at

an angle before drizzling on the mojo sauce. My favorite steak had now realized its full potential: The beautifully seared meat was rich, well seasoned, juicy, and tender, and the vibrant sauce played off of it beautifully.

### GRILLED MOJO-MARINATED SKIRT STEAK

SERVES 4 TO 6

Skirt steaks come from two different muscles and are sometimes labeled as inside skirt steak or outside skirt steak. The more desirable outside skirt steak measures 3 to 4 inches wide and 1/2 to 1 inch thick. Avoid the inside skirt steak, which typically measures 5 to 7 inches wide and 1/4 to 1/2 inch thick, as it is very chewy. Skirt steak is most tender when cooked to medium (130 to 135 degrees). Thin steaks cook very quickly, so we recommend using an instant-read thermometer for a quick and accurate measurement.

- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon grated lime zest plus 1/4 cup juice (2 limes)
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- Salt

- 1/2 teaspoon grated orange zest plus 1/2 cup juice
- 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 pounds skirt steak, trimmed and cut with grain into 6- to 8-inch-long steaks
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon baking soda

1. Combine garlic, soy sauce, 2 tablespoons lime juice, cumin, oregano, 3/4 teaspoon salt, orange juice, and pepper flakes in 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Place steaks in dish. Flip steaks to coat both sides with marinade. Cover and refrigerate for 1 hour, flipping steaks halfway through refrigerating.

2. Remove steaks from marinade and transfer marinade to small saucepan. Pat steaks dry with paper towels. Combine 1 tablespoon oil and baking soda in small bowl. Rub oil mixture evenly onto both sides of each steak.

3. Bring marinade to boil over high heat and boil for 30 seconds. Transfer to bowl and stir in lime zest, orange zest, remaining 2 tablespoons lime juice, and remaining 1 tablespoon oil. Set aside sauce.

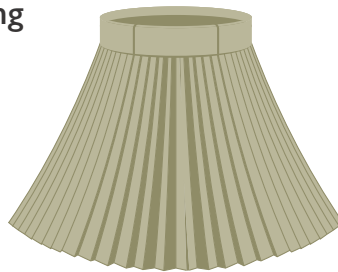
**4A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL:** About 25 minutes before grilling, open bottom vent completely. Light large chimney starter filled with charcoal briquettes (6 quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour evenly over half of grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. 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 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.

5. Clean and oil cooking grate. Cook steaks on hotter side of grill until well browned and meat registers 130 to 135 degrees (for medium), 2 to 4 minutes per side. (Move steaks to cooler side of grill before taking temperature to prevent them from overcooking.) Transfer steaks to cutting board, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Cut steaks on bias against grain into 1/2-inch-thick slices. Arrange slices on serving platter, drizzle with 2 tablespoons sauce, and serve, passing extra sauce separately.

### SCIENCE A Steak Tailor-Made for Marinating

We don't typically marinate steak since we have found that marinades don't penetrate more than a few millimeters beyond its surface. For a thick-cut steak, that means minimal flavor impact. But skirt steak is different: It has much more surface area than other cuts. And because it's so thin, the ratio of surface area to volume is quite large. That means there is a lot of exterior space for a marinade to flavor. If you look carefully, the grain of a skirt steak forms peaks and valleys like, well, a pleated skirt: The amount of fabric required to make a pleated skirt is much greater than the amount required to make a straight skirt. To illustrate this, we placed a measuring tape on a skirt steak and carefully pressed it into the valleys. When we removed the measuring tape, we found that the surface area for a skirt steak was three times that of a strip steak of the same weight.



#### SKIRT MODEL

Much like a pleated skirt, the surface of a skirt steak has lots of nooks and crannies. That means it has a large surface area for a marinade to flavor.

# Introducing Tacos Dorados

The hard-shell taco has been an American staple for more than half a century. When we traced its roots, we found a way to take it to a new, ultracrispy level.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

Maybe it's nostalgia—the first bite that cracks the shell, sending orange grease down your wrist. Or perhaps it's the satisfying combination of spiced meat, creamy cheese, and cool, crisp lettuce that makes hard-shell tacos so popular. Either way, Americans have an enduring love for this lunchroom and dinnertime staple.

Ease is a big part of the appeal: Relying on a packet of powdered taco seasoning and a sleeve of prefried taco shells means that dinner comes together in a flash. But when I recently prepared tacos using the contents of a supermarket kit, my middle school memories were obscured by a dust cloud of flat spices covering dry, nubblly meat.

## Choose Your Shell Adventure

I'd followed the instructions for preparing the taco shells, baking them for a few minutes before serving, and they were fine, though not terribly flavorful. Frying your own shells into the proper U shape using corn tortillas produces better results—rich corn flavor and a light, crispy texture that's miles apart from the hard crunch of the prefab type—but the process is tedious and messy.

Not truly satisfied with either choice, I dug into the history of hard-shell tacos. It turns out that although commercially made hard-shell tacos are an American innovation, crispy-shell tacos have long existed in Mexico under the name *tacos dorados*, or “golden tacos.” The way they're prepared is pure genius: Soft corn tortillas are filled, folded in half, and then deep-fried. At the table, the tacos are opened like a book and stuffed with garnishes.

After just one go-round with the filled-before-fried method, I was hooked. The fried shells were shatteringly crispy on their flat sides yet flexible at their spines, so they didn't break into a million pieces when I took a bite, and they boasted true corn flavor. This was what I had been craving; I just needed to come up with a low-fuss technique.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/aug18](https://CookIllustrated.com/aug18)



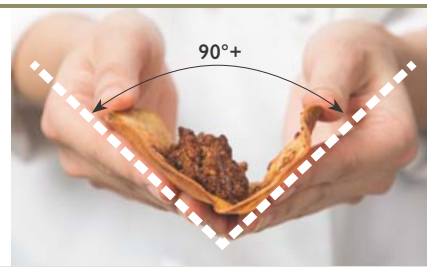
Open the crispy fried shell like a book to load in shredded lettuce, cheddar cheese, sour cream, chopped tomatoes, pickled jalapeños, and hot sauce.

## Beefing Up

Before I tackled frying the filled tortillas, I wanted to revamp the usual beef taco filling to work in my tacos dorados. I started with 90 percent lean ground beef, figuring that 85 percent would be on the greasy side. To ensure that the meat stayed tender and juicy, I used a test kitchen trick: raising its pH with baking soda to help the proteins attract and retain more water. I combined  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of baking soda with 1 tablespoon of water so it would distribute evenly. I then stirred it into the raw beef and let the mixture sit.

## Shells That Don't Split

We've all eaten tacos that shatter at the first bite. That's why we were happy to find that stuffing tortillas with filling before frying them not only produces great-tasting tacos but also creates crispy yet flexible shells that stay intact when you dive in. To wit: We pried ours open to a 90-degree angle with no splitting or cracking, an impossible feat with store-bought shells.



Meanwhile, I sautéed finely chopped onion and added modest amounts of common taco seasonings—chili powder, paprika, ground cumin, and garlic powder—to bloom in the oil and release their flavors. Then I added the treated beef and cooked it until it lost its pink color.

It was a fine start, but I wanted a bolder spice flavor and more meaty depth. I increased all the spices to a total  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup, and to boost the savoriness, I cooked a couple of tablespoons of umami-rich tomato paste in the skillet with the onion before adding the beef. My filling was now well spiced and rich-tasting. It was time to stuff the meat into tortillas and fry them up.

To ensure that the tortillas were pliable enough to be filled without cracking or falling apart, I borrowed a technique that we use for enchiladas: brushing each side with oil and then briefly baking the tortillas until they become flexible.

But even with tortillas that cooperated nicely, my filling was a little loose and tended to spill out. I tried binding it with flour and even with mashed canned beans, but ultimately it was easier to simply stir in some of the cheddar cheese I was already using as a garnish. I mixed  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of the

shredded cheddar into the beef while it was still hot. The cheese melted seamlessly, helping the beef stay put in the tortilla and enriching the mixture as well.

Finally, instead of deep-frying, which seemed fussy for these slender tacos, I simply shallow-fried them in the same skillet I'd used to cook the beef. I was able to fry 12 tacos in just  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of oil, and with some strategic arrangement in the skillet, I could complete the job in two batches of six.

As my colleagues eagerly pried open the tacos, added garnishes, and crunched away, I knew I had added my taco game for good.

## CRISPY TACOS (TACOS DORADOS)

SERVES 4

Arrange the tacos so they face the same direction in the skillet to make them easy to fit and flip. To ensure crispy tacos, cook the tortillas until they are deeply browned. To garnish, open each taco like a book and load it with your preferred toppings; close it to eat.

- 1 tablespoon water
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 12 ounces 90 percent lean ground beef
- 7 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 1½ tablespoons chili powder
- 1½ tablespoons paprika
- 1½ teaspoons ground cumin
- 1½ teaspoons garlic powder
- Salt
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 ounces cheddar cheese, shredded (½ cup), plus extra for serving
- 12 (6-inch) corn tortillas

Shredded iceberg lettuce  
Chopped tomato  
Sour cream  
Pickled jalapeño slices  
Hot sauce

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Combine water and baking soda in large bowl. Add beef and mix until thoroughly combined. Set aside.

2. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, 4 to 6 minutes. Add chili powder, paprika, cumin, garlic powder, and 1 teaspoon salt and cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in tomato paste and cook until paste is rust-colored, 1 to 2 minutes. Add beef mixture and cook, using wooden spoon to break meat into pieces no larger than ¼ inch, until beef is no longer pink, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer beef mixture to bowl; stir in cheddar until cheese has melted and mixture is homogeneous. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels.

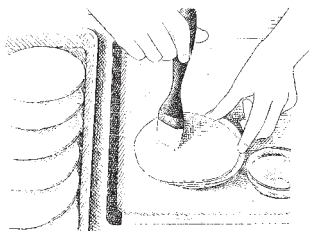
3. Thoroughly brush both sides of tortillas with 2 tablespoons oil. Arrange tortillas, overlapping, on rimmed baking sheet in 2 rows (6 tortillas each). Bake until tortillas are warm and pliable, about 5 minutes. Remove tortillas from oven and reduce oven temperature to 200 degrees.

4. Place 2 tablespoons filling on 1 side of 1 tortilla. Fold and press to close tortilla (edges will be open, but tortilla will remain folded). Repeat with remaining tortillas and remaining filling. (At this point, filled tortillas can be covered and refrigerated for up to 12 hours.)

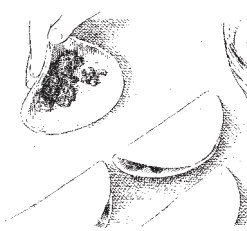
5. Set wire rack in second rimmed baking sheet and line rack with double layer of paper towels. Heat remaining ¼ cup oil in now-empty skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Arrange

## A New Way to Make Tacos

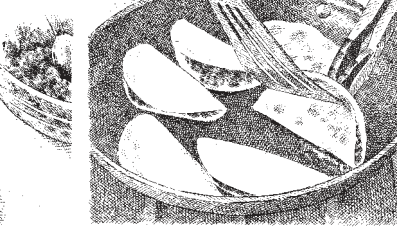
A few changes to the usual routine result in the crispiest, tastiest tacos around.



**DUMP STORE-BOUGHT OR DEEP-FRIED SHELLS** Brush the corn tortillas with oil; bake until pliable enough to stuff.



**FILL 'EM FIRST** Stuff the warmed tortillas with savory ground beef bound together with melted cheddar cheese.



**SHALLOW-FRY IN MINIMAL OIL** Fry the tacos in two batches until crispy. (Only ¼ cup of oil is needed for 12 tacos.)

6 tacos in skillet with open sides facing away from you. Cook, adjusting heat so oil actively sizzles and bubbles appear around edges of tacos, until tacos are crispy and deeply browned on 1 side, 2 to 3 minutes. Using tongs and thin spatula, carefully flip tacos. Cook until deeply browned on second side, 2 to 3 minutes, adjusting heat as necessary.

6. Remove skillet from heat and transfer tacos to prepared wire rack. Blot tops of tacos with double layer of paper towels. Place sheet with fried tacos in oven to keep warm. Return skillet to medium-high heat and cook remaining tacos. Serve tacos immediately, passing extra cheddar, lettuce, tomato, sour cream, jalapeños, and hot sauce separately.

## Make It a Party with Micheladas

For this classic Mexican cocktail made with beer, lime, and savory seasonings, we found that a full ¼ cup of lime juice per drink was key. To balance the lime, we added doses of Worcestershire sauce and hot sauce, finding that a thicker hot sauce added a bit of body. To ensure that everything is blended, we combine the flavorful base ingredients before pouring in the beer.

### MICHELADA (MEXICAN BEER AND LIME COCKTAIL) MAKES 4 COCKTAILS

Use a well-chilled Mexican lager. Our favorite is Tecate, but Corona Extra or Modelo will also work. We recommend Cholula or Tapatío hot sauces for their flavor and thicker consistencies. If using a thinner, vinegary hot sauce such as Tabasco, which is spicier, start with half the amount called for and adjust to your taste after mixing. Do not use bottled lime juice here.

- Kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon chili powder
- 1 cup lime juice (8 limes), plus lime wedges for serving
- 8 teaspoons hot sauce, plus extra for serving
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 4 (12-ounce) Mexican beers, chilled

1. Combine 2 teaspoons salt and chili powder on small plate and spread into even layer. Rub rims of 4 pint glasses with 1 lime wedge to moisten, then dip rims into salt mixture to coat. Set aside glasses.

2. Combine lime juice, hot sauce, Worcestershire, and ¼ teaspoon salt in 2-cup liquid measuring cup, stirring to dissolve salt. Fill prepared glasses with ice



This tart, spicy cocktail is a refreshing accompaniment to our Crispy Tacos (Tacos Dorados).

cubes and divide lime juice mixture evenly among glasses. Fill glasses with beer. Serve with lime wedges, extra hot sauce, and remaining beer, topping off glasses as needed.

# Next-Level Grilled Steak

Anyone can throw a rib eye on the fire. But Japanese *negimaki* rolls the flavors of teriyaki and the stylish presentation of sushi into a make-ahead summer stunner.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

When was the last time you hosted a summer cook-out and made a dish that your guests snapped up in minutes and raved about for the rest of the night? If you can't recall, consider this recipe—a popular Japanese preparation called *negimaki*—an opportunity to up your grill game.

The name may sound exotic, but its flavors and presentation are not. *Negimaki* is essentially a hybrid of beef teriyaki and rolled sushi, at least conceptually. To make it, cooks slice and pound a steak into thin strips, which they lay on a flat surface in an overlapping arrangement to form a rectangle. Then they roll the meat around a small bundle of scallions (*negi* means “scallion”; *maki*, “roll”) to form a tight cylinder, fasten it with toothpicks, grill it over a hot fire, and brush it with a teriyaki-style glaze. Before serving, they slice the rolls crosswise into bite-size pieces and sprinkle them with toasted sesame seeds so that every beefy, grassy, salty-sweet bite pops with a nutty-rich, delicate crunch.

It's a dish you often see on Japanese restaurant menus alongside appetizers such as edamame and *gyoza*. But it's also great for home grilling: There are few ingredients; the rolls cook quickly—and, in the version I hoped to create, can be assembled ahead of time; and it functions equally well as an appetizer as it does alongside steamed rice and a vegetable as a complete meal.

## High-Steaks Decision

Flavor and texture are two factors that I always consider when choosing a cut of beef. But here I also needed to consider the shape, size, and uniformity of the meat, since it needed to function as a “wrapper.”

That's why I was surprised to find *negimaki* recipes that called for cuts such as tenderloin. For one thing, their leanness prevents them from charring quickly and makes them bland and prone to drying out. And when I tried slicing and pounding these cuts, I found that their exceptional tenderness made them too soft to roll into supportive wrappers. Plus,



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/oct18](https://CookIllustrated.com/oct18)



These rolls, which can be assembled and refrigerated overnight before grilling, cook in about 30 minutes.

I wasn't about to splurge on a pricey tenderloin only to pound the daylights out of it. Same goes for other premium cuts such as strip steak and rib eye.

In the end, I chose flank steak. It's more affordable, flavorful, and mostly uniform. The drawbacks are that it tapers at one end and its edges are rounded; I'd have to devise a way to make an even wrapper out of the disparate pieces.

## That's a Wrap

Producing a sturdy, tender wrapper is all about evenly slicing and pounding the steak and arranging the pieces in a rectangle with sides that are as straight as possible. I started by briefly freezing the steak to firm it up and make it easier to slice cleanly. Then I cut a few slices from the tapered end and pounded them about  $\frac{3}{16}$  inch thick. That left me with a roughly square piece of meat, which I halved along the grain to produce two slabs. I sliced the slabs crosswise and pounded those slices, too.

But pounding the slices exaggerated their rounded edges so that some pieces were irregularly shaped.

I got around that by assembling the wrapper like a jigsaw puzzle, laying down one slice and then orienting two more around it to form straight edges on three sides. The rest of the assembly was a breeze: I laid a couple of whole raw scallions in each wrapper and rolled the package into a tight cylinder that I secured with toothpicks (see “Wrapping and Rolling *Negimaki*”).

I grilled the rolls over a hot fire, turning them every 5 minutes so that they charred evenly. Partway through cooking, I brushed them with a glaze mixture of sake, mirin, soy sauce, and sugar.

## Inside and Out

I couldn't track the meat's doneness by taking its temperature because the slices were too thin to probe with a thermometer, so I took a guess and pulled the rolls off the grill after about 20 minutes. At that point, the meat appeared to be cooked just beyond medium, which we've found is the ideal doneness for cuts with thick muscle fibers, such as flank steak.

But while the meat tasted good, most of the thin glaze had run off the meat as soon as I brushed it on. And the scallions, though pleasantly grassy and fresh against the beefy char, tasted sweeter or sharper depending on whether you ate a piece of *negimaki* that contained the whites or the greens.

## TECHNIQUE

### TEMP THE SCALLIONS

The meat is too thin to probe, so we take the temperature of the scallions instead.



Insert the probe at the end of the roll into the scallion core. If the temperature registers between 150 and 155 degrees, the meat is done.

To manage the scallion flavor, I halved each one crosswise and placed the halves inside each roll with the white parts at either end and the green parts down the center. I also let the whites hang over the roll ends. That way they could cook a little more to tame their sharpness and pick up some flavorful char over the fire.

But my most novel trick might have been this: monitoring the temperature of the middle of the rolls where the scallions were as a more reliable indication of the meat's doneness. Strange as that sounds, I discovered that when the scallions reached about 150 degrees, the steak was appropriately medium to medium-well.

As for the runny glaze, I reduced the mixture to a syrupy consistency before brushing it onto the rolls. The reduction clung nicely to the meat and boasted more concentrated flavor. I liked it so much that I made enough to drizzle over the finished rolls, too.

The result tasted great and looked even better. This is a dish I will pull out for company (samples in the test kitchen were gobbled up in seconds)—but it's also a dinner I'll throw on the grill any night, since the rolls can be assembled ahead of time.

### JAPANESE GRILLED STEAK AND SCALLION ROLLS (NEGIMAKI)

SERVES 8 TO 10 AS AN APPETIZER OR 4 TO 6 AS A MAIN DISH

Look for a flank steak that is as rectangular as possible, as this will yield the most uniform slices. Depending on how you slice the steak, you may end up with extra slices; you can grill these alongside the rolls or make several smaller rolls. Serve either as an appetizer or as a main dish with steamed white rice and a vegetable.

- 1 (2-pound) flank steak, trimmed
- ½ cup soy sauce
- ¼ cup sugar
- 3 tablespoons mirin
- 3 tablespoons sake
- 16 scallions, trimmed and halved crosswise
- 1 tablespoon sesame seeds, toasted

1. Place steak on large plate and freeze until firm, about 30 minutes.

### Starter? Entrée? Your Choice

*Negimaki* is typically offered as appetizer fare in Japanese restaurants, but we found that it functions equally well as an entrée paired with simple sides. And since our version can be assembled and refrigerated for up to 24 hours before grilling, it can be a 30-minute dinner any night of the week. Below are some suggested accompaniments that Web subscribers can access at [CookIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CookIllustrated.com/oct18).

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>As part of an appetizer spread with:</b> Shrimp Tempura, Chinese Pork Dumplings, Scallion Pancakes</p> | <p><b>As an entrée with:</b> Sautéed Snow Peas with Ginger, Garlic, and Scallion; Chinese Restaurant-Style Rice</p> |
|--|---|



2. Bring soy sauce, sugar, mirin, and sake to simmer in small saucepan over high heat, stirring to dissolve sugar. Reduce heat to medium and cook until slightly syrupy and reduced to ½ cup, 3 to 5 minutes. Divide evenly between 2 bowls and let cool. Cover 1 bowl with plastic wrap and set aside for serving.

3. Place steak on cutting board. Starting at narrow, tapered end, slice steak ⅜-inch thick on bias against grain until width of steak is 7 inches (depending on size of steak, you will need to remove 2 to 3 slices until steak measures 7 inches across). Cut steak in half lengthwise. Continue to slice each half on bias against grain. You should have at least 24 slices. Pound each slice to ⅜-inch thickness between 2 sheets of plastic.

4. Arrange 3 slices on cutting board with short side of slices facing you, overlapping slices by ¼ inch and alternating tapered ends as needed, to form rough rectangle that measures 4 to 6 inches wide and at least 4 inches long. Place 4 scallion halves along edge of rectangle nearest to edge of counter, with white tips slightly hanging over edges of steak on either side. Starting from bottom edge and rolling away from you, roll into tight cylinder. Insert 3 equally spaced toothpicks into end flaps and through center of roll. Transfer roll to platter and repeat with remaining steak and scallions. (Assembled rolls can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours.)

**5A. 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.

**5B. FOR A GAS GRILL:** Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave all burners on high.

6. Clean and oil cooking grate. Place rolls on grill (over coals if using charcoal) and cook until first side is beginning to char, 4 to 6 minutes. Flip rolls, brush cooked side with glaze, and cook until second side is beginning to char, 4 to 6 minutes. Cook remaining 2 sides, glazing after each turn, until all 4 sides of rolls are evenly charred and thermometer inserted from end of roll into scallions at core registers 150 to 155 degrees, 16 to 24 minutes total. Transfer rolls to cutting board, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for 5 minutes. Discard remaining glaze.

7. Remove toothpicks from rolls and cut rolls crosswise into ¾-inch-long pieces. Arrange rolls cut side down on clean platter, drizzle with 2 tablespoons reserved glaze, sprinkle with sesame seeds, and serve, passing remaining reserved glaze separately.

### STEP BY STEP | WRAPPING AND ROLLING NEGIMAKI

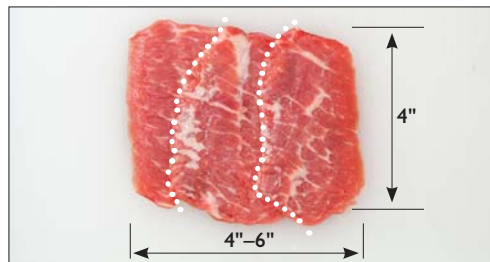
First we cut a few slices from the thin end and halve the chilled steak lengthwise. Then we slice, pound, and arrange the meat strategically to produce a sturdy, tight log.



**1. SLICE** chilled steak against grain on bias into 24 pieces.



**2. POUND** slices to ⅜-inch thickness.



**3. ARRANGE** slices like jigsaw puzzle, overlapping them by ¼ inch to form rough 4- to 6-inch by 4-inch rectangle.



**4. PLACE** scallion halves head to toe on beef, letting white tips hang over edges.



**5. ROLL** into tight cylinder and fasten with 3 toothpicks pushed through roll.

# Chinese Barbecued Spareribs

Cantonese restaurants employ lengthy marinades and specialty ovens to produce these gorgeously lacquered ribs. We do it in 2 hours with common cookware.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

Chinese barbecued spareribs are typically associated with Cantonese buffets and pupu platters, those medleys of vaguely authentic finger food that have been fixtures in Chinese American and Polynesian restaurants for decades. But unlike the questionable provenance of plattermates such as crab rangoons and chicken fingers, spareribs have real roots in Chinese cuisine. Their lurid red glow, lacquered sheen, and flavors redolent of hoisin and soy sauces, ginger, garlic, and five-spice powder indicate they are a form of *char siu*, the Cantonese-style barbecued pork you can find hanging in the windows of meat shops in any Chinatown. Their appeal is obvious—the meat is salty and sweet, with a deeply caramelized exterior and a satisfying resilient chew—and recipes for them have appeared in American newspapers, magazines, and cookbooks since the mid-20th century.

The distinct chew of Chinese barbecued spareribs sets them apart from the fall-off-the-bone tenderness of most American styles. They're also cooked very differently, since they're not actually barbecued. Like all forms of *char siu*, the ribs are marinated and then slow-roasted. In restaurants, this happens in large, boxy ovens where the meat hangs from hooks—a setup that allows fat to drip and hot air to circulate all around the meat so that it achieves its hallmark burnished finish. But this method also makes Chinese ribs tricky to replicate in a home oven, something I've always wanted to do in the winter months when I take a hiatus from the grill or when I don't feel like trekking to Chinatown for the real deal.

## Take Cover

Spareribs are cut close to the belly of the pig. A whole rack can weigh more than 5 pounds since it includes the brisket bone and surrounding meat. To make smaller, evenly rectangular racks that are



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/feb18](https://CookIllustrated.com/feb18)



Whereas Southern-style ribs are known for their fall-off-the-bone texture, the Chinese style retains a satisfying chew.

easier to fit on a grill or in the oven, butchers lop off the brisket portion and call this more svelte cut St. Louis-style spareribs. They're meaty and flavorful and are our go-to cut for most rib recipes.

I started with two racks and mixed up a *char siu* marinade: soy and hoisin sauces, Chinese rice wine, garlic, ginger, five-spice powder, white pepper, and red food coloring (traditionally this color came from fermented rice or bean paste).

The recipes I found recommended marinating the ribs for many hours or even for days. In most

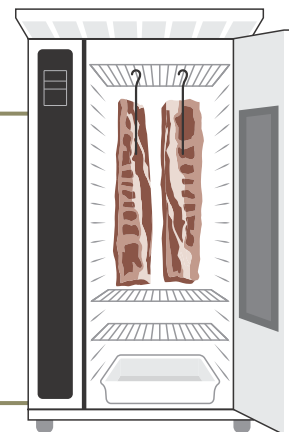
cases, marinating meat for anything longer than an hour is overkill, since we've found that very few flavors penetrate much beyond the meat's surface, no matter how long it soaks. But here a longer marinade might actually be worthwhile, since the *char siu* marinade contains soy and hoisin sauces—powerhouse ingredients packed with salt and flavor-boosting glutamates, both of which we have found can penetrate deep into meat.

Since the layer of meat on ribs is thin, a 2-hour soak seemed like plenty of time. I went with that and tried three common cooking methods. The first re-creates the conditions of a Chinese barbecue oven by cooking a whole slab of ribs on a rack in a low oven, flipping it and basting it with a reduction of the marinade so that all sides of the rack get good exposure to the marinade and the heat. The results were chewy yet tender and had a lacquered coat, but this method required 3 to 4 hours of closely attended cooking in addition to marinating time—more of a commitment than I wanted.

The second method, a speedier variation on that method, turns up the heat to about 350 degrees so that the ribs cook in 1 to 1½ hours. Unfortunately, the time savings came at the expense of the meat, which tended to dry out in the hotter oven. And the third, more common approach is to cut the rack into individual ribs and roast them in two stages: covered for 1 to 1½ hours so that they steam and tenderize and then brushed with a reduction of the marinade and roasted in a hot oven (or broiled) uncovered for about 15 minutes to dry out and color their exteriors.

## Barbecued Ribs, Chinese Style

Chinese ribs are nothing like your average Southern barbecue. Not only are they not smoked, they're not even cooked on a grill. First, they're typically marinated in a mixture that includes the salty-sweet flavors of soy and hoisin sauces along with Chinese rice wine, loads of garlic and ginger, and red food coloring. The ribs are then roasted for several hours while dangling from hooks in large ovens, until they take on a rich mahogany color. The meat is intentionally pulled from the oven while it still retains some chew.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

## FLAVOR-PACKED INDOOR RIBS IN 2 HOURS

American barbecued ribs require you to spend the better part of a day tending a live fire. Our version of the Chinese approach uses the oven and takes 2 hours from start to finish.



### CUT RACK INTO RIBS

Individual ribs have more surface area than an uncut rack, which means each one is exposed to heat and to the marinade on all sides. (It's not necessary to remove the rack's membrane before slicing.)



### BRAISE IN MARINADE

Moist heat quickly tenderizes the meat and accelerates the penetration of flavorful compounds (such as salt and glutamates), so the cooking time doesn't need to be long for the flavors to soak in.



### ROAST IN HOT OVEN

Just 15 minutes in a hot oven dries the ribs' exteriors so that the glaze can set and caramelize.

The third method, moist heat followed by dry, was the most promising. Cutting the racks into single ribs speeds cooking and creates lots of surface area for painting on the flavor-packed glaze. And moist heat is a very efficient way to cook meat, since water conducts energy faster than air does. The drawback is that you don't want to baste ribs that you cover, since the steamy environment doesn't allow the first coat to dry and set, so you never get a substantial buildup of glaze. I'd have to get all my glazing done after I uncovered them, so I had to pack a lot of flavor into the glaze.

### Braised and Glazed

My next move was to intensify the marinade so that when it reduced, a single coat of glaze would taste robust. I mixed up another batch with more soy and hoisin, more garlic and ginger (it was now more efficient to pulverize them in a food processor), and more spices. I also added honey, another typical char siu component that would lend the basting liquid more body.

But as I mixed up my new marinade, something occurred to me: If the ribs needed to soak in the marinade and moist heat was the most efficient way to cook them, why not do both at once by braising the ribs in the marinade before roasting them? Heat would also help the flavors penetrate the meat more quickly, so the cooking time wouldn't need to be long for the flavors to soak in. Then I could further reduce the braising liquid and use that to baste the ribs.

I made another batch of my marinade but this time thinned it with a little water and placed it in a Dutch oven. I added the ribs, brought the pot to a simmer, turned down the heat to low, covered the pot, and let the ribs cook on the stovetop until they were just tender, which took about 1 hour and 15 minutes. After straining and defatting the braising liquid, I returned it to the pot to simmer until it had reduced to a thick glaze; at this point, I also added

some toasted sesame oil for further complexity. In the meantime, I heated the oven to 425 degrees and set a wire rack inside a rimmed baking sheet that I'd lined with aluminum foil and partially filled with water to catch the drips of fat and glaze that would otherwise cause the sheet to smoke (see "Prevent Oven Smoke with a Water Bath"). I tossed the ribs in the glaze and then placed them bone side up on the rack.

After 15 minutes, with a flip halfway through to brown the other side, they were done. The braising liquid's salty-sweet flavor had penetrated into the exterior of the meat, and the glaze had dried and left a lacquered sheen that gave way to the meat's satisfying chew. It was char siu to rival the best I'd had in Chinatown, but it was easy to make in my own kitchen.

### Prevent Oven Smoke with a Water Bath



Partially filling the rimmed baking sheet with water creates a reservoir to catch drips of fat and glaze that would otherwise burn and smoke in the hot oven.

## CHINESE-STYLE BARBECUED SPARERIBS

SERVES 6 TO 8 AS AN APPETIZER

OR 4 TO 6 AS A MAIN COURSE

It's not necessary to remove the membrane on the bone side of the ribs. These ribs are chewier than American-style ribs; if you prefer them more tender, cook them for an additional 15 minutes in step 1. Adding water to the baking sheet during roasting helps prevent smoking. Serve the ribs alone as an appetizer or with vegetables and rice as a main course. You can serve the first batch immediately or tent them with foil to keep them warm.

- 1 (6-inch) piece fresh ginger, peeled and sliced thin
- 8 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 cup honey
- 3/4 cup hoisin sauce
- 3/4 cup soy sauce
- 1/2 cup Chinese rice wine or dry sherry
- 2 teaspoons five-spice powder
- 1 teaspoon red food coloring (optional)
- 1 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 2 (2 1/2- to 3-pound) racks St. Louis-style spareribs, cut into individual ribs
- 2 tablespoons toasted sesame oil

1. Pulse ginger and garlic in food processor until finely chopped, 10 to 12 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Transfer ginger-garlic mixture to Dutch oven. Add honey; hoisin; soy sauce; 1/2 cup water; rice wine; five-spice powder; food coloring, if using; and white pepper and whisk until combined. Add ribs and stir to coat (ribs will not be fully submerged). Bring to simmer over high heat, then reduce heat to low, cover, and cook for 1 1/4 hours, stirring occasionally.

2. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Using tongs, transfer ribs to large bowl. Strain braising liquid through fine-mesh strainer set over large container, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible; discard solids. Let cooking liquid settle for 10 minutes. Using wide, shallow spoon, skim fat from surface and discard.

3. Return braising liquid to pot and add sesame oil. Bring to boil over high heat and cook until syrupy and reduced to 2 1/2 cups, 16 to 20 minutes.

4. Set wire rack in aluminum foil-lined rimmed baking sheet and pour 1/2 cup water into sheet. Transfer half of ribs to pot with braising liquid and toss to coat. Arrange ribs, bone sides up, on prepared rack, letting excess glaze drip off. Roast until edges of ribs start to caramelize, 5 to 7 minutes. Flip ribs and continue to roast until second side starts to caramelize, 5 to 7 minutes longer. Transfer ribs to serving platter; repeat process with remaining ribs. Serve.

**TO MAKE AHEAD:** At end of step 3, refrigerate ribs and glaze separately, covered, for up to 2 days. When ready to serve, bring glaze and half of ribs to simmer in Dutch oven over medium heat, then proceed with step 4. Repeat with remaining ribs.

# Perfect Pork Tenderloin Steaks

How do you cook this lean cut so that it's superjuicy, rosy from edge to edge, and deeply browned? Use two cooking methods.

BY LAN LAM

**W**e've all suffered through dry, chalky, or tough pork tenderloin. That's because traditional techniques such as oven roasting or pan searing use high heat in an attempt to give the mild meat a flavorful browned crust, but these methods typically overcook the lean pork. Lowering the heat can alleviate dryness—but at the expense of browning. What if there were a way to guarantee juicy, flavorful, fork-tender meat?

Chefs in high-end restaurants have been doing just that by cooking food very gently using a technique called *sous vide* that keeps the food from rising above the ideal doneness temperature; afterward meat is typically seared rapidly to produce a browned crust. (In recent years, *sous vide* machines have gotten far less expensive. See “*Sous Vide Circulators*” for details.) In the test kitchen, we have learned to produce the same results without special equipment. The key is to use two cooking methods: Slow-roast the meat in a low-temperature oven, and then transfer it to the stovetop for a quick sear.

To put the technique into action, I borrowed a trick a colleague had used when grilling pork tenderloin. I lightly pounded 2 tenderloins to a 1-inch thickness and then halved each one crosswise, creating four pieces total. This would help greatly when it came time to sear the meat: I'd be working with steaks—with large, flat surfaces for browning—instead of cylinders.

My goal was to cook the interiors of the pork to 140 degrees and keep the outer layers as close to that temperature as possible. Cooked to this degree, the meat is faintly pink, superjuicy, and optimally tender. I seasoned the steaks with salt and pepper and arranged them on a wire rack (spritzed with vegetable oil spray) set in a rimmed baking sheet. This would raise the meat off the hot sheet and prevent the undersides from overcooking. I placed the assembly in a 275-degree oven, where the pork took about 30 minutes to reach 140 degrees. I then removed the sheet from the oven and swaddled the steaks in paper towels to wick away moisture. I needed to get the pork as dry as possible because any water on the surface would inhibit browning.

Next, I heated 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil in a



We pound the pork flat for better browning.

12-inch skillet over medium-high heat, waiting for wisps of smoke to rise. At that point, I knew the pan was ready, so I turned the burner to high and added the steaks, which browned evenly and deeply in just a minute or two per side. The high heat browned the surfaces quickly, so the steaks were in and out of the pan before their interior temperature could rise much above 140 degrees. After letting the meat rest, I sliced into pork tenderloin perfection: juicy, tender, and evenly rosy meat encased in a flavorful mahogany crust. (To learn how to make this recipe using *sous vide*, see “*Want to Try Sous Vide?*”)

## PERFECT PAN-SEARED PORK TENDERLOIN STEAKS

SERVES 4

Choose tenderloins that are equal in size to ensure that the pork cooks at the same rate. We prefer natural pork in this recipe. If using enhanced pork (injected with a salt solution), reduce the salt in step 2 to ¼ teaspoon per steak. Open the oven as infrequently as possible in step 2. If the meat is not yet up to temperature, wait at least 5 minutes before taking its temperature again. Serve the pork with Scallion-Ginger Relish (recipe follows), if desired.

Our recipe for Perfect Pan-Seared Pork Tenderloin Steaks for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/apr18).

- 2 (1-pound) pork tenderloins, trimmed
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 275 degrees. Set wire rack in rimmed baking sheet and lightly spray rack with vegetable oil spray.

2. Pound each tenderloin to 1-inch thickness. Halve each tenderloin crosswise. Sprinkle each steak with ½ teaspoon salt and ⅛ teaspoon pepper. Place steaks on prepared wire rack and cook until meat registers between 137 and 140 degrees, 25 to 35 minutes.

3. Move steaks to 1 side of rack. Line cleared side with double layer of paper towels. Transfer steaks to paper towels, cover with another double layer of paper towels, and let stand for 10 minutes.

4. Pat steaks until surfaces are very dry. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Increase heat to high, place steaks in skillet, and sear until well browned on both sides, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Transfer to carving board and let stand for 5 minutes. Slice steaks against grain ¾ inch thick and transfer to serving platter. Season with salt to taste, and serve.

## SCALLION-GINGER RELISH

MAKES ABOUT ⅓ CUP

We like the complexity of white pepper in this recipe.

- 6 scallions, white and green parts separated and sliced thin
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
- ½ teaspoon ground white pepper
- ½ teaspoon ground lime zest plus 2 teaspoons juice
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce

Combine scallion whites, ginger, white pepper, and lime zest in heatproof bowl. Heat oil in small saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Pour oil over scallion mixture. (Mixture will bubble.) Stir until well combined. Let cool completely, about 15 minutes. Stir in scallion greens, lime juice, and soy sauce. Let mixture sit for 15 minutes to allow flavors to meld.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/apr18)



## SOUS VIDE PORK TENDERLOIN STEAKS

SERVES 4

We prefer natural pork in this recipe. If using enhanced pork (injected with a salt solution), reduce the salt in step 2 to ¼ teaspoon per steak. Serve the pork with Scallion-Ginger Relish (page 14), if desired. Our recipe for Sous Vide Pork Tenderloin Steaks for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/apr18). Our quick guide to getting started with sous vide is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/sousvideguide](http://CooksIllustrated.com/sousvideguide). Additional sous vide recipes, including Butter-Basted Thick-Cut Rib-Eye Steaks and Soft-Poached Eggs, are available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/sousvide](http://CooksIllustrated.com/sousvide).



### 1. HEAT WATER TO PRECISE TEMPERATURE

Using sous vide circulator, bring 4 quarts water (water should be 4 inches deep) to 140°F/60°C in 7-quart Dutch oven or similar-size heatproof container.

**WHY?** A sous vide circulator brings the water to the exact ideal doneness temperature of the food. Since the food can't exceed the temperature of the water in which it is submerged, there is no risk of overcooking.



### 2. PUT MEAT IN BAG WITH OIL

Pound two 1-pound pork tenderloins to 1-inch thickness. Halve each tenderloin crosswise to create 4 steaks total. Sprinkle each steak with ½ teaspoon kosher salt and ⅛ teaspoon pepper. Place steaks and 2 tablespoons vegetable oil in 1-gallon zipper-lock freezer bag.

**WHY?** Oil conducts heat better than air and therefore helps the meat cook evenly. It also keeps the steaks from sticking together.



### 3. REMOVE AIR FROM BAG

Seal bag, pressing out as much air as possible.

**WHY?** Removing air from the bag is critical because air is a poor conductor of heat and slows cooking. In fact, *sous vide* is French for “under vacuum” and references the removal of air from the bag.



### 4. SUBMERGE BAG

Gently lower bag into water bath until pork is submerged, then clip top corner of bag to side of pot, allowing remaining air bubbles to rise to top of bag. Open 1 corner of zipper, release air bubbles, and reseal bag. Cover pot with plastic wrap and cook pork for at least 1 hour or up to 2 hours.

**WHY?** Properly submerging the food ensures even cooking. Securing the food to the container keeps it away from the circulator's intake/outtake areas.



### 5. DRY MEAT

Line wire rack with double layer of paper towels and place in rimmed baking sheet. Transfer steaks to paper towels, cover with another double layer of paper towels, and let stand for 10 minutes. Pat steaks until surfaces are very dry.

**WHY?** The meat will be somewhat wet when you remove it from the sous vide bag. Thoroughly drying the pork steaks with double layers of paper towels eliminates moisture that would impede browning.



### 6. SEAR MEAT

Heat 2 tablespoons vegetable oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Increase heat to high, place steaks in skillet, and sear until well browned on both sides, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Transfer to carving board and let stand for 5 minutes. Slice steaks against grain ¾ inch thick and transfer to serving platter. Season with salt to taste, and serve.

**WHY?** Searing creates the deeply flavorful browned crust that sous vide cooking doesn't produce.

## Want to Try Sous Vide?

While our oven-to-stovetop method for cooking pork tenderloin steaks (page 14) works very well, the sous vide cooking method here gives you control over the precise doneness temperature of the meat without having to monitor it. The sous vide method also offers the convenience of being able to hold the meat at that temperature for a couple of hours until you're ready to serve it. For this technique, you'll need a sous vide circulator, a 7-quart Dutch oven or a similar-size heatproof container, and zipper-lock bags.

## TESTING Sous Vide Circulators

Whether or not you're familiar with sous vide, chances are you've eaten food prepared this way. In the past decade, sous vide—the method of cooking food in a precise, controlled water bath—has gone from high-end restaurants to home kitchens. Though freestanding machines exist, home cooks typically use immersion circulators—slim, stick-like devices that attach to different vessels and continuously heat the water. We evaluated seven models with prices ranging from \$129.99 to \$274.95 by cooking eggs, salmon, flank steak, pork loin, and beef short ribs to a range of temperatures.

Our testing revealed flaws in certain models: Some fluctuated more than 1 degree from the target temperature, which resulted in over- or undercooked eggs; a few machines required a confusing sequence of button-pushing to get started; and the two largest circulators, while powerful, didn't leave much room in a 6-quart water bath to add food.

On the other hand, our top-ranked circulators were temperature-stable, slim, lightweight, and easy to use. The Joule (\$199.00), made by ChefSteps, was powerful enough to heat quickly and stayed within 0.2 degrees of the target temperature. It also featured 6.5 inches between the minimum and maximum water fill lines, which allowed us to cook uninterrupted without needing to refill (due to water evaporation). Though it can be operated only with an accompanying smartphone app, its lack of buttons and display screens allowed for the larger distance between the water fill lines. We also like the Anova Precision Cooker WI-FI (\$199.00), which can be operated with or without a smartphone.

### HIGHLY RECOMMENDED JOLE

MODEL: Stainless Steel PRICE: \$199.00

COMMENTS: This slim, lightweight machine heated water almost as fast as the biggest circulators and was the most accurate model in our lineup. It requires a smartphone to operate, but the app is intuitive and simple. Testers loved its magnetic bottom, which allowed it to stand stably in the center of metal pots.

### RECOMMENDED ANOVA Precision Cooker WI-FI

MODEL: A3.2 PRICE: \$199.00

COMMENTS: We liked that we could set this model's temperature and time on the circulator or with an app. However, it lagged behind our winner on heating speed and accuracy and was a little too bulky to be stored in a standard drawer.



# Slow-Roasted Deviled Pork Chops

A punchy mustard-based paste is an age-old cover-up for mild-mannered cuts. But it can't hide meat that's dry and tough below the surface.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

**Y**ou wouldn't usually call upon the devil to save a weeknight dinner, but that's exactly what Mr. Micawber does in Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* (1850) when he covers undercooked mutton with mustard, salt, and black and cayenne peppers. It is a classic example of "devil-ing," the practice of seasoning food with some combination of mustard, pepper, and/or vinegar, which dates back to at least the 18th century. Nowadays, the term refers to any treatment that uses those components to punch up mild-mannered foods such as hard-cooked eggs, deli ham, or bland chicken breasts and pork chops.

The ease and bold flavors of deviling appeal to me, particularly when applied to boneless pork chops, which I often make for weeknight dinners. But recipes vary widely when it comes to the type and intensity of heat—from a weak sprinkle of black pepper to a thick slather of sharp mustard, neither of which offers the complex, balanced spiciness and acidity that I would want in this dish. Plus, mustard-coated pork chops are often covered in bread crumbs, but I've found that the fine crumbs soak up moisture from the mustard and turn soggy.

But those are just the surface issues related to deviling, and they would be relatively simple to fix. The bigger problem with most deviled pork chops is the way that they're cooked: They're usually coated with mustard and then seared or broiled, the goal being to develop a deeply browned, flavorful crust. But inevitably, the lean meat dries out and becomes tough.

To fix these issues, I would start by finding a cooking technique that produced tender, juicy chops. Then I would need to fine-tune a mustard-based deviling paste that would be assertive and vibrant enough to perk up the pork without overwhelming it. Once those elements were in place, I'd see about adding a bread-crust.



#### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/jun18](https://CookIllustrated.com/jun18)



In addition to providing bold flavor, our mustard paste glues crisp panko bread crumbs to the chops' exteriors.

#### The Lowdown

The more I thought about the role of well-browned meat on deviled pork chops, the more I wondered if it was necessary. Once the chops were covered with the punchy mustard paste and, potentially, a crunchy bread-crust coating, would you really miss the flavor and texture of the seared meat? I did a quick test and confirmed that the answer was no; the mustard-based paste I'd used to coat the meat more or less camouflaged the flavor of the sear. Searing was out.

Instead, I would try to slow-roast the chops, as we often do with large roasts and thick steaks. The benefit is twofold: Lower heat keeps the temperature of the meat's outermost layers low; this prevents them from squeezing out moisture and promotes more-even cooking by reducing the temperature differential between the meat's exterior and interior. Lower heat also encourages enzymes within the pork to break down some of the muscle protein, leading to more-tender meat.

*Searing was out... I would try to slow-roast the chops, as we often do with large roasts and thick steaks.*

I placed four boneless, 1-inch-thick chops on a wire rack set in a rimmed baking sheet so that air could circulate around them for even cooking. Then I slid the sheet into a 275-degree oven and left them alone until they hit 140 degrees. That took about 40 minutes, which was longer than I'd ever waited for pork chops to cook. But the juicy, tender results were worth it. The only hiccup was that the chops stuck to the rack, so the next time I coated it with vegetable oil spray to ensure that the meat released cleanly.

#### The Devil Is in the Details

On to the mustard paste. I followed the lead of other recipes and started with Dijon, which offered an assertive punch of clean heat and acidity along with a creamy texture that clung well to the chops. Then I took a cue from the Dickensian formula and seasoned the mustard with salt as well as black and cayenne peppers; each type of pepper lent its own distinct heat, and both enhanced the mustard's burn. For savory flavor, I worked in a small amount of garlic that I had minced to a paste (which resulted in even flavor distribution) and balanced the fiery concoction with a couple of tea-

spoons of brown sugar. After patting a new batch of chops dry, I brushed the entire surface of each one with the paste, set them on the rack, and popped them into the oven.

The paste was nicely seasoned and packed decent punch, but now that I was tasting it with the pork, I wanted even more of that nasal bite. A heavier coat of the paste wasn't the way to go; for one thing, I wanted more heat but not more acidity. Plus, it would be messy to both slather more paste on the meat and clean it off the wire rack after

cooking; the baked-on coating from the underside of the chops was already sticking to the rack. Instead, I tried adding dry (also known as English) mustard, a variety of hot mustard that's sold in powdered form. In many cases,

the powder is reconstituted in a little water before being used, but that wouldn't be necessary here since the Dijon contained plenty of moisture. I ran a few tests and worked my way up to a hefty 1½ teaspoons

## SCIENCE Calibrating the Best Burn

Our “deviled” paste draws its complex fiery flavor from a combination of spicy components: Dijon mustard, dry mustard, and cayenne and black peppers. Each of these ingredients activates pain receptors in your mouth—TRPV1, which is the same nerve channel that responds to the pain of piping-hot liquid, and TRPA1, a close relative. But the different ingredients stimulate the nerves in different ways, so the combination adds up to a much more complex experience of spiciness. The stimulation of pain and other tactile nerves in the mouth, called chemesthesis, can take many forms—a quick jolt of heat, a lingering burn, the sensation of a pinprick—and can even affect different parts of your mouth and nose. Here’s what each deviling component brings to the mix.



of dry mustard, so that the paste’s heat was potent but still layered—a sharp punch that tingled on the tongue and tapered off into a slow, satisfying burn.

I ran two more quick tests. The first was to see if I could get away with coating just the top and sides of the chops now that the paste was so potent. I could, which cut back considerably on the mess before and after roasting. The second test—whether to brush the chops with the paste before or after cooking—confirmed that we preferred the drier consistency and more rounded flavor of the cooked paste. The only downside was the visual: a dull, mottled, ocher coating. It was time to consider that bread-crust crust.

### Crunch Factor

Besides visual appeal, a crust would offer nice textural contrast to the meat, and the mustard paste would be the glue I’d need to help the crumbs adhere to the chops. To keep the coating process simple, I decided to cover just the top surfaces.

To prevent the crumbs from soaking up moisture from the paste and turning mushy, I employed a two-pronged solution. First, I used panko: pre-toasted coarse bread crumbs that we always turn to when we want a craggy texture and great crunch. Second, I sautéed the panko crumbs in butter so that they would turn golden brown; they wouldn’t get any color in the low oven. I pressed about 2 tablespoons of crumbs onto the top of each chop and slid them into the oven.

This batch was golden and crispy on top and moist and juicy throughout and boasted a fiery but balanced flavor that kept you going back for more. Best of all, the method was dead simple; once the chops were in the oven, I didn’t have to flip them or tend to them in any way until they were done.

I never thought I’d get so excited about a boneless pork chop. I guess you could say the devil made me do it.

### DEVILED PORK CHOPS

SERVES 4

For the best results, be sure to buy chops of similar size. This recipe was developed using natural pork; if using enhanced pork (injected with a salt solution), do not add salt to the mustard paste in step 2. Serve the pork chops with mashed potatoes, rice, or buttered egg noodles. Our recipe for Deviled Pork Chops for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/jun18).

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup panko bread crumbs
- Kosher salt and pepper
- ¼ cup Dijon mustard
- 2 teaspoons packed brown sugar
- 1½ teaspoons dry mustard
- ½ teaspoon garlic, minced to paste
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless pork chops,  
¾ to 1 inch thick

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 275 degrees.

2. Melt butter in 10-inch skillet over medium heat. Add panko and cook, stirring frequently, until golden brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer to bowl and sprinkle with ⅛ teaspoon salt. Stir Dijon, sugar, dry mustard, garlic, cayenne, 1 teaspoon salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper in second bowl until smooth.

3. Set wire rack in rimmed baking sheet and spray with vegetable oil spray. Pat chops dry with paper

## Speak of the Devil

In his 1797 *The Romish Priest. A Tale*, British author John Wolcot used the term “devil” to refer to “a red-hot bit of meat” that was “loaded with kian” (cayenne). The spicy snack was savored in the wee hours by 18th-century gentlemen who found themselves hungry after a night of carousing.

The definition of the term has broadened over the years to encompass any spicy, pungent treatment, but its purpose—to revive jaded appetites and even to strengthen character—remains much the same.

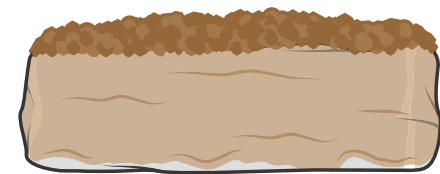


towels. Transfer chops to prepared wire rack, spacing them 1 inch apart. Brush 1 tablespoon mustard mixture over top and sides of each chop (leave bottoms uncoated). Spoon 2 tablespoons toasted panko evenly over top of each chop and press lightly to adhere.

4. Roast until meat registers 140 degrees, 40 to 50 minutes. Remove from oven and let rest on rack for 10 minutes before serving.

### Apply Side and Top Coats

Be strategic about applying the mustard paste and bread crumbs to the chops. That way, you’ll produce flavor-packed results with great crunch—and minimal mess.



#### PASTE GOES ON TOP AND SIDES

It’s potent enough that coating just the top and sides of the meat delivers plenty of flavor, so you can avoid getting the paste on the rack.

#### CRUMBS GO JUST ON TOP

The paste will glue the panko crumbs to the chops’ top surfaces; there’s no need to press them onto the sides.

# Vietnamese Pork with Rice Noodles

*Bun cha*—a one-dish meal featuring grilled pork patties, crisp vegetables, springy noodles, and a vibrant sauce—cooks as quickly as a burger but tastes much lighter.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

I usually start the summer months dreaming about ambitious grilling projects such as ribs and brisket, but when the evenings turn hot and humid, I find myself seeking out lighter, fresher options that I can make more quickly. That's how I learned about *bun cha*, a vibrant Vietnamese dish of rice noodles, grilled pork, and crisp vegetables, all pulled together with a light yet potent sauce.

In the street-food stalls of Hanoi, where the dish originated, cooks prepare fatty cuts such as pork shoulder or belly in two ways: They slice some into thin strips and marinate it in fish sauce, sugar, black pepper, and maybe some minced shallots or onions, and they finely chop the rest (*cha* refers to chopped meat), mix it with similar seasonings, and shape it into small patties. Then they grill all the pork over a box of hot coals and—here comes the genius bit—unload the sizzling meat into bowls of *nuoc cham*, an intensely flavored mixture of lime juice, fish sauce, sugar, water, and sometimes garlic and chiles. The *nuoc cham* picks up the meaty char flavor while every inch of the pork is bathed in zesty sauce. Then the pork is plucked from the bowl and served with a platter of cool, delicate rice noodles; tender greens; leafy herbs; and crisp cucumbers or bean sprouts. Diners assemble bowls of the components to their taste and drizzle more of the grilled meat-infused sauce over the top.

What makes *bun cha* so appealing to eat is that it's a one-dish meal with a brilliant contrast of flavors and textures. And as far as I could tell from the recipes I consulted, what makes this dish so appealing to cook is that it comes together relatively quickly and uses a small arsenal of mostly familiar ingredients.

## Pat-a-Cake

Following the lead of one recipe I'd found, I sliced ½ pound of pork belly into strips and marinated them in a mixture of fish sauce, sugar, pepper, and minced shallots. I also finely chopped an equal



To serve, arrange the components on platters and allow diners to assemble their own bowls of meat, noodles, salad, and sauce.

amount of pork shoulder, folded in more of the seasonings, and shaped the mixture into small patties. To simulate the brazier over which the meat would traditionally be cooked, I piled a chimney's worth of hot coals on one side of my grill, dropped the cooking grate in place, and arranged the meat directly over the coals.

The pork belly released lots of fat, causing impressive flare-ups, so I had to move the strips around a lot and I lost about a quarter of them between the bars. Those that didn't fall through were nicely charred but very chewy. Ultimately, I decided to skip the strips altogether and stick with just the patties, which would make the recipe quicker to prepare. But the patties needed work, too. Though they were easier to maneuver on the grill and stayed more tender than the pork belly, they were dry inside by the time their exteriors had charred sufficiently—and a dunk in the sauce couldn't save them. Besides, finely chopping pork shoulder—a big, tough cut—had taken longer than it did to actually cook it.

I'd seen a few recipes that called for supermarket ground pork in place of the chopped meat. It wouldn't be as authentic, but taking the shortcut would make this dish a snap to prepare—something I could throw together any night of the week. Besides, my goal for the pork would remain the same: deeply savory, well-charred, rich meat that balanced the bright-tasting sauce, crisp vegetables, and noodles.

I mixed 1 pound of ground pork with the usual seasonings plus ½ teaspoon of baking soda—a favorite test kitchen trick. The baking soda boosts the meat's pH, which in turn enhances browning and inhibits the tendency of meat fibers to tighten up and squeeze out moisture as they cook. The result: patties that browned quickly and stayed juicy.

## A World-Class Condiment

*Nuoc cham*—a salty-sour-sweet combination of fish sauce, lime juice, and sugar that is usually diluted with water and is often seasoned with garlic and/or chile—is as essential to Vietnamese cooking as salsa is to Mexican cuisine. It functions as a dipping sauce or dressing for countless dishes and is a snap to make. The key is flavor balance. We make sure to use hot water (which helps quickly dissolve the sugar) and to grind—not just mince—the garlic and chile so that their assertive flavors disperse evenly.



### ESSENTIAL SAUCE

The salty-sour-sweet and spicy flavors of *nuoc cham* enhance countless Vietnamese dishes.

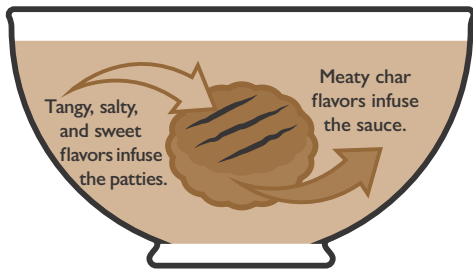


### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksiIllustrated.com/aug18](https://CooksiIllustrated.com/aug18)

## Sauce Does Double Duty

In *bun cha*, the assertively flavored sauce called *nuoc cham* is the element that brings together the various components of the dish. It functions as a postmarinade for the grilled pork, infusing the patties with salty, sour, sweet, and aromatic flavors. Then the meat-infused liquid is used as a sauce that dresses the rest of the components.



### FLAVOR EXCHANGE

Dunking the grilled meat into the sauce enhances the flavors of both components.

## Hot, Sour, Salty, Sweet

Nuoc cham, according to cookbook author Andrea Nguyen, is a dipping sauce that every good Vietnamese cook needs to master and is the element that brings together all the components in this dish and many others in Vietnamese cuisine. It's also a cinch to make. The tricks are to balance the saltiness of the fish sauce with the brightness of lime juice or vinegar and the sweetness of sugar and to add just enough water so that the sauce enlivens rather than overpowers whatever you're dressing. My placeholder version tasted balanced but spartan, so I tried incorporating the chile and garlic I had seen in some recipes.

However, I couldn't mince the chile and garlic finely enough to distribute their flavors evenly throughout the sauce, so some bites were fiery or pungent while others fell flat. But Nguyen makes a helpful suggestion in her version: Combine the aromatics with some of the sugar in a mortar and pestle. The granules act as an abrasive, helping speedily reduce everything to a paste that made every drop of the sauce taste more vibrant. (In lieu of a mortar and pestle, you can smear the sugar across the minced aromatics several times with the flat side of a chef's knife on a cutting board.)

## Composing a Salad

When cooked, rice vermicelli, the *bun* in bun cha, should be fine and delicate yet resilient. My noodles softened after about 4 minutes in boiling water, at which point I drained them and rinsed them well with cold water to halt their cooking and wash away surface starch to minimize stickiness. Then I drained them again and spread them out on a platter to air-dry while I made the salad.

I tore a head of tender Boston lettuce into bite-size pieces and, per Vietnamese tradition, arranged the nuoc cham-moistened pork, remaining sauce, noodles, greens, herbs (mint leaves and delicate cilantro

leaves and stems), and cucumber slices separately so that diners could compose their own salads.

Every bite was an extraordinary balance of smoky, juicy meat; tangy, salty-sweet sauce; cool, tender greens; and delicately springy noodles. And the kicker was that when I tallied up my over-the-heat cooking time—4 minutes to boil the noodles plus 8 minutes to grill the patties—it equaled just 12 minutes, making this an ideal dinner to cook on a sweltering summer night. Or on any night, for that matter.

## VIETNAMESE GRILLED PORK PATTIES WITH RICE NOODLES AND SALAD (BUN CHA)

SERVES 4 TO 6

Look for dried rice vermicelli in the Asian section of your supermarket. We prefer the more delicate springiness of vermicelli made from 100 percent rice flour to those that include a secondary starch such as cornstarch. If you can find only the latter, just cook them longer—up to 12 minutes. For a less spicy sauce, use only half the Thai chile. For the cilantro, use the leaves and the thin, delicate stems, not the thicker ones close to the root. To serve, place platters of noodles, salad, sauce, and pork patties on the table and allow diners to combine components to their taste. The sauce is potent, so use it sparingly. Our recipe for Vietnamese Grilled Pork Patties with Rice Noodles and Salad (Bun Cha) for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/aug18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/aug18).

### Noodles and Salad

- 8 ounces rice vermicelli
- 1 head Boston lettuce (8 ounces), torn into bite-size pieces
- 1 English cucumber, peeled, quartered lengthwise, seeded, and sliced thin on bias
- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves and stems
- 1 cup fresh mint leaves, torn if large

### Sauce

- 1 small Thai chile, stemmed and minced
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup hot water
- 5 tablespoons fish sauce
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup lime juice (2 limes)

### Pork Patties

- 1 large shallot, minced
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon pepper
- 1 pound ground pork

**1. FOR THE NOODLES AND SALAD:** Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Stir in noodles and cook until tender but not mushy, 4 to 12 minutes. Drain noodles and rinse under cold running water until cool. Drain noodles very well, spread on large plate, and let stand at room temperature to dry.

## SHOPPING Two Common Types of Rice Noodles

Dried rice noodles come in dozens of varieties, but there are two styles that you're likely to find at the supermarket.

**Rice sticks** are straight and flat and can be narrow like linguine or wide like pappardelle; they offer great chew and are typically used in noodle soups such as *pho* and stir-fries such as pad Thai.

**Rice vermicelli** are round strands that range in size from slightly wider than angel hair to about the thickness of spaghetti. They look wiry in the package but turn nicely springy when cooked; the noodles' diameter influences their cooking time, so check them for doneness early and often. They're the best choice for noodle bowls such as *bun cha* and for summer rolls. We prefer the more delicate springiness of vermicelli that are made from 100 percent rice flour to those that include a secondary starch such as cornstarch; however, if you can find only noodles that contain cornstarch, just cook them a bit longer.

### RICE STICKS



### RICE VERMICELLI



Arrange lettuce, cucumber, cilantro, and mint separately on large platter and refrigerate until needed.

**2. FOR THE SAUCE:** Using mortar and pestle (or on cutting board using flat side of chef's knife), mash Thai chile, 1 tablespoon sugar, 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. Set aside.

**3. FOR THE PORK PATTIES:** Combine shallot, fish sauce, sugar, baking soda, and pepper in medium bowl. Add pork and mix until well combined. Shape pork mixture into 12 patties, each about 2½ inches wide and ½ inch thick.

**4A. 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 half of 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. Leave all burners on high.

**5.** Clean and oil cooking grate. Cook patties (directly over coals if using charcoal; covered if using gas) until well charred, 3 to 4 minutes per side. Transfer grilled patties to bowl with sauce and gently toss to coat. Let stand for 5 minutes.

**6.** Transfer patties to serving plate, reserving sauce. Serve noodles, salad, sauce, and patties separately.

# Real Carne Adovada

Restraint is the key to the purest, most robust chile flavor in this classic New Mexican pork braise. It's also what makes it dead simple to prepare.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

Before I take you on a deep dive into *carne adovada*, one of New Mexico's most celebrated dishes and quite possibly the easiest braise that you will ever make, I need to back up and explain how hugely significant of a role chiles play in New Mexican cuisine.

For one thing, the state claims its own unique chile cultivars. The relatively mild peppers, which are sold both fresh—either unripe and green or ripe and red—and dried were first released by New Mexico State University in 1913 and have since become one of the defining ingredients in the local cuisine—not to mention the state's most lucrative cash crop. New Mexico even passed a law declaring that only chiles grown in the state may be labeled as such. Dishes that feature the peppers typically contain few other seasonings so that the chile flavor can shine.

*Carne adovada* is a perfect example. To make it, cooks simmer chunks of pork in a thick sauce made from dried red New Mexican chiles; garlic; dried oregano; spices such as cumin, coriander, or cloves; vinegar; and a touch of sugar or honey. (*Adobada*, the Mexican preparation on which the dish is based, refers to meat cooked in an adobo sauce of chiles, aromatics, and vinegar.) When the meat is fall-apart tender, the rich, robust, brick-red braise is served with tortillas or rice and beans.

That's the purist's version, anyway. But there are also plenty of recipes for *carne adovada* that complicate the flavors by adding superfluous ingredients such as raisins, coffee, and/or a mix of other kinds of chiles so that the final result is reminiscent of a mole sauce. Many of these recipes, I found, are also plagued by typical braise problems, such as dry meat and over- or underseasoned sauce that is either too scant or too soupy.

I got to work on a minimalist braise—one that would feature moist, tender pork in a simple, potent sauce that tasted first and foremost of chiles.



What makes our *adovada* so simple? The chiles aren't toasted, the pork isn't seared, and the braising happens in the oven.

## Seeing Red

Most of the recipes I found called for boneless butt roast, which is affordable, streaked with flavorful fat, and loaded with collagen that breaks down during cooking, rendering the meat tender. I cut the roast into 1½-inch chunks, which would be equally easy to eat wrapped in a tortilla or from a fork, and tossed the pieces with kosher salt so that the meat would be

deeply seasoned. I didn't sear it since the meat above the surface of the liquid would brown in the oven.

Most of the simpler sauce formulas went something like this: Toast whole dried New Mexican chiles—as much as 8 ounces—and then steep them in boiling water until their stems soften, which takes about 30 minutes. Then, puree the chiles with enough water to form a thick paste and season it with garlic, spices, vinegar, and a sweetener.

Eight ounces of chiles was a massive pile that I wouldn't be able to toast or puree in a single batch, so I scaled down to a more manageable (but still generous) 4 ounces. After toasting and steeping them, I processed the chiles with 4 cups of the water they had soaked in, plus a couple of garlic cloves, Mexican oregano (less sweet than the Mediterranean kind), cumin, cloves, white vinegar, and sugar until it formed a loose puree. I poured the sauce over the meat in a Dutch oven, brought it to a boil on the stove, covered it, and (as we typically do with a braise) transferred it to the oven, where it would simmer gently and evenly with no stirring.

After about 2 hours of braising, the meat was fork-tender. But the sauce was way off—so loose and thin that it didn't cling to the meat. And despite the load of chiles it contained, the flavor was washed-out.

Reducing the water by half thickened the puree and made its flavor more concentrated, albeit one-dimensional. I'd have to think about tweaking the flavors. The bigger problem was that the chile

## America's Oldest Cuisine

Often confused with Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisine, New Mexican cuisine is an amalgam of many influences that has evolved over hundreds of years and long predates the state's founding in 1912. Its earliest roots date back to Native American tribes (Pueblo, Apache, and Navajo), which settled in the area centuries before the pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock in 1620. The cuisine further evolved as new cooking traditions and ingredients were brought by Spanish settlers in the late 16th century, as well as by Anglo American and French newcomers who came to the area in the 1800s. As cattle ranching gained prominence in the 1800s, some cowboy got mixed in there, too.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/oct18](https://CookIllustrated.com/oct18)

## TECHNIQUE

### BLENDING CHILES INTO A SMOOTH PUREE



To ensure that the tough skins on dried New Mexican chiles break down as thoroughly as possible in the blender, start by adding 1 cup of liquid—just enough to create a vortex while leaving enough friction to grind down the solids. Once the chiles are finely ground and the puree is smooth, blend in the remaining liquid.

seeds and skins hadn't broken down completely in the blender (New Mexican chile skins are particularly tough), and their texture was more noticeable now that there was less liquid.

Going forward, I made sure to seed the chiles before toasting them. As for the bits of skin, I tried straining them out to make the puree ultrasMOOTH, but it was a fussy step and the sauce suffered. Not only did it lack vibrancy in both color and flavor—chile skins contain high concentrations of flavor and aroma compounds that give them much of their astringent, floral, and fruity notes—but I found that the tiny insoluble particles of pureed skin and pulp were also responsible for making the sauce viscous enough to cling to the meat.

The trick to smoothing out the puree was refining my processing method. Instead of adding all of the water at the start, which left the skins swimming in liquid, I started with just enough liquid to keep the blender running before adding the rest. That way there was more friction to grind the solids.

### The Toasting Is Toast

Back to refining the flavor of the sauce. Bumping up the amounts of garlic and vinegar, switching from sugar to the more nuanced sweetness of honey, and introducing a dash of cayenne pepper for subtle heat were all good moves. But the sauce still lacked the fruity brightness I was hoping for.

Toasting chiles is standard practice when you want to deepen their flavor; it can also add hints of char. But if I was after a sweeter, slightly acidic profile—which dried red New Mexican chiles naturally offer—maybe toasting them was the wrong move.

To find out, I held a side-by-side tasting of my *adovada* made with toasted and untoasted chiles. Sure enough, the untoasted batch boasted rounder flavor that was fruity, a touch sweet, and slightly

astringent. Best of all, skipping the toasting step made the dish even easier to prepare.

The result was bright, rich, just a little spicy, and deeply satisfying—precisely the pure and simple *adovada* I'd had in mind. It's what I'll be making for dinner when I want a bold, hearty braise. And since those flavors also pair brilliantly with eggs and potatoes, I'll be sure to save the leftovers for breakfast.

### BRAISED NEW MEXICO-STYLE PORK IN RED CHILE SAUCE (CARNE ADOVADA)

SERVES 6

Pork butt roast is often labeled Boston butt in the supermarket. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a full kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount. If you can't find New Mexican chiles, substitute dried California chiles. Dried chiles should be pliable and smell slightly fruity. Kitchen shears can be used to cut them. If you can't find Mexican oregano, substitute Mediterranean oregano. Letting the stew rest for 10 minutes before serving allows the sauce to thicken and better coat the meat. Serve with rice and beans, crispy potatoes, or flour tortillas with shredded lettuce and chopped tomato, or shred the pork as a filling for tacos and burritos.

- 1 (3½- to 4-pound) boneless pork butt roast, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch pieces  
Kosher salt
- 4 ounces dried New Mexican chiles, wiped clean, stemmed, seeded, and torn into 1-inch pieces
- 4 cups boiling water
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 2 tablespoons distilled white vinegar
- 5 garlic cloves, peeled
- 2 teaspoons dried Mexican oregano
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon ground cloves  
Lime wedges

1. Toss pork and 1 tablespoon salt together in bowl; refrigerate for 1 hour.

2. Place chiles in medium bowl. Pour boiling water over chiles, making sure they are completely submerged, and let stand until softened, 30 minutes. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees.

3. Drain chiles and reserve 2 cups soaking liquid (discard remaining liquid). Process chiles, honey, vinegar, garlic, oregano, cumin, cayenne, cloves, and 1 teaspoon salt in blender until chiles are finely ground and thick paste forms, about 30 seconds. With blender running, add 1 cup reserved liquid and process until smooth, 1½ to 2 minutes, adding up to ¼ cup additional reserved liquid to maintain vortex. Add remaining reserved liquid and continue to blend sauce at high speed, 1 minute longer.

4. Combine pork and chile sauce in Dutch oven, stirring to make sure pork is evenly coated. Bring



*Carne adovada* for breakfast? You bet. The bright, robust chile sauce goes great with eggs, potatoes, and warmed tortillas.

to boil over high heat. Cover pot, transfer to oven, and cook until pork is tender and fork inserted into pork meets little to no resistance, 2 to 2½ hours.

5. Using wooden spoon, scrape any browned bits from sides of pot and stir until pork and sauce are recombined and sauce is smooth and homogeneous. Let stand, uncovered, for 10 minutes. Season with salt to taste. Serve with lime wedges. (Leftover pork can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

### INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT New Mexican Chiles

Chiles are as fundamental to New Mexican cuisine as soy is to Japanese cooking or potatoes are to Irish food. In fact, the state breeds and grows its own unique cultivars, which are sold both fresh and dried. Fresh chiles appear in everything from casseroles to burgers to rice; dried chiles appear in sauces for braised meats such as *carne adovada* or for enchiladas. Here's a rundown on the flavor and heat profile of the dried kind and how to substitute for them.

**Flavor:** Fruity, sweet, slightly acidic

**Heat:** Relatively mild; Scoville rating: 0 to 7,000 (For reference: Bell peppers rate from 0 to 1,000; jalapeños rate from 1,000 to 50,000; and habaneros rate from 100,000 to 500,000.)

**Appearance:** Wrinkly; dark red; particularly shiny, tough skins

**Substitute:** Dried California chiles



# Next-Level Chicken Piccata

For a sauce with deep citrus flavor, don't waste any part of the lemon.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

Chicken piccata needs little introduction, for better or for worse. A good version—chicken breasts pounded thin, lightly dusted with flour, pan-seared, and bathed in a rich lemon-butter pan sauce, perhaps with scatterings of capers, garlic, shallot, and parsley—deserves nothing but praise. Yet piccata can also be punishingly bad, featuring dry, tough chicken drowning in sauce that's either boring or brash.

I looked first at the preparation of the cutlets themselves. A common approach is to flatten a whole breast with a meat pounder, which can tear the flesh. In the test kitchen, we have a better way: Halve the breast crosswise and then split the thick side horizontally to create three similar-size pieces that require only minimal pounding. To season the meat and help it retain moisture, I tossed the cutlets with salt and pepper and set them aside for 15 minutes.

At this point, the cutlets are normally dredged in flour and seared in batches. The flour helps with browning by absorbing surface moisture; the proteins and starch in the flour also brown. The problem is that in the short time the cutlets are in the pan, the flour doesn't cook through, so the cutlets turn gummy on the surface once the sauce is poured on.

I tried a different approach—I floured the cutlets, pan-seared them, and then transferred them to a placeholder sauce to simmer. Problem solved: Any uncooked flour sloughed off into the sauce, thickening it and leaving the coating thin and silky. Because I had salted the chicken, the additional cooking didn't dry it out.

For the sauce, I sautéed garlic and shallot and then stirred in chicken broth and a few tablespoons of lemon juice. After simmering the cutlets in the sauce, I finished it with capers and butter.

The sauce had nice body, but its lemon flavor was one-dimensional. Zest contributed depth, but something was still missing. I thought about eastern Mediterranean cuisines, in which whole lemons are preserved in salt and then sliced or chopped and incorporated into stews and tagines for incredible complexity. Preserved lemons weren't appropriate here, but what about adding whole lemon pieces to piccata? I quartered thin slices of lemon and simmered them in the sauce until

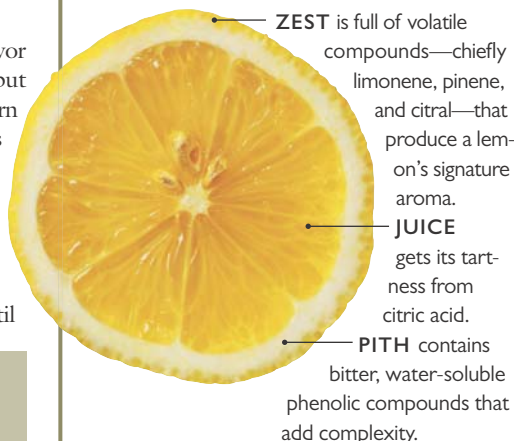


The lemon slices soften as they simmer and can be eaten along with the chicken.

they softened. Bingo: My twist on this classic recipe resulted in a truly complex sauce featuring tartness from the juice, fruity aroma from the zest, and a subtle bitterness from the pith.

## SCIENCE Lemon Law: For Complexity, Use Every Part

We add lemon slices to our piccata to take advantage of the unique flavor that each part of the fruit provides.



**ZEST** is full of volatile compounds—chiefly limonene, pinene, and citral—that produce a lemon's signature aroma.

**JUICE** gets its tartness from citric acid.

**PITH** contains bitter, water-soluble phenolic compounds that add complexity.

## CHICKEN PICCATA

SERVES 4 TO 6

Serve with buttered pasta, white rice, potatoes, or crusty bread and a simple steamed vegetable. Our recipe for Chicken Piccata for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18).

- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 2 large lemons
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup plus 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 shallot, minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 6 pieces
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley

1. Cut each chicken breast in half crosswise, then cut thick half in half again horizontally, creating 3 cutlets of similar thickness. Place cutlets between sheets of plastic wrap and gently pound to even  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thickness. Place cutlets in bowl and toss with 2 teaspoons salt and  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon pepper. Set aside for 15 minutes.

2. Halve 1 lemon lengthwise. Trim ends from 1 half, halve lengthwise again, then cut crosswise  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick slices; set aside. Juice remaining half and whole lemon and set aside 3 tablespoons juice.

3. Spread flour in shallow dish. Working with 1 cutlet at a time, dredge cutlets in flour, shaking gently to remove excess. Place on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until smoking. Place 6 cutlets in skillet, reduce heat to medium, and cook until golden brown on 1 side, 2 to 3 minutes. Flip and cook until golden brown on second side, 2 to 3 minutes. Return cutlets to wire rack. Repeat with 2 tablespoons oil and remaining 6 cutlets.

4. Add remaining 1 teaspoon oil and shallot to skillet and cook until softened, 1 minute. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, 30 seconds. Add broth, reserved lemon juice, and reserved lemon slices and bring to simmer, scraping up any browned bits.

5. Add cutlets to sauce and simmer for 4 minutes, flipping halfway through simmering. Transfer cutlets to platter. Sauce should be thickened to consistency of heavy cream; if not, simmer 1 minute longer. Off heat, whisk in butter. Stir in capers and parsley. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Spoon sauce over chicken and serve.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18)



# Beijing-Style Meat Sauce and Noodles

Meet *zha jiang mian*, the most popular Chinese dish you've never heard of.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Have you ever “discovered” something new only to find that it’s everywhere you turn? That was my experience with the meaty Chinese noodle dish *zha jiang mian* (“ja jang mee-AN”), and I’ve never been so glad to find a new favorite that I can get in most any Chinese restaurant. This dish has many aliases—fried sauce noodles, Beijing meat sauce, and Old Beijing noodles, to name a few. But what’s even better is that it’s a good dish to make at home: simple, quick, and flavor-packed.

It starts with a sauce akin to a long-simmered, deeply flavored Italian meat ragu. The difference is that it simmers for just 20 minutes and calls for only ½ pound of ground meat. The savory secret? Two fermented products: sweet bean sauce (*tián miàn jiàng*) and ground bean sauce (*huáng jiàng*).

Most recipes begin by sautéing ground pork, minced mushrooms, garlic, ginger, and scallions. The bean sauces go into the pot next, along with some water. The sauce simmers until it develops a thick consistency and a mahogany color and the flavors meld. It’s then spooned over a mound of chewy lo mein noodles and topped with nests of colorful slivered raw vegetables. As the dish is stirred, the vegetables wilt from the heat but retain a refreshing crispness that’s an ideal foil for the deep, dark sauce.

Developing a *zha jiang mian* recipe for home cooks would require finding substitutes for the sweet bean and ground bean sauces, which are hard to source outside of Asian markets. Thick, dark sweet bean sauce has a salty-sweet-umami flavor reminiscent of hoisin, but it’s saltier, with an underlying bitter smokiness. It reminded me of molasses, which inspired my first substitution attempt: hoisin and molasses in a 3:1 ratio. The flavor was close but lacked the salty depth of the original. Adding soy sauce did the trick.

Ground bean sauce packs a savory-salty punch. Red miso paste, another long-fermented product, was a solid swap once I added a little more soy sauce.

When I used both substitutes, the flavors of the sauce were spot-on, but the dish was far too salty. Not wanting to upset the savory-salty-sweet balance by adjusting the ingredients, I tried a different approach: What if I simply used less sauce? It worked. The flavors were already so concentrated that reducing the quantity produced a balanced dish.

A few final tweaks: Mixing a baking soda solution into the ground pork kept the meat tender and moist. As for the vegetables, three provided variety and kept knife work to a minimum: Cucumber matchsticks and bean sprouts, along with scallion greens, provided freshness and crunch.



This one-pot meal comes together in just 30 minutes.

## BEIJING-STYLE MEAT SAUCE AND NOODLES (ZHA JIANG MIAN)

SERVES 6

We prefer red miso in this recipe. You can use white miso, but the color will be lighter and the flavor milder. You can substitute 8 ounces of dried linguine for the lo mein noodles, if desired, but be sure to follow the cooking time listed on the package. For an authentic presentation, bring the bowl to the table before tossing the noodles in step 5. Our recipe for Beijing-Style Meat Sauce and Noodles (*Zha Jiang Mian*) for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/jun18).

- 8 ounces ground pork
- ⅛ teaspoon baking soda
- 5 tablespoons red miso paste
- 5 tablespoons soy sauce
- 3 tablespoons hoisin sauce
- 1 tablespoon molasses
- 8 scallions, white and light green parts cut into ½-inch pieces, dark green parts sliced thin on bias
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 (½-inch) piece ginger, peeled and sliced into ⅛-inch rounds
- 4 ounces shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and sliced ½ inch thick

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 pound fresh lo mein noodles
- 6 ounces (3 cups) bean sprouts
- ½ English cucumber, unpeeled, cut into 2½-inch-long matchsticks (2 cups)

1. Toss pork, 2 teaspoons water, and baking soda in bowl until thoroughly combined. Let stand for 5 minutes. Whisk ½ cup water, miso paste, soy sauce, hoisin, and molasses together in second bowl.

2. Pulse white and light green scallion parts, garlic, and ginger in food processor until coarsely chopped, 5 to 10 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add mushrooms and pulse until mixture is finely chopped, 5 to 10 pulses.

3. Heat oil and pork mixture in large saucepan over medium heat for 1 minute, breaking up meat with wooden spoon. Add mushroom mixture and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture is dry and just begins to stick to saucepan, 5 to 7 minutes. Add miso mixture to saucepan and bring to simmer. Cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture thickens, 8 to 10 minutes. Cover and keep warm while noodles cook.

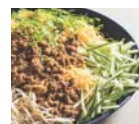
4. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add noodles and cook, stirring often, until almost tender (center should still be firm with slightly opaque dot), 3 to 5 minutes. Drain noodles and transfer to wide, shallow serving bowl.

5. Ladle sauce over center of noodles and sprinkle with sprouts, cucumber, and dark green scallion parts. Toss well and serve.



## From China to Italy?

Though most food historians no longer believe Marco Polo was the first to introduce pasta to Italy after his travels to China in the 13th century, perhaps he was still the first to introduce *zha jiang mian*; the rich, savory meat sauce in the dish bears an uncanny resemblance to Italian ragu.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/jun18)

# Three-Cup Chicken

One cup each of soy sauce, sesame oil, and rice wine is easy to remember. Too bad it doesn't work. We figured out a better formula and streamlined the recipe.

≧ BY STEVE DUNN ≦

Long ago—in 1283, to be exact, if stories are to be believed—the warden of a military prison in Dadu (modern Beijing) prepared the final meal for Wen Tianxiang, a Song dynasty patriot. Legend has it that on the eve of the execution, with just a handful of ingredients at his disposal—soy sauce, sesame oil, and rice wine—the warden invented a chicken recipe by combining 1 cup of each ingredient. *San bei ji*, or three-cup chicken, as it has come to be known, must have been well received, for in the ensuing years, the recipe was adopted by neighboring Taiwan and has since evolved into a national dish of sorts. These days, chiles are included for heat, along with generous amounts of fresh ginger, garlic, scallions, and Thai basil. Intrigued by the robust, aromatic flavors, I got to work on creating my own version of the dish.

## Breaking It Down

Many recipes start with instructions for butchering a whole bird into 2- to 3-inch pieces, a job requiring a heavy cleaver and more than a little bit of nerve. Even in the loud, busy test kitchen, the violent sounds produced as I hacked thighs and legs into bite-size chunks raised a few eyebrows. In addition, tasters struggled to eat the small, bone-in, skin-on chicken pieces—a common preparation in Taiwan but one that runs counter to our expectations here. Looking for alternatives, I ruled out whole bone-in parts—if I was veering from tradition, I might as well try to make the dish as speedy as possible. Instead, I settled on boneless, skinless thighs; their rich flavor would stand up to the potent sauce better than that of milder breasts. I cut them into 2-inch pieces that would cook in well under 30 minutes.

Many modern recipes call for stir-frying the chicken and aromatics in untoasted sesame oil in a wok before adding the soy sauce and wine. I got my skillet good and hot and browned the chicken, which took a bit of time because I had to do it in



Thinly sliced scallions, fresh Thai basil, and plenty of garlic and ginger complement the savory elements of the dish.

batches to avoid crowding. As I worked, I began to question why I was bothering with this step at all. Browning is normally used to build deep flavor, but here, where a sauce rich in soy sauce, wine, sesame, ginger, chiles, and garlic would dress the chicken, was it even necessary?

I quite literally put the chicken on the back burner to do more research, ultimately learning that history was on my side: In 13th-century China, the

chicken for this dish wasn't browned at all. Instead, it was cooked in an earthenware pot until the sauce reduced to a glaze. Inspired by this finding, I eliminated the browning step and moved on to developing an efficient process whereby I would briefly marinate the chicken in what would become the cooking liquid. (Marinating is not traditional, but it would be an easy way to enhance the chicken's flavor.) I combined placeholder amounts of soy sauce and Chinese rice wine, added the chicken, and set it aside while I sautéed the aromatics (also placeholders) in the sesame oil. I then added the chicken and the marinade and brought it all to a simmer. It worked beautifully: Tasters didn't miss the browned flavor at all.

As we have found in other recipes, cooking the dark chicken meat until it registered 200 degrees (well beyond its food-safe point of 165 degrees) not only fully rendered any fat but also melted tough connective tissue into rich gelatin, which coats the meat's protein fibers, enhancing tenderness.

## Matters of Taste

Having found a fuss-free method for tender chicken, I shifted my focus to the big, bold flavors that characterize this dish. Dealing with the aromatics turned out to be largely an exercise in how to prep them. Cutting the scallions into 2-inch lengths resulted in flabby pieces by the end of cooking, but slicing them thin on the bias delivered a pleasant texture. Grated ginger clouded the translucent sauce, so I sliced it into thin half-moons instead. Tasters praised these larger pieces for the spicy pop they provided. As for the garlic, simply halving cloves

## Three Cups? Not So Much

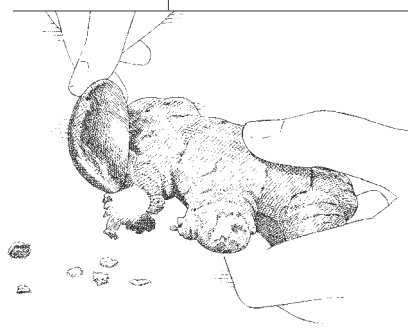
Few modern recipes for three-cup chicken actually use the original formula of 1 cup each of untoasted sesame oil, soy sauce, and rice wine; a full cup of oil makes the dish greasy, and 1 cup each of soy sauce and rice wine take too long to reduce. We use just 1/3 cup each of soy sauce and dry sherry (our substitute for rice wine) and season the dish with a mere tablespoon of deeply aromatic toasted sesame oil.



## WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CookIllustrated.com/apr18)

## TECHNIQUE | PEELING GINGER



Using a paring knife or a peeler on ginger is overkill since it removes too much of the flesh. Simply scrape the edge of a spoon along the ginger to remove the skin. Unlike the straight blade of a knife, the curved spoon is easy to maneuver around the root's irregular shape.

lengthwise provided a sweet, mellow counterpoint to the spicy ginger. Instead of traditional Thai bird chiles, which can be hard to find, I opted for red pepper flakes, which are available everywhere. Finally, most recipes call for sautéing the aromatics in untoasted sesame oil, but since American cooks typically have only the toasted kind, which is not for cooking but rather for seasoning, I decided to sauté in vegetable oil and finish with a small amount of the potent toasted sesame oil.

As for the sauce, some recipes specify a large volume of ingredients (one even called for the original 1 cup each of soy sauce and wine) that takes a long time to reduce. In the end, I cut the total amount of liquid to only about  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup, tossing in a touch of sugar to balance the acidic wine. Finally, for a silky consistency, I finished the sauce with a simple cornstarch slurry. A handful each of scallion

## Chinese Restaurant-Style Rice

The rice served in Chinese restaurants is soft enough to soak up savory sauces and sticky enough to be picked up with chopsticks. Chinese cooks never salt their rice, making it an ideal accompaniment to highly flavorful and/or soy-heavy dishes such as three-cup chicken. We found that rinsing the grains removed some of their surface starch and that starting them in boiling water provided enough agitation to release the remaining starch, resulting in just the right amount of stickiness.

### CHINESE RESTAURANT-STYLE RICE

SERVES 4 TO 6

Do not stir the rice as it cooks. The finished rice can stand off the heat, covered, for up to 15 minutes. Medium-grain or jasmine rice can also be used.

- 2 cups long-grain white rice
- 3 cups water

greens and fragrant Thai basil leaves contributed fresh elements.

In less than an hour and without having to wield a heavy cleaver, I had produced san bei ji that stayed true to its roots.

### THREE-CUP CHICKEN

SERVES 4

We prefer the flavor of Thai basil in this recipe, but you can substitute sweet Italian basil, if desired. For a spicier dish, use the larger amount of red pepper flakes. Serve with white rice. Our recipe for Three-Cup Chicken for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/apr18).

- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup soy sauce
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup Shaoxing wine or dry sherry
- 1 tablespoon packed brown sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed and cut into 2-inch pieces
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 (2-inch) piece ginger, peeled, halved lengthwise, and sliced into thin half-rounds
- 12 garlic cloves, peeled and halved lengthwise
- $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 6 scallions, white and green parts separated and sliced thin on bias
- 1 tablespoon water
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch
- 1 cup Thai basil leaves, large leaves sliced in half lengthwise
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil



1. Place rice in fine-mesh strainer set over bowl. Rinse under running water, swishing with your hands, until water runs clear. Drain thoroughly.

2. Bring rice and water to boil in saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook, uncovered, until water level drops below surface of rice and small holes form, about 5 minutes.

3. Reduce heat to low, cover, and cook until rice is tender and water is fully absorbed, about 15 minutes. Serve.

1. Whisk soy sauce, wine, and sugar together in medium bowl. Add chicken and toss to coat; set aside.

2. Heat vegetable oil, ginger, garlic, and pepper flakes in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-low heat. Cook, stirring frequently, until garlic is golden brown and beginning to soften, 8 to 10 minutes.

3. Add chicken and marinade to skillet, increase heat to medium-high, and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in scallion whites and continue to cook until chicken registers about 200 degrees, 8 to 10 minutes longer.

4. Whisk water and cornstarch together in small bowl, then stir into sauce; simmer until sauce is slightly thickened, about 1 minute. Remove skillet from heat. Stir in basil, sesame oil, and scallion greens. Transfer to platter and serve.

## SHOPPING

### Chinese Cooking Wines

Many Chinese recipes (ours included) call for Shaoxing rice wine, an amber-colored specialty of Shaoxing, China, that contributes distinctive savory, nutty flavors. But shopping for Shaoxing wine in the United States can be confusing because there are multiple products with similar names: authentic Shaoxing wine and Shaoxing cooking wine.

To see how each functioned in a recipe, we tasted them, as well as dry sherry (a common substitute for Shaoxing), in a beef stir-fry. All the products were acceptable, but we preferred the more complex, less salty flavors of the

authentic Shaoxing wine and the dry sherry.



**Best choice:** Authentic Shaoxing wine

**Tip:** This is sold in an elaborate bottle and only in liquor stores.

**Good alternative:** Dry sherry

**Tip:** Our favorite option, Lustau Palo Cortado Peninsula Sherry (\$19.99), delivered nutty, complex flavor. Avoid "sherry cooking wine," which lacks complexity and contains salt that we could taste.



**Only in a pinch:** Shaoxing cooking wines

**Tip:** These are made by adding salt (you'll see it listed on the label) to lower-quality wines so they become "undrinkable" and can therefore be sold in markets that aren't licensed to sell alcohol. We could taste the salinity, even in a stir-fry.



# Roast Chicken with Bread Salad

San Francisco's Zuni Café serves perfect roast chicken with a chewy-crisp, warm bread salad that has a cultlike following. We pay homage to the dish with a streamlined take.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

Few dishes are as beloved and crowd-pleasing as roast chicken. Perhaps no one knew this better than the late, renowned chef Judy Rodgers of Zuni Café in San Francisco. When she put her roast chicken with warm bread salad on the menu in the late '80s, it was a real hit. Now, some 30 years later, it still is.

I recently prepared Rodgers's recipe from *The Zuni Café Cookbook* (2002). The chicken was beautifully executed: the skin deeply bronzed, the meat juicy and well seasoned. And the salad? The bread itself was a lovely mix of crunchy, fried, chewy, and moist pieces, all tossed with savory chicken drippings. Currants, pine nuts, just-softened scallions and garlic, salad greens, and a sharp vinaigrette completed the salad. Served with the chicken, it was a perfect meal.

But the recipe for this rustic dish is anything but simple. It's a meticulously detailed four-page essay that calls for preparing the chicken and bread separately (the latter in two stages), so their cooking has to be coordinated, as do the salad's many components, including vinegar-soaked currants, sautéed aromatics, and toasted nuts. This could all be tackled easily in a professional kitchen, but at home it seemed taxing.

## Roast Chicken Rules

Before I did anything else, I wanted to nail the chicken cookery. I butterflied a chicken by snipping out the backbone and then pressing down on its breastbone to help the bird lie flat.

Rodgers called for salting her chicken overnight, which is a trick we often use as well. The salt draws moisture from the flesh, forming a concentrated brine that is eventually reabsorbed, seasoning the meat and keeping it juicy. I lifted up the skin and rubbed kosher salt onto the flesh; I then refrigerated the bird for 24 hours. This would give the salt time to penetrate the flesh as well as dry the skin so it would brown and crisp more readily.

The next day, I placed the bird skin side up in a



This salad is saturated with chicken flavor, from the bread pieces that are cooked under the chicken to the dressing, which also contains drippings.

12-inch skillet (rather than a large roasting pan, so the juices could pool without risk of scorching) and slid it, brushed with oil to encourage deep browning, into a 475-degree oven. Because the chicken was butterflied, I was pretty sure I could roast it at a high temperature without the breast and thigh meat cooking unevenly. Sure enough, 45 minutes later I had a mahogany brown, crispy-skinned, succulent chicken.

## Breaking Bread

On to my favorite part: the bread. What makes Rodgers's bread salad unique is its mix of crispy-chewy textures, achieved by removing the crusts from a rustic loaf, cutting the bread into large chunks, coating the chunks with oil, and broiling them. The bread chunks are then torn into smaller pieces and tossed with currants, pine nuts, cooked scallions and garlic, broth, and vinaigrette. Finally, the mixture is baked in a covered dish so that the bread emerges, as Rodgers described it, "steamy-hot, a mixture of soft, moist wads, crispy-on-the-outside-but-moist-in-the-middle wads, and a few downright crispy ones."

I wondered if I could streamline things by cooking the bread with the chicken, which would also allow the bread to directly soak up all the bird's juices and fat. The test kitchen has recipes that call for butterflying poultry and draping it over stuffing prior to roasting, and I thought a similar technique could work well here. The pieces touching the skillet would crisp just like Rodgers's broiled bread, and the chicken juices would keep the remaining pieces moist.

Rodgers called for an open-crumbed loaf such as ciabatta; I wanted something sturdier to hold up under the chicken, so I opted for a denser country-style loaf, which I cut into 1-inch pieces and placed in the skillet before arranging the butterflied bird on top. When I removed it from the oven, I was pleased: The bread beneath the chicken was saturated with savory chicken juices on one side and was deeply golden, crispy, and fried on the other side where it had been in contact with the pan. The only problem was that the pieces around the edges of the pan that had not been tucked under the chicken had dried out and burned slightly. Plus, a lot of the bread had stuck to the pan.

For my next batch, I moistened the bread with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of chicken broth. I also spritzed the skillet with vegetable oil spray and stirred a little olive oil into the bread before arranging it in the skillet. I hoped this would help the edge pieces fry and crisp without sticking. Finally, I didn't trim away



Zuni Café opened its doors in 1979; in 1987, the late Judy Rodgers became the head chef. On an average day, the restaurant serves about 100 of its whole chickens with warm bread salad.



## WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/jun18](https://CookIllustrated.com/jun18)

## Making the Most of the Star Ingredient

We think the roast chicken in this recipe is terrific, but the crispy, chewy, ultrasavory bread is our favorite part of the dish. Here's how we make it so great.



### Choose a Sturdy Loaf:

Use country-style bread, which has heft and can stand up to cooking. Remove bottom crust but leave top crust attached for some chew.

### Stack It Up:

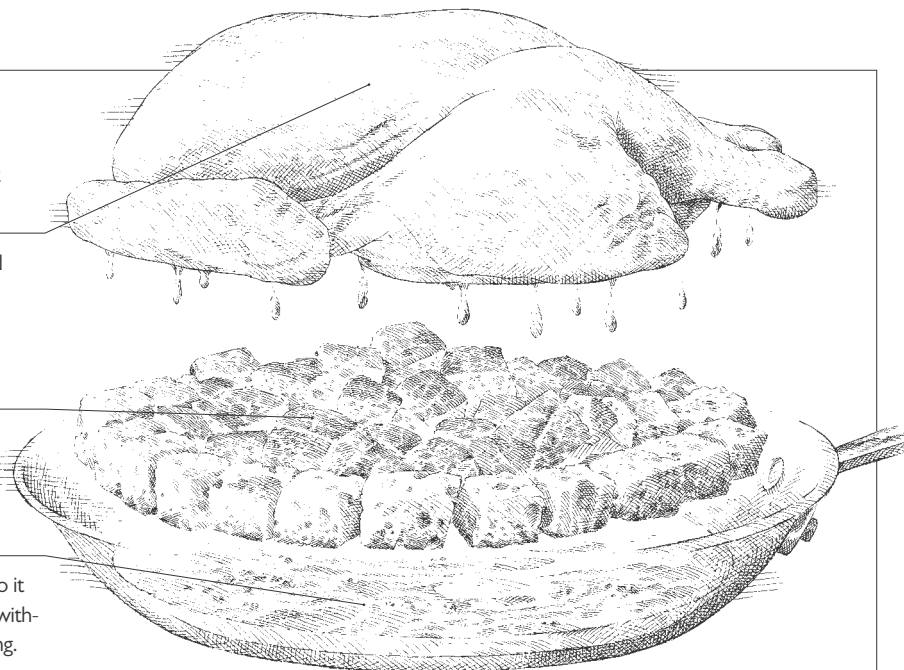
Roast untrimmed butterflied chicken on top of bread so juices and fat can be absorbed.

### Position It Right:

Arrange bread with crust side up so tougher parts are beneath moist chicken.

### Avoid the Burn:

Add oil and broth so it stays moist and crisps nicely without drying, burning, or sticking.



any of the bird's excess fat or skin. This way, I would be capturing every last drop of the drippings—arguably the most flavorful element a chicken has to offer. These were good moves: The bread boasted a mix of textures and tasted intensely chicken-y, and nothing burned or dried out. That said, the crusted pieces were still tough.

I started anew, this time removing all the crust so I was left with only the soft inner crumb. This eliminated the tough parts, but now the bread had no structure and collapsed into a single mass.

I prepared another loaf but this time removed only the thick bottom crust. So they would be sure to soften, I arranged the remaining crusted pieces directly under the bird, crust side up. To say it worked well would be an understatement: This bread offered a little of everything: crunchy, fried, chewy, and moist pieces. There wasn't a tough piece in the mix. It was time to pull the dish together.

## Salad Days

As I examined the salad components, I decided to make a couple of adjustments: Instead of sautéing thinly sliced scallions with garlic, I decided to skip the garlic and keep the scallions raw, which I mixed, along with sweet currants, into a sharp dressing of champagne vinegar (Rodgers called for this type, and I liked its bright, balanced flavor) and extra-virgin olive oil. For body and more punch to cut the dish's richness, I added a spoonful of Dijon mustard. And because the bread would provide plenty of crunch and richness, I left out the pine nuts, too. Finally, I poured the accumulated chicken juices into the dressing before tossing it with the bread and a heap of peppery arugula. Instead of arranging the carved chicken on top of the salad, which caused the greens to wilt, I served it alongside.

My streamlined rendition of the Zuni chicken and bread salad hit all the right notes: salty, savory, sweet, fresh, and bright. I only hope that it will be as memorable and enduring as the original.

## ROAST CHICKEN WITH WARM BREAD SALAD

SERVES 4 TO 6

Note that this recipe requires refrigerating the seasoned chicken for 24 hours. This recipe was developed and tested using Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt. If you have Morton Kosher Salt, which is denser than Diamond Crystal, put only ½ teaspoon of salt onto the cavity. Red wine or white wine vinegar may be substituted for champagne vinegar, if desired. For the bread, we prefer a round rustic loaf with a chewy, open crumb and a sturdy outer crust.

- 1 (4-pound) whole chicken, giblets discarded  
Kosher salt and pepper
- 4 (1-inch-thick) slices country-style bread  
(8 ounces), bottom crust removed,  
cut into ¾- to 1-inch pieces (5 cups)
- ¼ cup chicken broth
- 6 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons extra-virgin  
olive oil
- 2 tablespoons champagne vinegar
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 3 scallions, sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons dried currants
- 5 ounces (5 cups) baby arugula

1. Place chicken, breast side down, on cutting board. Using kitchen shears, cut through bones on either side of backbone; discard backbone. Do not trim off any excess fat or skin. Flip chicken over and press on breastbone to flatten.

2. Using your fingers, carefully loosen skin covering breast and legs. Rub ½ teaspoon salt under skin of each breast, ½ teaspoon under skin of each leg, and 1 teaspoon salt onto bird's cavity. Tuck wings behind back and turn legs so drumsticks face inward toward breasts. Place chicken on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet or on large plate and refrigerate, uncovered, for 24 hours.

3. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat

oven to 475 degrees. Spray 12-inch skillet with vegetable oil spray. Toss bread with broth and 2 tablespoons oil until pieces are evenly moistened. Arrange bread in skillet in single layer, with majority of crusted pieces near center, crust side up.

4. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and place, skin side up, on top of bread. Brush 2 teaspoons oil over chicken skin and sprinkle with ¼ teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon pepper. Roast chicken until skin is deep golden brown and thickest part of breast registers 160 degrees and thighs register 175 degrees, 45 to 50 minutes, rotating skillet halfway through roasting.

5. While chicken roasts, whisk vinegar, mustard, ¼ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper together in small bowl. Slowly whisk in remaining ¼ cup oil. Stir in scallions and currants and set aside. Place arugula in large bowl.

6. Transfer chicken to carving board and let rest, uncovered, for 15 minutes. Run thin metal spatula under bread to loosen from bottom of skillet. (Bread should be mix of softened, golden-brown, and crunchy pieces.) Carve chicken and whisk any accumulated juices into vinaigrette. Add bread and vinaigrette to arugula and toss to evenly coat. Transfer salad to serving platter and serve with chicken.

## Skip the Trimming

Most of our chicken recipes call for trimming away any excess fat and skin. But since those elements produce hugely flavorful drippings, we decided to leave them intact for this recipe. This meant that more savory, chicken-y drippings would be available for the bread to absorb.



### LIQUID GOLD

An untrimmed 4-pound chicken exudes ½ cup of drippings.

# Grilled Chicken Thighs

Flavorful, meaty, inexpensive thighs should be the easiest part of the chicken to cook on the grill—not a direct path to an inferno.

≧ BY STEVE DUNN ≦

One of my earliest cooking memories is of my dad positioned at the grill, squirt bottle in one hand and grill tongs in the other, working furiously to rescue chicken thighs from a three-alarm blaze. In a rush to get dinner on the table, he would position the thighs directly over the fire to cook them quickly. Within minutes, their rendering fat dripped into the flames, ignited, and grew into a blaze that forced him to shuffle the chicken around the grate while he simultaneously tried to quell the fire with water from his squirt bottle. I can't lie: The pyrotechnics were pretty thrilling to watch as a kid. But eating the chicken was less thrilling—the chewy meat tasted of acrid smoke and was covered with rubbery, badly charred skin.

Chicken thighs have a lot going for them: They're more flavorful and less prone to overcooking than leaner breasts, boast a relatively high ratio of meat to bone, and have a flat layer of skin that is prime for browning and crisping. What makes them challenging to cook, especially over a live fire, is that they tend to have more subcutaneous fat than other parts of the chicken, which means the skin is at risk of not thoroughly rendering and remaining chewy and flabby, which will cause flare-ups.

My goal: a recipe that would produce juicy, flavorful meat and well-rendered, crispy skin—minus the inferno.

## A Leg Up

My colleague Andrea Geary recently developed a recipe for Grilled Spice-Rubbed Chicken Drumsticks (May/June 2017) that I thought might be a good blueprint for thighs, too. The key is to cook the chicken over indirect heat for about an hour, during which time fat and collagen in the meat and skin render and break down, respectively, so that the meat is tender and the skin is primed for crisping. We also arrange the drumsticks in two rows alongside the fire and rearrange them halfway through cooking—those closer to the heat go to the outside, and those on



The flat layer of skin on chicken thighs is ideal for crisping on the grill.

the outside go closer to the heat—so that they all finish cooking at the same time. Then we move the drumsticks directly over the heat to briefly brown and crisp the skin.

I placed eight thighs skin side up over the cooler half of a grill, thinking that the fat in the skin would lubricate the meat as it rendered. After 20 minutes, I rearranged the pieces and then let them cook for another 15 to 20 minutes until they registered between 185 and 190 degrees. That's well past the point of doneness for white meat (160 degrees), but we've found that dark meat benefits from being

cooked much more thoroughly, especially if it also cooks slowly. That's because the longer the meat spends cooking at temperatures above 140 degrees, the more of its abundant collagen breaks down and transforms into gelatin that lubricates the meat, making it seem juicy and tender.

The method was dead easy, and all seemed to be going well until I moved the thighs to the hotter side of the grill and flipped them onto their skin sides to crisp. Fat poured out from under the skin, dripped into the fire, and sent flames shooting up. I managed to salvage some of the thighs and was pleased that the meat was, indeed, quite tender and moist after the lengthy stint over indirect heat. But the skin wasn't nearly as nice to eat—not just because it was burnt in spots, but because it was still flabby and chewy beneath the surface.

## Skin Treatment

Crispy, evenly bronzed chicken skin is a real treat, but it takes both ample time and heat to produce those results. That's partly because chicken skin—particularly the skin on thighs—is padded with fat that must render before the skin can crisp. But fat isn't the only factor that makes chicken skin flabby and chewy; skin, like meat, contains collagen that must break down in order for it to turn tender. Only once the skin is tender can it then crisp (see "What's Good for Tender Meat Is Good for the Crispiest Skin").

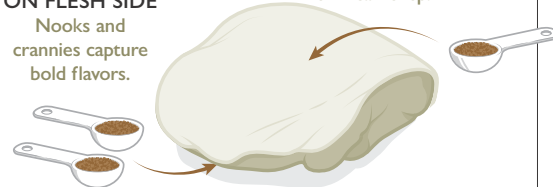
The thighs were already spending a long time on the grill, but maybe the skin wasn't getting hot enough to shed fat. So I spent the next several tests exposing the skin to more heat. Making a hotter fire helped but at the expense of the meat, which moved too quickly through the collagen breakdown zone and was thus not as tender. I had

## How to Portion the Paste

Our pastes add potent flavor, but it's important to apply them strategically. We found that too much paste on the skin prevented it from crisping, so we applied two-thirds of the paste to the flesh side and the remaining one-third to the skin side to ensure that the skin was seasoned but not wet.

**MORE PASTE ON FLESH SIDE**  
Nooks and crannies capture bold flavors.

**LESS PASTE ON SKIN SIDE**  
Minimal moisture means skin can crisp.



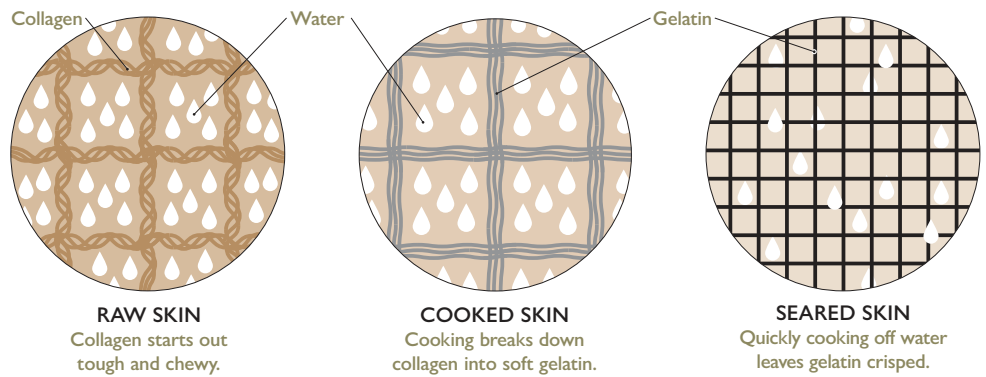
## WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/aug18](http://CookIllustrated.com/aug18)

## SCIENCE What's Good for Tender Meat Is Good for the Crispiest Skin

We know that cooking chicken thighs low and slow is a surefire way to produce tender meat. But it's also a great way to ensure crispy skin. Like thigh meat, chicken skin is loaded with collagen. During cooking—especially lengthy cooking at relatively moderate temperatures—collagen breaks down into a protein called gelatin. That gelatin forms a mesh that holds on to water and makes the skin soft and tender.

Then, when the tender skin is seared over high heat, the gelatin strands become rigid and the water evaporates out from among them so fast that it leaves behind tiny air spaces in the mesh—or, as we perceive it, crispiness.



better luck turning the thighs skin side down mid-way through cooking instead of at the end; more direct (but still gentle) heat melted the fat, which now dripped out of each piece instead of puddling under the skin. But I got the best results yet when I cooked the chicken skin side down from start to finish. By the time the meat was tender, much of the skin's fat had rendered and the skin had become paper-thin and soft, so all I had to do to crisp it up was slide the thighs over to the hotter side for about 5 minutes. The method was so easy, and the results were perfect—if a bit plain.

### Aced the Paste

I didn't want to thwart my skin-crisping efforts by dousing the thighs with a wet marinade, so I rubbed a few robustly seasoned pastes onto the chicken: a version that tapped into my love of Korean fried chicken with *gochujang* and soy sauce, a mustard and tarragon paste with loads of garlic, and an Indian version with garam masala and ginger.

The trick was applying it strategically, since even the moderate moisture in the paste could soften the skin. I found that spreading two-thirds of the paste on the flesh side of each thigh worked best; there

were lots of nooks and crannies to capture the paste, and the remaining third that I rubbed over the skin seasoned and flavored it without adding so much moisture that crisping was inhibited. The only hitch: Since the chicken cooked skin side down the whole time, the paste on the flesh side looked and tasted a bit raw. So after the skin crisped over the hotter side of the grill, I flipped the pieces onto the flesh side for a minute or two to take the raw edge off the paste.

Perfectly tender, juicy meat; thin, crispy skin; bold flavor; and a method that requires practically zero work. Dinner's in the bag—not in the fire.

### BEST GRILLED CHICKEN THIGHS

SERVES 4 TO 6

In step 1, the chicken can be refrigerated for up to 2 hours before grilling. Our recipes for Best Grilled Chicken Thighs for Two and Garam Masala Paste are available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/aug18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/aug18).

- 8 (5- to 7-ounce) bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 recipe paste (recipes follow)

1. Place chicken, skin side up, on large plate. Sprinkle skin side with salt and spread evenly with one-third of spice paste. Flip chicken and spread remaining two-thirds of paste evenly over flesh side. Refrigerate while preparing grill.

**2A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL:** Open bottom vent halfway. 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 halfway. 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). (Adjust primary burner [or, if using 3-burner grill, primary burner and second burner] as needed to maintain grill temperature around 350 degrees.)

3. Clean and oil cooking grate. Place chicken, skin side down, on cooler side of grill. Cover and cook for 20 minutes. Rearrange chicken, keeping skin side down, so that pieces that were positioned closest to edge of grill are now closer to heat source and vice versa. Cover and continue to cook until chicken registers 185 to 190 degrees, 15 to 20 minutes longer.

4. Move all chicken, skin side down, to hotter side of grill and cook until skin is lightly charred, about 5 minutes. Flip chicken and cook until flesh side is lightly browned, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to platter, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Serve.

### GOCHUJANG PASTE

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

*Gochujang*, or Korean red chili paste, can be found in Asian markets or in the Asian section of large supermarkets.

- 3 tablespoons gochujang
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt

Combine all ingredients in bowl.

### MUSTARD-TARRAGON PASTE

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

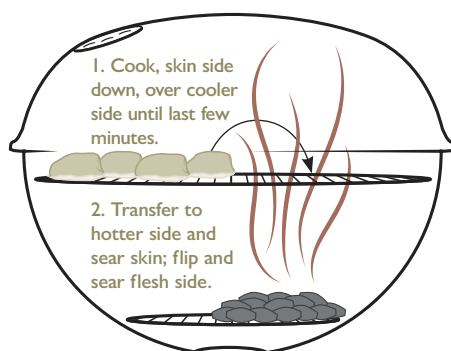
Rosemary or thyme can be substituted for the tarragon, if desired. When using this paste, we like to serve the chicken with lemon wedges.

- 3 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon finely grated lemon zest
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh tarragon
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon water
- ½ teaspoon pepper

Combine all ingredients in bowl.

### Perfect Results, Practically Zero Effort

We found that the best way to produce moist, tender meat and thin, crispy skin is also the easiest.



SET IT AND (ALMOST) FORGET IT

# Indoor Pulled Chicken

Our stovetop method yields pulled chicken so good—and so quick—that you’ll think twice about making the outdoor kind.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

**T**raditional pulled chicken is a true labor of love: First you brine bone-in, skin-on parts for an hour or so. Then you cook them slowly over coals and wood chunks until the meat is moist and tender within and kissed with smoke flavor throughout. With the skin burnished to a deep mahogany, smoked chicken is a beautiful thing—making it feel almost like a crime to pull off the skin, shred the richly flavored meat, and douse it in barbecue sauce for sandwiches.

I developed a killer recipe for Smoked Chicken (July/August 2011), and if I make it for friends, you’d better believe I’m going to get full credit for all the work by showing off its burnished parts. But for those times when I need a quick weeknight meal or when my grill is covered with 16 inches of snow, I had a hunch that I could make some really good pulled chicken by simply braising chicken parts in a smoky barbecue sauce. It wouldn’t give me burnished skin—but I wouldn’t need that anyway.

## Smoke and Mirrors

My Smoked Chicken recipe calls for whole breasts and leg quarters; I pull the white meat off the fire early since it cooks faster than the dark meat. But in the interest of keeping things as simple as possible, I decided to use only thighs for my indoor pulled chicken. They are our preferred cut for braising since they have lots of collagen, which turns to gelatin and gives the meat a moist, tender texture. Using the boneless, skinless type was one more way to streamline things.

I arranged 2 pounds of thighs (enough to make 6 to 8 sandwiches) in a Dutch oven along with the makings of a tangy barbecue sauce—ketchup, molasses, Worcestershire sauce, hot sauce, and salt and pepper—and enough water to comfortably cover the chicken. I also stirred in a couple of teaspoons of liquid smoke. I know what you might be thinking, but stick with me: Liquid smoke is an all-natural ingredient made from real woodsmoke and would



Thirty-five minutes is all it takes to put tender, sweet, and smoky pulled chicken sandwiches on the table.

replicate the flavor achieved via wood chips (see “Don’t Shy Away from Liquid Smoke”).

I brought the pot to a simmer and let it bubble until the thighs were tender, about 25 minutes. To shred the chicken, I found that our usual method of pulling it apart with a pair of forks was overkill for meat so fall-apart tender. It was also slow. Putting the thighs in the bowl of a stand mixer and using the paddle attachment—which we sometimes use to shred large quantities—worked, but it was a big piece of equipment to haul out for 10 seconds of use. In the end, shredding the meat with a pair of tongs was the most efficient way to get the job done.

I stirred some of the braising liquid into the shredded chicken and piled it onto buns. Between bites, my colleagues offered critiques. One was that the meat was washed-out: It lacked seasoning and had none of the concentrated chicken-y taste that you get in real smoked chicken. Also, the sauce was thin.

I changed up my method, this time simmering the thighs in a much smaller amount of liquid, hoping it would produce better-tasting meat. I used

only 1 cup of water mixed with sugar, salt, molasses, and liquid smoke. Sugar and salt are common brine components and would flavor the meat, molasses would add bittersweet notes, and liquid smoke would of course contribute the smoky element. I separately prepared a thick barbecue sauce to coat the chicken in before serving.

Sure enough, the salty/sweet braising liquid had infused the meat with the taste of a brined, slowly smoked bird. Still, it was lacking the deep poultry flavor and unctuous meatiness of real smoked chicken. But aside from the cooking method, the only other difference between this recipe and my outdoor recipe was the lack of skin and bones.

## Fat Chance

Chicken skin contains fat that renders and bastes the meat as it cooks. Chicken skin, bones, and tendons offer collagen, which breaks down during cooking to form gelatin, giving the meat a rich, luxurious texture. How could I get more of these missing elements—fat and gelatin—into my recipe?

As I prepped my next batch, I thought about how we normally trim and discard the fat attached to boneless, skinless chicken thighs. This time around, I decided to leave

it. Once the chicken was cooked, I strained the braising liquid, skimmed off the fat (2 pounds of thighs yielded about 3 tablespoons), and added it to the

## TECHNIQUE | A NEW WAY TO

### SHRED CHICKEN

Instead of using two forks to shred the chicken, we squeeze it gently with tongs. The meat is so tender that it falls apart easily into bite-size pieces.



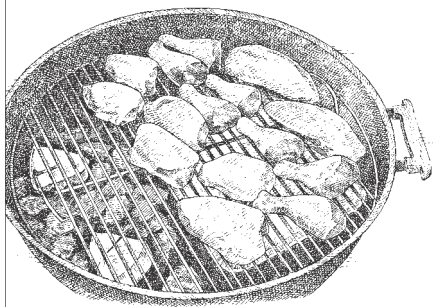
#### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CookIllustrated.com/apr18)



## Speeding the Way to Pulled Chicken

Cooking untrimmed boneless, skinless thighs with powdered gelatin replicates the fat and gelatin naturally found in bone-in, skin-on parts.



**OUTDOOR**  
2½ hours

Bone-in, skin-on parts

Brine for 1 hour in sugar and salt

1½ hours

Wood chips

**JUICINESS**

**SEASONING**

**COOKING TIME**

**SMOKY FLAVOR**

**INDOOR**  
35 minutes

Boneless, skinless thighs with fat intact; add gelatin

Cook in broth, molasses, sugar, and salt

35 minutes

Liquid smoke



chicken. I also swapped the braising water for chicken broth and stirred in some powdered gelatin. The extra fat, along with the broth and gelatin, greatly improved the flavor and overall unctuousness of the meat.

The chicken needed to be reheated after shredding, so I mixed it with some of the braising liquid and a little barbecue sauce and heated it until it absorbed all the liquid and appeared dry, which took about 5 minutes. (Since the liquid smoke flavor seemed to diminish during braising, I added a bit more at this point.) After this step, the chicken was meaty and dense, ready for extra sauce to be added at the table.

For some variety, I mixed up two more sauces: a mustardy South Carolina-style sauce and a vinegary North Carolina-style option. Now when I crave pulled chicken, will I head outside? Maybe, if the sun is shining and I have time to burn. Otherwise, I'm staying in.

### Don't Shy Away from Liquid Smoke

Until we did some research years ago, we assumed (as many people do) that there must be some kind of synthetic chemical chicanery going on in the making of liquid smoke. But that's not the case. Liquid smoke is made by channeling smoke from smoldering wood chips through a condenser, which quickly cools the vapors, causing them to liquefy. The water-soluble flavor compounds in the smoke are trapped within this liquid, while the insoluble tars and resins are removed by a series of filters, resulting in a clean, all-natural smoke-flavored liquid. Some manufacturers add other flavorings to liquid smoke, but our top-rated product, Wright's Liquid Smoke, contains nothing but smoke and water.



ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGoyNE

### INDOOR PULLED CHICKEN

SERVES 6 TO 8

Do not trim the fat from the chicken thighs; it contributes to the flavor and texture of the pulled chicken. If you don't have 3 tablespoons of fat to add back to the pot in step 3, add melted butter to make up the difference. We like mild molasses in this recipe; do not use blackstrap. Serve the pulled chicken on white bread or hamburger buns with pickles and coleslaw.

- 1 cup chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons molasses
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon liquid smoke
- 1 teaspoon unflavored gelatin
- Salt and pepper
- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, halved crosswise
- 1 recipe barbecue sauce (recipes follow)
- Hot sauce

1. Bring broth, molasses, sugar, 2 teaspoons liquid smoke, gelatin, and 1 teaspoon salt to boil in large Dutch oven over high heat, stirring to dissolve sugar. Add chicken and return to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until chicken is easily shredded with fork, about 25 minutes.

2. Transfer chicken to medium bowl and set aside. Strain cooking liquid through fine-mesh strainer set over bowl (do not wash pot). Let liquid settle for 5 minutes; skim fat from surface. Set aside fat and defatted liquid.

3. Using tongs, squeeze chicken until shredded into bite-size pieces. Transfer chicken, 1 cup barbecue sauce, ½ cup reserved defatted liquid, 3 tablespoons reserved fat, and remaining 1 teaspoon liquid smoke to now-empty pot. Cook mixture over medium heat, stirring frequently, until liquid has been absorbed and exterior of meat appears dry, about 5 minutes. Season with salt, pepper, and hot sauce to taste. Serve, passing remaining barbecue sauce separately.

### LEXINGTON VINEGAR BARBECUE SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

For a spicier sauce, add hot sauce to taste.

- 1 cup cider vinegar
- ½ cup ketchup
- ½ cup water
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¾ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ½ teaspoon pepper

Whisk all ingredients together in bowl.

### SOUTH CAROLINA MUSTARD

BARBECUE SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

You can use either light or dark brown sugar in this recipe.

- 1 cup yellow mustard
- ½ cup distilled white vinegar
- ¼ cup packed brown sugar
- ¼ cup Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tablespoons hot sauce
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper

Whisk all ingredients together in bowl.

### SWEET AND TANGY BARBECUE SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

We like mild molasses in this recipe.

- 1½ cups ketchup
- ¼ cup molasses
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tablespoon hot sauce
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper

Whisk all ingredients together in bowl.

# Real Kung Pao Chicken

Spicy chiles and tingly Sichuan peppercorns team up with lightly sauced chicken and peanuts in a stir-fry that's literally sensational.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

If you haven't eaten kung pao chicken in the past 10 years, there's a good chance you've never had the real thing. I hadn't, until recently.

In the '90s, the dish was my go-to Chinese restaurant order. The diced chicken and vegetables, peanuts, and vaguely sweet and sour sauce were cozily familiar, while the fiery dried chiles scattered throughout supplied an appealing undercurrent of danger. But eventually the novelty wore off, as did any urge to make it myself.

Then, a few months ago, I ordered kung pao in a restaurant and was delighted by the addition of Sichuan peppercorns, which imbued the dish with a woody fragrance and citrusy tang and created an intriguing tingling sensation on my lips and tongue, a perfect complement to the chiles' heat. In fact, the interplay of peppercorns and fiery chiles is so foundational to Sichuan cuisine that it has a name: *ma la*, which means "numbing heat." (See "Adding 'Pow' to Kung Pao.") Sichuan peppercorns were banned in the United States from 1968 to 2005 because they might carry a disease that could endanger the American citrus crop, so these tiny dried fruits of the prickly ash tree had been tragically absent from my '90s kung pao. But now, back where they belonged, they snapped the flavors of kung pao chicken into focus.

With my interest in the dish reawakened, I was eager to devise my own version of kung pao chicken. I knew that chiles and buzzy peppercorns weren't enough to ensure success, though. The chicken would have to be juicy and the peanuts crunchy, with a bit of crisp, cooling vegetable for contrast. And I wanted a potent glaze that lightly coated—not heavily sauced—each piece but still delivered flavor to every bite.

## A Mild Start

Most recipes called for boneless, skinless chicken breasts or thighs. I went with thighs because they're not only more resistant to overcooking but also more flavorful, so they'd make a better match for the strong flavors of kung pao. I tossed the diced thighs in a



Bite-size pieces allow kung pao chicken's hallmark sensations—spice, tingle, crunch, crispness, and juiciness—to be experienced all in one mouthful.

marinade that, based on my research, appeared to be pretty universal: savory soy sauce; sweet rice wine; floral, earthy white pepper; and a bit of cornstarch that would help the marinade cling to the meat and lend some body to the glaze when cooked.

Vegetables aren't a major player in kung pao chicken, but a small amount adds welcome color and crunch. Celery and scallions are common, and I diced them to match the size of the smallest element of the dish: the peanuts. Cutting everything to the same

size is a hallmark of kung pao chicken. It provides visual harmony and allows the diner to experience multiple flavors and textures in every bite. I also grated some ginger, minced some garlic, and whisked up a quick glaze composed of a bit more soy; complex, fruity black vinegar; dark brown sugar; and some toasted sesame oil to bolster the nutty flavor of the roasted peanuts. I kept the volume small so I'd end up with just enough glaze to coat all the components.

To start, I heated a tablespoon of vegetable oil in a nonstick skillet and added a generous handful of dried arbol chiles (a fine substitute for the traditional bright red *chao tian jiao*, or "facing heaven" chiles) and some ground Sichuan peppercorns. When they were fragrant and just starting to darken, I added the peanuts and then the garlic and ginger. The last two clumped up in the hot skillet, but I figured they'd disperse once I added the chicken.

Because the chicken pieces were a pain to turn constantly, I introduced an innovation: I covered the skillet. This way, the pieces cooked from the top and the bottom. When the chicken was mostly cooked, I added the celery. After pouring in the sauce and reducing it to a glaze consistency, I stirred in the scallions, killed the heat, and took a taste.

Let's start with the positives: The chicken thighs were tender and juicy throughout, the celery and scallions were crisp, and the dark glaze coated everything nicely. On the negative side, the peanuts were soggy and soft. And those sticky clumps of garlic and ginger hadn't spread out as I had hoped; they had instead collected all the Sichuan peppercorn dust, forming sneaky sensory bombs. As for the heat, despite my free hand with the chiles, it was almost nonexistent.

## Hold the Sauce

Americans tend to like heavily sauced Chinese dishes to top their rice, but kung pao should not be swimming in liquid. The flavors of this dish are very potent, and a large volume of sauce would make it overwhelmingly spicy and salty. (Alternatively, reducing the potency of the sauce with ingredients such as broth and thickeners would dilute the overall flavor of the dish.) What's more, in China rice is typically eaten plain as a palate cleanser in between bites of assertively flavored food, not as a starchy base beneath a blanket of sauce.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/dec18)

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

## Heating Things Up

I had a hunch about why my arbol chiles, which I knew to be impressively spicy, weren't imparting much "pow" to my kung pao. To test it, I touched an intact chile to my tongue. Nothing. Then I opened up a chile and tasted the interior. Ouch. There was plenty of heat on the inside since most capsaicin resides in the ribs and seeds of chiles, but there wasn't enough time or moisture in my recipe to coax that flavor through the tough skin.

So for my next batch, I halved the chiles lengthwise to expose as much of their spicy interiors as possible. (But to ensure that I didn't overwhelm my tasters with heat, I jostled the chiles until all the seeds fell out.) And to aid the distribution of the grated ginger and minced garlic, I put them in a small bowl and stirred in 1 tablespoon of oil.

I also tweaked the order of operations a bit. Because I wanted the peanuts to be as toasty and crunchy as possible, I first cooked them in a teaspoon of oil and then transferred them to a plate, where they would continue to crisp as they cooled. Then I stir-fried the halved chiles and the ground peppercorns and added the ginger and garlic, which dispersed with minimal persuasion thanks to their coating of oil. I added the chicken, covered the skillet, and, once the chicken was mostly cooked, tossed in the celery. I then stirred in the sauce, and only when it was fully reduced did I add the peanuts and scallions, so both would maintain their texture.

With its lightly glazed components and hallmark sensations of spice, tingle, crunch, crispness, and juiciness in every bite, this version of kung pao was as real as it gets.

### KUNG PAO CHICKEN

SERVES 4 TO 6

Kung pao chicken should be quite spicy. To adjust the heat level, use more or fewer chiles, depending on the size (we used 2-inch-long chiles) and your taste. Have your ingredients prepared and your equipment in place before you begin to cook. Use a spice grinder or mortar and pestle to coarsely grind the Sichuan peppercorns. If Chinese black vinegar is unavailable, substitute sherry vinegar. Serve with white rice and a simple vegetable such as broccoli or bok choy. Do not eat the chiles. Our Kung Pao Chicken for Two recipe is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/dec18).

#### Chicken and Sauce

- 1½ pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed and cut into ½-inch cubes
- ¼ cup soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 tablespoon Chinese rice wine or dry sherry
- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- 1 tablespoon Chinese black vinegar
- 1 tablespoon packed dark brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil

#### Stir-Fry

- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- ½ cup dry-roasted peanuts
- 10–15 dried arbol chiles, halved lengthwise and seeded
- 1 teaspoon Sichuan peppercorns, ground coarse
- 2 celery ribs, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 5 scallions, white and light green parts only, cut into ½-inch pieces

**1. FOR THE CHICKEN AND SAUCE:** Combine chicken, 2 tablespoons soy sauce, cornstarch, rice wine, and white pepper in medium bowl and set aside. Stir vinegar, sugar, oil, and remaining 2 tablespoons soy sauce together in small bowl and set aside.

**2. FOR THE STIR-FRY:** Stir garlic, ginger, and 1 tablespoon oil together in second small bowl. Combine peanuts and 1 teaspoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-low heat. Cook, stirring constantly, until peanuts just begin to darken, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer peanuts to plate and spread into even layer to cool. Return now-empty skillet to medium-low heat. Add remaining 1 tablespoon oil, arbols, and peppercorns and cook, stirring constantly, until arbols begin to darken, 1 to 2 minutes. Add garlic mixture and cook, stirring constantly, until all clumps are broken up and mixture is fragrant, about 30 seconds.

**3.** Add chicken and spread into even layer. Cover skillet, increase heat to medium-high, and cook, without stirring, for 1 minute. Stir chicken and spread into even layer. Cover and cook, without stirring, for 1 minute. Add celery and cook uncovered, stirring frequently, until chicken is cooked through, 2 to 3 minutes. Add soy sauce mixture and cook, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened and shiny and coats chicken, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in scallions and peanuts. Transfer to platter and serve.

#### RECIPES TO MAKE IT A MEAL

Find these recipes in our archive:  
Chinese Restaurant-Style Rice (March/April 2018)  
and Sautéed Baby Bok Choy (March/April 2017).

## Adding "Pow" to Kung Pao

The combination of numbing, tingly Sichuan peppercorns (*ma*) and fiery chiles (*la*)—or *ma la* ("numbing heat")—is a calling card of Sichuan cuisine. You'll find these trademark sensations in our Kung Pao Chicken as well as in our Sichuan Braised Tofu with Beef (Mapo Tofu) (September/October 2017) and Crispy Salt and Pepper Shrimp (November/December 2014).



#### TINGLY

Sichuan peppercorns contain the chemical hydroxy-alpha-sanshool, which stimulates receptors in our mouths, sending signals to our brains that we interpret as vibrations—even though the peppercorns don't actually vibrate our skin. They do, however, cause numbness and tingling.



#### FIERY

Arbol chiles are a good substitute for the traditional choice: *chao tian jiao*, or "facing heaven" chiles. Both varieties measure about 30,000 units on the Scoville heat scale.

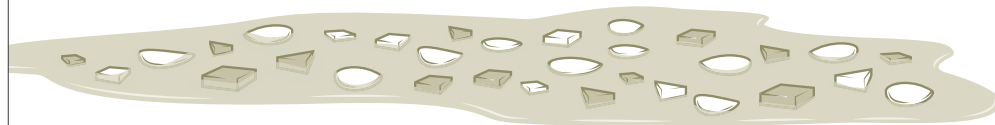


#### GRIND AND SEED

Sichuan peppercorns need to be ground for even flavor distribution. After you slice the arbol chiles to expose their capsaicin-rich interior ribs, shake out their seeds for just the right amount of heat.

## TECHNIQUE | LUBRICATE YOUR AROMATICS

The small bits of garlic and ginger in a typical stir-fry can clump up when you add them to the pan, preventing some bits from blooming in the oil and their flavors from distributing evenly throughout the dish. The easy work-around? Combine the aromatics with a tablespoon of oil and add this mixture to the pan.



#### OIL HELPS GARLIC AND GINGER DISTRIBUTE EVENLY

# One-Pan Chicken and Potatoes

We produced a trio of heavy hitters—tender, crisp-skinned chicken; well-browned potatoes; and a garlicky white wine sauce—all in the same pan.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

**R**oast chicken and potatoes are near-universal favorites. Add a superflavorful pan sauce and you've got a slam dunk. A terrific example of this combination is chicken Vesuvio, a dish beloved in the Italian American restaurants of Chicago: Chicken and potatoes are cooked in a single skillet along with a garlicky white wine pan sauce that practically makes itself. So why aren't we all making chicken Vesuvio at home?

Before I answer, a look at how the dish comes together in a restaurant kitchen: A line cook makes each serving to order by searing a half chicken skin side down in an olive oil-slicked skillet and then adding potato wedges, which brown and crisp in the rendered fat. Everything is sprinkled generously with minced garlic and dried herbs, and then the chicken and potatoes are turned browned side up. Plenty of white wine goes into the pan, which is then transferred to a hot oven until everything cooks through.

With the cooked chicken and potatoes transferred to a warm plate, the sauce is briefly reduced in the skillet. A handful of peas or a sprinkling of parsley might be added before pouring the loose sauce around the chicken and potatoes. The whole process takes about 30 minutes.

Now, back to why Vesuvio isn't at the top of anyone's Tuesday night dinner list: None of the recipes I tried were particularly successful. They were all designed to serve at least four, which meant that the skillet was crowded. In cramped conditions, the chicken skin didn't render adequately, so it remained flabby, and the potatoes didn't brown well. Plus, the compact layer of chicken and potatoes acted like a lid, inhibiting evaporation of the sauce in the oven, which left it thin and sharp-tasting. Even after I reduced the sauce on the stovetop, it had a disappointingly watery consistency, with a layer of fat floating on top and all the garlic particles lurking at the bottom.



The sauce ingredients—dry white wine, garlic cloves, oregano, and thyme—go into the pan once halved potatoes are browned in savory chicken fat.

But the prospect of a chicken Vesuvio with enough crisp-skinned chicken, well-browned potatoes, and potent sauce to serve at least four was a powerful inducement. And if I could make the dish almost as quickly as a Chicago line cook? Even better. I pressed on.

it to shimmer. In went eight thighs, skin side down. After they'd released some fat, I added 1½ pounds of Yukon Gold potatoes (we liked this variety for its creamy texture) that I had halved crosswise, which made them sturdier than the wedges. What's more, they didn't occupy as much of the precious cooking

## Sizing Up the Skillet

Most of the faults in my first round of testing could be attributed to a single factor: insufficient surface area. A restaurant cook makes each serving of chicken Vesuvio in its own skillet, so there is ample room for a half chicken and four or five wedges of potato to brown and for the sauce to cook down.

More servings required more surface area, but simultaneously wrangling two skillets seemed intimidating. Instead, I dug out my roasting pan, which was broad enough to accommodate all the ingredients, heavy enough to heat evenly, and tall enough to contain any sloshing of sauce.

## Vesuvio Victories

Even with so much surface area at my disposal, a half chicken per person seemed excessive. Instead, I decided to go with just thighs. They cook up tender and juicy without salting or brining, they have plenty of skin for crisping, and they exude a good amount of fat, which would enrich the potatoes and sauce.

I placed the roasting pan over two burners set at medium-high heat. Instead of the traditional olive oil, which would lose its distinctive flavor over the heat, I added a tablespoon of vegetable oil and waited for

## Are Some Dried Herbs as Good as Fresh?

We often prefer the flavor of fresh herbs in recipes, but dried oregano and thyme—the traditional choices in chicken Vesuvio—work fine here for two reasons. First, the ample amount of wine in the recipe provides moisture, which softens the herbs. The second reason has to do with the nature of the herbs themselves.

Delicate herbs such as basil and chives are native to wet, temperate regions. Their flavor compounds are more volatile than water, so they're gone before the leaves are fully dehydrated, leaving these herbs nearly flavorless in their dried form. But hardier oregano and thyme (as well as rosemary, bay, and sage) are native to hot, dry climates, so they've evolved to withstand warm, arid conditions. Their flavor compounds are less volatile, so they retain much of their flavor when dried.



### HERBS THAT CAN TAKE THE HEAT

Herbs native to hot, dry climates—oregano, thyme, rosemary, bay, and sage—retain their flavor compounds when dried.



#### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CookIllustrated.com/oct18)

surface, and they required browning on only one side. I added a whopping 12 cloves of minced garlic, sprinkled dried oregano and thyme (see “Are Some Dried Herbs as Good as Fresh?”) over the whole thing, and flipped the chicken. After turning all the potatoes browned side up, I poured in 1½ cups of dry white wine and moved the roasting pan to the oven. Twenty minutes later, I transferred the cooked chicken and potatoes to a platter, returned the roasting pan to the stovetop, and reduced the sauce, which took only about 4 minutes. I skipped the peas since they made the sauce sweet and vegetal, but I included a bit of parsley for color and freshness.

This was a huge improvement. The thighs were moist, tender, and crisp-skinned, and the potatoes were deeply browned. However, the sauce—although garlicky and bright—was still separated and thin, and the garlic detritus scattered throughout was irksome.

### Garlic Gains

I considered skimming the fat from the sauce, but I didn’t want to lose its rich flavor, which was a perfect foil for the wine’s acidity. Stumped on that score, I turned my attention to those troublesome garlic bits.

For my next batch, I halved the garlic cloves instead of mincing them. My plan was to steep them in the sauce while it cooked and then fish them out before serving. But with their reduced surface area, they hadn’t released much flavor. My sauce had gone from punchy to puny, and it was still greasy and thin.

Luckily, the softened garlic had made it only as far as my cutting board. I chopped it coarse, mashed it with the side of my knife, scooped it up, and whisked it back into the sauce. And then something unexpected happened: The fat that had been on the surface of the sauce was instantly incorporated, leaving nary a droplet behind. It turns out that garlic can be a powerful emulsifier (see “Bet You Didn’t Know That Garlic Can . . .”). The garlic paste also added a bit of bulk, which gave the sauce even more body.

### No Room for the Potatoes

In restaurants, one or two servings of chicken Vesuvio are prepared to order in a skillet. But when we made enough to serve four, the pan was so overcrowded that the chicken skin stayed flabby, the potatoes didn’t brown, and the sauce failed to reduce. Our fix: a roasting pan. Its large surface provides ample room for eight chicken thighs and 1½ pounds of potatoes to brown and for the sauce to simmer.



FOUR SERVINGS JUST WON'T FIT

## Bet You Didn't Know That Garlic Can . . .

### . . . Be Tamed with Lemon Juice

Garlic cloves contain a compound called alliin, which has a mild flavor, and an enzyme known as alliinase. When the clove is whole, the two substances are kept in different parts of the plant’s cells, but as soon as the garlic is cut and the cells are damaged, they mix. Within 30 seconds, the enzyme converts mild

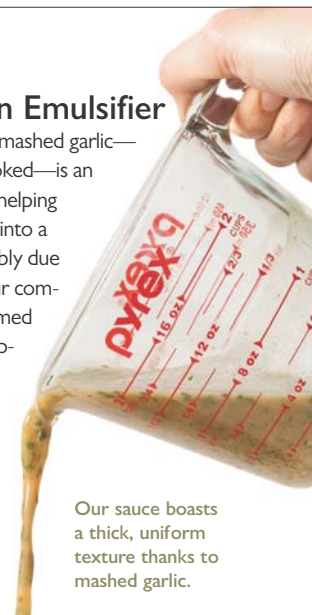


Acid mellows the fiery taste of fresh garlic.

alliin into a third compound: pungent allicin, which gives raw garlic its bite. However, when an acidic ingredient such as lemon juice is quickly added to the cut garlic, the acid mostly prevents the enzyme from working, leaving the garlic with more of the mild—and less of the biting—compound.

### . . . Act as an Emulsifier

We’ve noticed that mashed garlic—whether raw or cooked—is an effective emulsifier, helping blend fat and water into a creamy sauce, possibly due to some of the sulfur compounds that are formed when its cells are ruptured (the 12 cloves of garlic also add bulk). Whisking mashed garlic into our sauce changes its texture from thin and separated to thick and uniform.



Our sauce boasts a thick, uniform texture thanks to mashed garlic.

The mashed garlic added a welcome note of nutty sweetness, but the sauce needed a little more zing. I minced two more cloves and mixed them with a bit of lemon juice. The acid limits the formation of the pungent compound allicin, the source of garlic’s heat. Perfect: The sauce now had well-rounded, punchy garlic flavor, and whereas 12 minced garlic cloves had marred its texture, these final two cloves weren’t noticeable. I poured the sauce around the chicken and potatoes so as not to obscure their beautiful brown hues.

Chicago has many attractions, but chicken Vesuvio is one that no longer requires a plane ticket.

### CHICKEN VESUVIO

SERVES 4 TO 6

For this recipe you’ll need a roasting pan that measures at least 16 by 12 inches. Trim all the skin from the underside of the chicken thighs, but leave the skin on top intact. To ensure that all the potatoes fit in the pan, halve them crosswise to minimize their surface area. For the most efficient browning, heat the roasting pan over two burners. Combining the garlic with lemon juice in step 1 makes the garlic taste less harsh, but only if the lemon juice is added immediately after the garlic is minced. Our recipe for Chicken Vesuvio for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18).

- 8 (5- to 7-ounce) bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 1½ pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, 2 to 3 inches in diameter, halved crosswise
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 14 garlic cloves, peeled (2 whole, 12 halved lengthwise)
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1½ teaspoons dried oregano
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme

- 1½ cups dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and sprinkle on both sides with 1½ teaspoons salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Toss potatoes with 1 tablespoon oil and 1 teaspoon salt. Mince 2 whole garlic cloves and immediately combine with lemon juice in small bowl; set aside.

2. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in large roasting pan over medium-high heat until shimmering. Place chicken, skin side down, in single layer in pan and cook, without moving it, until chicken is rendered about 2 tablespoons of fat, 2 to 3 minutes. Place potatoes cut side down in chicken fat, arranging so that cut sides are in complete contact with surface of pan. Sprinkle chicken and potatoes with oregano and thyme. Continue to cook until chicken and potatoes are deeply browned and crisp, 8 to 12 minutes longer, moving chicken and potatoes to ensure even browning and flipping pieces when fully browned. When all pieces have been flipped, tuck halved garlic cloves among chicken and potatoes. Remove pan from heat and pour wine into pan (do not pour over chicken or potatoes). Transfer pan to oven and roast until potatoes are tender when pierced with tip of paring knife and chicken registers 185 to 190 degrees, 15 to 20 minutes.

3. Transfer chicken and potatoes to deep platter, browned sides up. Place pan over medium heat (handles will be hot) and stir to incorporate any browned bits. Using slotted spoon, transfer garlic cloves to cutting board. Chop coarse, then mash to smooth paste with side of knife. Whisk garlic paste into sauce. Continue to cook until sauce coats back of spoon, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Remove from heat and whisk in reserved lemon juice mixture and 1 tablespoon parsley. Pour sauce around chicken and potatoes. Sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon parsley and serve.

# Revamping Chicken Salads

Throwing together leftover cooked chicken, dressing, and greens is a way to put dinner on the table without much thought. Maybe that's exactly the problem.

≧ BY STEVE DUNN ≦



Our poached chicken delivers ultra-moist meat, which we use in our Chicken Caesar Salad, Sichuan-Style Chicken Salad, and Thai-Style Chicken Salad with Mango.

Every time I throw together a salad with chicken using whatever leftover meat I have on hand, I think of what Rodney Dangerfield would say: The chicken don't get no respect.

Corny as that sounds, the chicken tastes exactly like what it is: an afterthought. Straight from the refrigerator, the once flavorful, juicy meat seems dry and dull as cotton (see "Give Cold Chicken the Cold Shoulder" to understand why). Allowing the chicken to come up to room temperature helps, but unless you're using poached chicken, it's never going to be optimally moist.

Here's why: Poaching is much gentler than dry-heat methods such as searing, roasting, and grilling. While the cooler cooking temperature doesn't create a browned crust, it does let the meat retain moisture and fat that would be squeezed out by other cooking methods. And when done well, the results are incredibly succulent and clean-tasting, providing the ideal blank slate for tossing with greens and a flavorful dressing.

## The Poach Approach

A while back, we came up with a simple approach to poaching that reliably produces flavorful, succulent meat. It's based on the principles of sous vide cooking, a technique in which vacuum-sealed foods

are submerged in a water bath that's been preset to the food's ideal cooked temperature. But here, we place the chicken in a steamer basket set in a pot of water, bring the water to a subsimmer temperature of 175 degrees, and remove the pot from the burner so that the water's residual heat gently cooks the meat.

I gave it a try with four boneless, skinless breasts and salted water. It took about 15 minutes to bring the liquid up to 175 degrees, at which point I shut off the heat and let the chicken linger in the steamy water until the meat registered 160 degrees.

## Dressed for Success

One of the cardinal rules of meat cookery is letting the cooked meat rest before cutting into it. This allows the muscle fibers to relax and reabsorb the flavorful juices. Typically, I would let boneless, skinless breasts rest for about 5 minutes, which would give some of the juices time to redistribute before the chicken gets cold. But since my goal was exceptionally moist meat, and because I intended

my salads to be served at room temperature, I let the meat rest longer. Why? Picture slicing into hot chicken that has rested for just a few minutes: What you see is a stream of vapor escaping from the cut side, which is moisture. Giving the chicken a good 10 to 15 minutes to cool ensured that more of the moisture would stay locked in the meat.

I was now ready to use the chicken in salad. I'd been eager to work up a version of the classic Sichuan dish called bang bang chicken, a staff favorite in which finely shredded meat is tossed with a dressing made of chili oil, garlic, ginger, Sichuan peppercorns, soy sauce, and black vinegar and then combined with napa cabbage, scallions, celery, and cilantro. When I tossed the fragrant dressing with the chicken, I realized that there were two subtle but significant techniques built into this dish that guaranteed bold flavor: First, shredding the meat instead of cutting it into chunks, as I typically would for chicken salad, created loads of surface area that allowed the dressing to thoroughly soak into the meat and give every bite maximum flavor. Second, dressing the meat by itself before pairing it with the other components ensured that every piece was completely coated.

I applied those lessons to two other bold-tasting salads: a shredded Thai-style chicken-mango version freshened with lots of herbs and spooned into lettuce cups, and a quick chicken Caesar salad, for which I thinly sliced the meat to maximize its surface area.

It didn't take much to give chicken the respect it deserves, and I could taste the difference.

## Ensuring Maximum Flavor in Chicken Salad

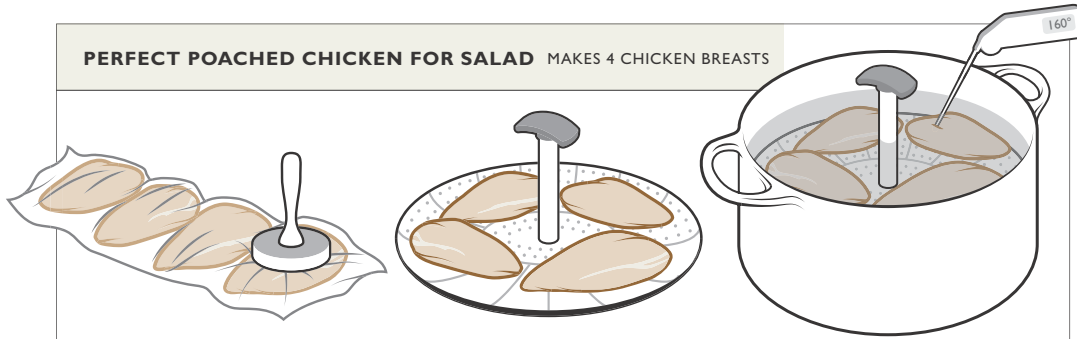
- Poach chicken for juiciest meat.
- Use room-temperature, not chilled, chicken.
- Shred or slice chicken to create lots of surface area for dressing to cling to.
- Toss chicken, not just salad, with some of dressing.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/jun18](http://CookIllustrated.com/jun18)

## PERFECT POACHED CHICKEN FOR SALAD MAKES 4 CHICKEN BREASTS



1. Cover 4 trimmed 6- to 8-ounce boneless, skinless chicken breasts with plastic wrap and pound thick ends gently until  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch thick. Whisk 4 quarts cool water with 2 tablespoons salt in large Dutch oven.

2. Arrange chicken in steamer basket without overlapping. Submerge in pot. Heat over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until water registers 175 degrees, 15 to 20 minutes.

3. Turn off heat, cover pot, remove from burner, and let stand until chicken registers 160 degrees, 17 to 22 minutes. Transfer chicken to cutting board and let cool for 10 to 15 minutes.

## Give Cold Chicken the Cold Shoulder

If you poach the chicken ahead of time and chill it, be sure to let it come to room temperature before using it in one of our salads. That's because cold meat tastes less juicy and flavorful than meat that's warm or at room temperature.

➤ **Here's Why:** Juiciness and flavor in meat are not just a function of moisture but also of fat and of salivation. When meat is cold, the moisture is gelled and the fat is firm, so neither flows as freely. Less flavor is released, so you also salivate less. In addition, the solidification of the juices means that the muscle fibers don't slide against each other as easily during chewing, which gives the meat a tougher, stringier texture.

## SICHUAN-STYLE CHICKEN SALAD (BANG BANG JI SI)

SERVES 4 TO 6

We prefer Sichuan chili powder, but Korean red pepper flakes, called *gochugaru*, are a good alternative. Rice vinegar can be substituted for black vinegar, if desired. Vary the amount of Sichuan peppercorns to suit your taste.

### Dressing

- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup vegetable oil
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and smashed
- 1 ( $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch) piece ginger, peeled and sliced in half
- 2 tablespoons Sichuan chili powder
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon Chinese black vinegar
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon Sichuan peppercorns, toasted and ground
- 2 teaspoons sugar

### Salad

- 1 recipe Perfect Poached Chicken for Salad, shredded into thin strips
- Salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$  head napa cabbage, sliced thin (6 cups)
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups coarsely chopped fresh cilantro leaves and stems
- 6 scallions, sliced in half lengthwise, then sliced thin on bias
- 1 celery rib, sliced thin on bias
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame seeds (optional)

**1. FOR THE DRESSING:** Combine vegetable oil, garlic, and ginger in bowl. Microwave until oil is hot and bubbling, about 2 minutes. Stir in chili powder and let cool for 10 minutes.

**2.** Strain oil mixture through fine-mesh strainer into large bowl; discard solids. Whisk soy sauce, vinegar, sesame oil, 1 teaspoon peppercorns, and sugar into strained oil. Add up to 1 teaspoon additional peppercorns to taste.

**3. FOR THE SALAD:** Add chicken to bowl with dressing and toss to coat. Season with salt to taste. Toss cabbage, 1 cup cilantro, two-thirds of scallions, celery, and pinch salt in second large bowl. Arrange cabbage mixture in even layer on large platter. Mound chicken on top of cabbage mixture and sprinkle with remaining  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cilantro, remaining scallions, and sesame seeds, if using. Serve.

## THAI-STYLE CHICKEN SALAD WITH MANGO

SERVES 4 TO 6

We like to serve this salad in leaves of Bibb lettuce to form lettuce cups, but it can also be served on a bed of greens. Toss 6 to 8 cups of greens with 2 teaspoons of lime juice, 1 teaspoon of toasted sesame oil, 1 teaspoon of vegetable oil, and a pinch of salt before spooning the chicken on top.

### Dressing

- 3 tablespoons lime juice (2 limes)
- 1 shallot, minced
- 2 tablespoons fish sauce, plus extra for serving
- 1 tablespoon packed brown sugar
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon red pepper flakes

### Salad

- 1 recipe Perfect Poached Chicken for Salad, shredded into thin strips
- 1 mango, peeled, pitted, and cut into  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch pieces
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup chopped fresh mint
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup chopped fresh cilantro
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup chopped fresh Thai basil
- Salt
- 1 head Bibb lettuce (8 ounces), leaves separated
- 2 Thai chiles, sliced thin

**1. FOR THE DRESSING:** Whisk all ingredients together in large bowl.

**2. FOR THE SALAD:** Add chicken to bowl with dressing and toss to coat. Add mango, mint, cilantro, and basil and toss to coat. Season with salt to taste. Serve salad in lettuce cups, passing Thai chiles and extra fish sauce separately.

## CHICKEN CAESAR SALAD

SERVES 6

We recommend using homemade croutons, but store-bought are fine as well. Adjust the amount of anchovies to suit your taste.

### Dressing

- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup mayonnaise
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 3–4 anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon pepper
- $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon salt

### Salad

- 2 heads romaine lettuce (12 ounces each) (large outer leaves discarded), washed, dried, and cut into 1-inch pieces (16 cups)
- 2 cups croutons
- 2 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (1 cup)
- 1 recipe Perfect Poached Chicken for Salad, sliced crosswise  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch thick
- Pepper

**1. FOR THE DRESSING:** Whisk all ingredients together in bowl.

**2. FOR THE SALAD:** Toss lettuce with croutons,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup Parmesan, and two-thirds of dressing in large bowl until well combined. Divide dressed lettuce among 6 plates. Toss chicken with remaining dressing. Divide chicken equally among plates and season with pepper. Serve immediately, passing remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup Parmesan separately.

# Low-Stress Turkey for a Crowd

Moist, tender meat; crisp, bronzed skin; and rich, full-flavored gravy for 20 people? No problem—if you think like a chef.

BY STEVE DUNN



We ditch a whole turkey in favor of easier-to-manage parts. We braise the dark meat ahead of time, roast the breasts, and then reheat the dark meat and crisp its skin just before serving.

Hosting a big crowd on Thanksgiving has the potential to be disastrous. That's because the usual approaches—roasting two average-size birds or one enormous one—are fraught with issues. Two turkeys require dual ovens—a nonstarter for most. And a single large bird hogs the oven, making it off-limits for other dishes. A 20-pounder can also be a real challenge to maneuver in and out of the oven and nearly impossible to flip during roasting to promote evenly cooked white and dark meat. What's more, a large bird tends to overcook on the exterior while the interior comes up to temperature. And no matter how many birds you roast, there's still the last-minute scramble to make gravy from pan drippings. Finally, you must compose yourself for tableside carving.

But keep reading, because things are about to change. All the stress melts away if you think more like a professional chef. You see, a good chef is a master at breaking down complex dishes into simple components and then devising a timeline to prepare

as much as possible in advance. Once I started thinking in those terms, all sorts of possibilities opened up.

My first move was the biggest game changer: Instead of roasting two whole turkeys, I separately cooked two bone-in breasts and four leg quarters.

## TURKEY AND GRAVY FOR A CROWD

SERVES 18 TO 20

This recipe requires refrigerating the salted turkey breasts for 24 hours. If using self-basting or kosher turkey breasts, do not salt in step 7, but season with salt in step 8. We used Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt; if you use Morton Kosher Salt, reduce the salt in step 7 to 2½ teaspoons per breast, rubbing 1 teaspoon onto each side and ½ teaspoon into the cavity. Covering the turkey with parchment and then foil will prevent the wine in the braising liquid from “pitting” the foil.

### *Turkey Legs and Gravy*

- 3 onions, chopped
- 4 celery ribs, chopped
- 4 carrots, peeled and chopped
- 10 garlic cloves, crushed and peeled
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted, plus extra as needed

This meant that I could use different cooking techniques for each to guarantee juicy, tender results. Working with parts also presented some terrific make-ahead opportunities.

I sketched out a plan: I would start by braising the leg quarters up to a few days before the feast. Low, slow braising promises tender, moist dark meat since it gives the abundant collagen time to turn into supple gelatin—and the reheated dark meat would taste just as good as freshly made. What's more, a flavor-packed braising liquid (broth, white wine, fresh herbs, and aromatics) would be an ideal base for a big batch of gravy that I could also prepare in advance.

With the dark meat and gravy taken care of, I would salt the breasts the day before Thanksgiving to season the flesh and hold in moisture. Then, the only tasks left would be roasting the breasts (this takes 2 hours, freeing up precious oven space) and reheating the thighs, drumsticks, and gravy. Brushing the skin of the braised dark meat with melted butter and cranking the heat to 500 degrees would encourage browning and crisping so all the parts would arrive at the table looking as if they had come from two whole birds.

I executed my plan without a hitch. At serving time, the parts were a breeze to carve and made a gorgeous presentation on a platter. Moist, tender, well-seasoned white and dark meat? Check. Bronzed, crisp skin? Check. Sumptuous gravy? Check. Cool, calm, and collected host? Check, check, check.

- 10 sprigs fresh thyme
- 10 sprigs fresh parsley
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 tablespoon black peppercorns
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 4 (1½- to 2-pound) turkey leg quarters, trimmed
- Kosher salt and pepper
- ½ cup all-purpose flour

### *Turkey Breasts*

- 2 (5- to 6-pound) bone-in turkey breasts, trimmed
- Kosher salt
- 7 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted



### WATCH THE VIDEO

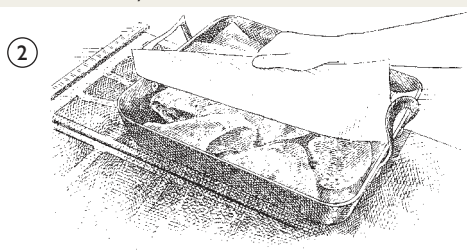
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**UP TO 3 DAYS IN ADVANCE** Braise Leg Quarters, Make Gravy



**1. FOR THE TURKEY LEGS AND GRAVY:** Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Toss onions, celery, carrots, garlic, melted butter, thyme sprigs, parsley sprigs, bay leaves, and peppercorns together in large roasting pan; spread into even layer. Place pan over medium heat and cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are softened and lightly browned and fond forms on bottom of pan, about 15 minutes. Add broth, water, and wine and bring to simmer, scraping up any browned bits. Remove pan from heat.



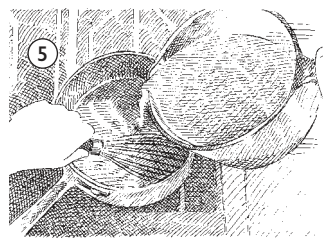
2. Cut leg quarters at joints into thighs and drumsticks, sprinkle with 3 tablespoons salt, and season with pepper. Place pieces skin side up in pan (braising liquid should come about three-quarters of way up legs and thighs). Place 12 by 16-inch piece of parchment paper over turkey pieces. Cover pan tightly with aluminum foil. Place pan in oven and cook until thighs register 170 degrees, 2½ to 3 hours. Remove pan from oven. Transfer turkey pieces to large, shallow container and let cool completely, about 1 hour. Once cool, cover and refrigerate.



**3.** Using spatula, scrape up any browned bits from bottom and sides of pan. Strain contents of pan through fine-mesh strainer set over large bowl, pressing on solids with spatula to extract as much liquid as possible; discard solids.



**4.** Transfer liquid to fat separator and let settle for 5 minutes. Reserve ½ cup plus 1 tablespoon fat (if there is not enough fat, add extra melted butter to make up difference) and 8 cups liquid; discard remaining liquid.

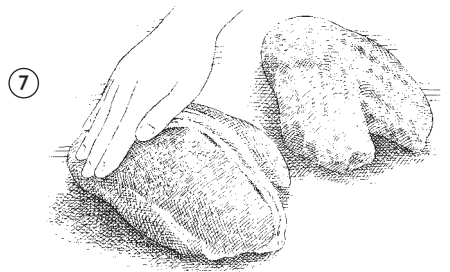


**5.** Heat reserved fat in large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, until flour is medium golden brown and fragrant, about 5 minutes. Slowly whisk in reserved liquid and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until gravy is thickened and reduced to 6 cups, 15 to 20 minutes. Off heat, season gravy with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to large container and let cool completely, about 1 hour. Once cool, cover and refrigerate.

**DAY BEFORE** Butcher and Salt Breasts

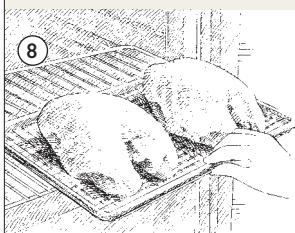


**6. FOR THE TURKEY BREASTS:** Place breasts on cutting board skin side down. Using kitchen shears, cut through ribs, following vertical lines of fat where breasts meet backs, from tapered ends of breasts to wing joints. Using your hands, bend backs away from breasts to pop shoulder joints out of sockets. Using paring knife, cut through joints between bones to separate backs from breasts.

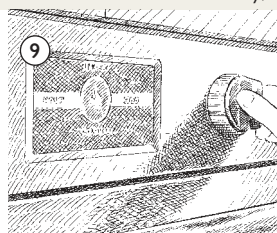


**7.** Flip breasts skin side up. Using your fingers, carefully loosen and separate skin from each side of 1 breast. Peel back skin, leaving it attached at top and center of each breast. Rub 1 teaspoon salt onto each side of breast, then place skin back over meat. Rub 1 teaspoon salt onto underside of breast cavity. Repeat with remaining breast. Place breasts on rimmed baking sheet and refrigerate, uncovered, for 24 hours.

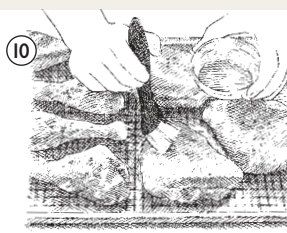
**SERVING DAY** Roast Breasts, Reheat Dark Meat and Gravy, and Carve



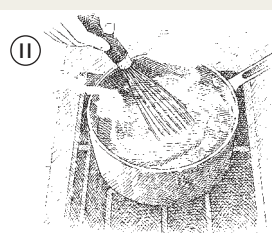
**8.** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Measure out 20-inch piece of foil and roll into loose ball. Unroll foil, place on second rimmed baking sheet, and top with wire rack (crinkled foil will insulate bottom of sheet to keep it from smoking during roasting). Place breasts, skin side up, on prepared wire rack; brush with 4 tablespoons melted butter and sprinkle each whole breast with 1 teaspoon salt. Roast until thickest part of breast registers 130 degrees, about 1½ hours.



**9.** Remove breasts from oven and increase oven temperature to 500 degrees. When oven reaches that temperature, return breasts to oven and roast until skin is deeply browned and thickest part of breast registers 160 degrees, 20 to 30 minutes. Transfer to carving board and let rest, uncovered, for 30 minutes. Pour any juices from sheet into bowl and set aside.

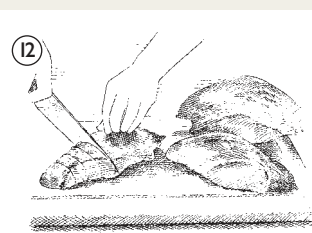


**10.** Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position. Place thighs and drumsticks skin side up on now-empty wire rack set in sheet and brush with



remaining 3 tablespoons melted butter. Place in oven and reheat until skin is well browned and thighs register 110 degrees, 18 to 22 minutes. Transfer thighs and drumsticks to large platter.

**11.** While thighs reheat, bring gravy to simmer in large saucepan over medium-low heat, whisking occasionally. Add any reserved juices from breasts and season with salt and pepper to taste. Cover and keep warm.



**12.** Carve breasts and transfer to platter with thighs and drumsticks. Serve, passing gravy separately.

# Roasted Salmon for a Crowd

When it comes to serving a crowd, most cooks turn to a large roast or bird. But wouldn't it be nice to serve fish?

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

The vast majority of the time when I cook salmon, I buy individual fillets suited for quick weeknight meals. They're easy to pan-sear, poach, roast, or grill, and their uniform shape means they cook evenly. But salmon is ideal for entertaining, too. It requires little prep work; cooks faster than a roast or stew; dresses up beautifully with countless sauces, glazes, and rubs; and makes a striking centerpiece.

But cooking a whole side of salmon—a single fillet that weighs 4 to 5 pounds and serves upwards of eight people—demands different considerations than cooking individual fillets does. The large fillet doesn't fit in a skillet, so you can't cook it on the stovetop. But cooking it in the oven comes with hurdles; namely, browning is more difficult without the stove's intense heat.

I wanted to come up with an approach for a whole roasted fillet that would be evenly moist inside and gorgeously browned on top. And since this salmon would be a for-company dish, I wanted bulletproof methods for shuttling the cooked fillet from pan to platter and for cutting tidy portions.

## Embroided in Problems

I tried one recipe that actually called for flipping the fish halfway through cooking, which was a cruel proposition. I knew I could come up with a more straightforward approach that would deliver the results I sought. I was interested in experimenting with the broiler, which would be the surest way to apply concentrated heat to the fish's surface.

I placed a 5-pound (average weight for a whole side) salmon fillet on a rimmed baking sheet, slid it onto an oven rack placed about 7 inches beneath a preheated broiler (which I hoped was enough distance from the element that the fish wouldn't burn before it was cooked through), and cooked it until the thickest portion registered 125 degrees. That took about 20 minutes, by which time the surface had quite a bit of uneven color. A whole



Once the fish is done salting, it can be on the table in 30 minutes. And either of our no-cook accompaniments can be prepared while it roasts.

side of salmon slopes considerably on the tail end, so the browning was mostly isolated to the thicker portion that was closest to the broiler element. Meanwhile, the fierce heat had overcooked the top ½ inch of the thicker part and all of the thinner ends and caused the fish to shed loads of albumin, the unsightly white protein that seeps out of overcooked fish.

## Honey-Do

The easiest way to prevent the tapered portions from overcooking was to do away with them. I had the fishmonger lop off the tail portion and belly flap, leaving me with a uniformly thick fillet that weighed about 4 pounds, which was still plenty for at least eight guests.

Next, I salted the fish, which we've found helps it retain

moisture and prevents the albumin from seeping out during cooking. After 1 hour, I patted it dry and repeated the broiler experiment. This time, the albumin stayed inside the fish and the flesh was nicely seasoned. But the uppermost part of the fish was still parched.

What I needed was a way to help the fish brown as quickly as possible under the broiler so that I could lower the oven temperature and the salmon could cook gently for the bulk of the time. Sprinkling sugar over the top of the fish helped, but the color was still spotty—it was hard to evenly distribute the crystals—and rather pale. But what about honey? The sugars it contains caramelize more readily than white sugar. I used 2 tablespoons, which was enough to coat the entire fillet but not so much that the fish tasted sweet, and it was easy to brush on in an even layer (for more information, see “The Sweet Spot for Even Browning”).

This time, the surface began to caramelize in 5 minutes and was nicely browned after 15, at which point I turned the oven to 250 degrees and slow-roasted the fish until done. The flesh was almost uniformly cooked from top to bottom, and it was bet-

ter still when I tried again and turned down the oven temperature after 10 minutes (doing so accounted for any carryover cooking that occurred while the broiler cooled).

## TECHNIQUE | CUTTING PERFECT PORTIONS

Don't mar your perfectly cooked side of salmon with sloppy portioning. Here's how to divvy up the fillet into tidy pieces.



1. Use thin metal spatula to cut down center seam of fillet to halve fish lengthwise.



2. Insert spatula into fillet at 45-degree angle, following grain, to cut 8 to 10 equal portions.



## WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/jun18](https://CookIllustrated.com/jun18)

## RECIPE TESTING The Sweet Spot for Even Browning

To find the best way to brown the salmon as quickly as possible, we coated one portion of the fillet with granulated sugar and another portion with honey and left the remaining portion uncoated. After broiling the fillet, we compared the results. The sugar-coated portion was spotty and almost as pale as the uncoated portion, but the honey-coated portion was deeply and evenly browned. Why? The sugars in honey caramelize more rapidly than does white sugar (sucrose), which must first break down into fructose and glucose before it can caramelize.



But here's a quirky thing about broilers: While they fiercely heat the upper half of the oven, they leave the bottom half surprisingly cool, particularly when the bottom is blocked by a side of salmon and a baking sheet. In fact, I found that the salmon needed a good 25 minutes to cook through after the broiling step, presumably because the lower portion of the oven took a while to heat up. That made me wonder if I couldn't speed up the cooking by preheating the oven before turning on the broiler. Sure enough, preheating the oven to 250 degrees before broiling the fish raised the temperature of the oven's top portion by 50 degrees and the bottom portion by 125 degrees. This shaved 10 minutes off the cooking time. (Some broilers also don't heat evenly from edge to edge; in those cases, it helps to cover the browned portions of salmon with a piece of aluminum foil to shield them while the paler sections catch up.) I also moved the fish onto a wire rack to raise it off the baking sheet, allowing for better air circulation, which helped it cook more evenly.

### Foiling the Fumble

A side of salmon is quite sturdy when raw but very fragile once cooked, which meant I had to be strategic about getting it to the table in one piece. So I made a long foil sling, coated it with vegetable oil spray, and placed it on the wire rack before loading on the raw salmon. Once the salmon was done, I grabbed the ends of the sling, transferred it to the serving platter, and gently slid the foil out from underneath the fish. I then experimented with a few ways to portion the fish (see "Cutting Perfect Portions").

A squeeze of fresh lemon juice was all it took to temper the richness of my salmon, but a pair of vibrant, no-cook condiments—an arugula-based pesto and a crisp cucumber relish—offered even more dress-up potential.

### ROASTED WHOLE SIDE OF SALMON

SERVES 8 TO 10

This recipe requires salting the fish for at least 1 hour. Look for a fillet that is uniformly thick from end to end. The surface will continue to brown after the oven temperature is reduced in step 4; if the surface starts to darken too much before the fillet's center registers 125 degrees, shield the dark portion with aluminum foil. If using wild salmon, which contains less fat than farmed salmon, remove it from the oven when the center of the fillet registers 120 degrees. Serve as is or with Arugula and Almond Pesto or Cucumber-Ginger Relish (recipes follow).

- 1 (4-pound) skin-on side of salmon, pin bones removed and belly fat trimmed  
Kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons honey  
Lemon wedges

1. Sprinkle flesh side of salmon evenly with 1 tablespoon salt and refrigerate, uncovered, for at least 1 hour or up to 4 hours.

2. Adjust oven rack 7 inches from broiler element and heat oven to 250 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and place wire rack in sheet. Fold 18 by 12-inch piece of foil lengthwise to create 18 by 6-inch sling. Place sling on wire rack and spray with vegetable oil spray.

3. Heat broiler. Pat salmon dry with paper towels and place, skin side down, on foil sling. Brush salmon evenly with honey and broil until surface is lightly but evenly browned, 8 to 12 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through broiling.

4. Return oven temperature to 250 degrees and continue to cook until center of fillet registers 125 degrees, 10 to 15 minutes longer, rotating sheet

halfway through cooking. Using foil sling, transfer salmon to serving platter, then carefully remove foil. Serve, passing lemon wedges separately.

### ARUGULA AND ALMOND PESTO

MAKES ABOUT 1 1/2 CUPS

For a spicier pesto, reserve, mince, and add the ribs and seeds from the chile. The pesto can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours. If refrigerated, let the pesto sit at room temperature for 30 minutes before serving.

- 1/4 cup almonds, lightly toasted
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 4 anchovy fillets, rinsed and patted dry
- 1 serrano chile, stemmed, seeded, and halved lengthwise
- 6 ounces (6 cups) arugula
- 1/4 cup lemon juice (2 lemons)
- 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt

Process almonds, garlic, anchovies, and serrano in food processor until finely chopped, about 15 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add arugula, lemon juice, oil, and salt and process until smooth, about 30 seconds.

### CUCUMBER-GINGER RELISH

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

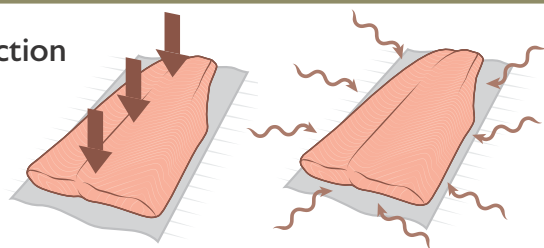
For a spicier relish, reserve, mince, and add the ribs and seeds from the chile. To keep the cucumbers crisp, serve this relish within 30 minutes of assembling it.

- 1/2 cup rice vinegar
- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/4 cup lime juice (2 limes)
- 2 tablespoons whole-grain mustard
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 English cucumber, seeded and cut into 1/4-inch dice
- 1 cup minced fresh mint
- 1 cup minced fresh cilantro
- 1 serrano chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced

Whisk vinegar, oil, lime juice, mustard, ginger, and salt in bowl until smooth. Add cucumber, mint, cilantro, and serrano and stir to combine.

### Going to Extremes For Perfection

Broiling can deeply brown a large piece of salmon, but it's not a good method for cooking the fish from start to finish because the intense heat overcooks the outermost layer. To achieve a deeply browned exterior and a silky interior, we used the broiler to jump-start browning and then used very low (250-degree) heat to bake the fish gently.



**BROIL TO BROWN; BAKE AT 250° TO FINISH**  
A high-low cooking method guarantees perfectly cooked fish.

# Peruvian Ceviche

Bright citrus is great with fresh seafood—provided that the acid doesn't overwhelm its delicate flavor. We went fishing for more balance and found it in this regional version.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

In the summer, ceviche is one of my go-to dinners for three big reasons: It's easy and quick, it doesn't require turning on the stove or oven or even firing up the grill, and it's the only dish that truly allows the fresh, clean, delicate flavor of seafood to shine. Ceviche, of course, is the Latin American dish in which pieces of raw fish are “cooked” in an acidic marinade until the flesh firms and turns opaque.

Full disclosure: When I make ceviche at home, I don't normally use a recipe. I juice some limes, cut up the fish (usually a firm-fleshed white variety such as sea bass, snapper, or halibut—whatever is freshest at the market), and let the fish marinate in the lime juice until it just begins to turn opaque. Then I add minced garlic and chiles, chopped cilantro, some thinly sliced onion, creamy diced avocado, a glug of olive oil for some richness, and a generous pinch of salt. Some crunchy garnishes go in a bowl to be served alongside. When I started researching traditional recipes, I quickly realized how simplistic my understanding of ceviche was. Plenty of versions took an approach similar to mine, but the Peruvian recipes opened my eyes to a more sophisticated take.

## A New Spin on Ceviche

Many Peruvian recipes call for blending the marinade ingredients—citrus juice, aromatics, and olive oil—before adding the seafood. But there's another component they often add to the marinade: fish. Some recipes call for a concentrated fish broth; others call for adding a small portion of fish before blending and straining. In both cases, the added seafood brings savory depth to the marinade, which is called *leche de tigre* (“tiger's milk”). This leche is sometimes poured over the marinated fish before serving, like a sauce, or drunk as a beverage, either on its own or mixed into a cocktail (an alleged aphrodisiac).

With its creamy, rich consistency and balanced, nuanced flavor, the blended marinade is akin to an emulsified vinaigrette. Thanks to that emulsification,



The bright, balanced dressing for our ceviche is packed with aromatics, herbs, and chiles. Its emulsified consistency coats every piece of fish.

I began working on my version by slicing 1 pound of skinless red snapper into small pieces. To make the leche, I poured ½ cup of fresh lime juice into a blender along with two garlic cloves, ¼ cup of chopped cilantro, a couple of teaspoons of salt, and a tablespoon of olive oil. For a bit of heat, I added some *aji amarillo* paste, which is made from a fruity yellow pepper of the same name and is traditional to many Peruvian ceviches (a seeded habanero chile can be substituted in a pinch). Finally, I added ⅓ cup of sliced snapper. After blending, I strained out any remaining solids.

The resulting leche had the creamy consistency I was aiming for, but the lime was so muted that I could barely taste it. Plus, blending the green cilantro with the yellow chile paste turned the leche an unappealing muddy brown. I made a new batch with ¾ cup of lime juice and no cilantro (I would add it as a garnish). This bright yellow leche had silky, rich body and bright, balanced flavor. It was time to figure out how long to “cook” my fish in this new marinade.

## Firming Things Up

The acid in a ceviche marinade denatures (unravels) and coagulates (clumps together) proteins, giving the fish an opaque appearance and a slightly firm—yet still tender—texture (see “How Acid ‘Cooks’ Fish”). When fish is marinated in pure lime juice, it turns opaque at the edges almost

the silky marinade coats and clings to each piece of fish. (This was a sharp contrast to my usual unblended marinade, which always runs right off the fish, causing individual bites to feature too much sharp lime juice or an abundance of greasy oil.)

## How Acid “Cooks” Fish

Acids denature and coagulate fish proteins, firming fish and turning it opaque just as hot cooking methods do. However, “cooking” with acid doesn't change the fish's taste—its clean, delicate flavor still shines. It also does not kill microbes, which underscores the importance of using the freshest seafood. Our *leche de tigre* is about



**15 MINUTES**  
Still too raw

**30 MINUTES**  
Just firm and opaque

**90 MINUTES**  
Dry and chalky

three times less acidic than straight lime juice, so it affects the fish more slowly, giving us some breathing room in the marinating time. We marinated thin slices of fish in our leche to demonstrate how it affects the flesh over time.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksiIllustrated.com/aug18](https://CooksiIllustrated.com/aug18)

## How to Buy the Freshest Fish

When making ceviche, using the freshest seafood possible is imperative for both flavor and food safety reasons. Here's what to look for:

- **CLEAN SMELL** The seafood (and the store or counter) should smell like the sea, not fishy or sour.
- **SHINY SURFACE** Fillets should look bright and shiny; whole fish should have bright, clear eyes.
- **FIRM TEXTURE** Fresh fish is firm. Ask your fishmonger to press the flesh with their finger; it should spring back.
- **ADVICE** Ask your fishmonger what's freshest that day, even if it's not what you originally had in mind. Ceviche works with many different varieties of fish.

instantly and goes from tender to firm in minutes. In contrast, the leche's more tempered acidity affects the fish more slowly, providing a wider window for serving. For my snapper, I found 30 to 40 minutes to be the ideal marinating time. At around the 30-minute mark, it's just beginning to turn opaque and its texture is firm but easily yields as you bite into it. Those who prefer ceviche with a texture closer to that of fully cooked fish can marinate for 45 minutes to 1 hour, though beyond that I found the texture unpleasantly dry and chalky.

### Salt First

Before cooking, we often season proteins, including fish, with salt and let them sit to season them throughout. Was this step necessary here, considering I had sliced the fish thin and exposed more surface area to the marinade? I tossed my next batch of sliced snapper with 1 teaspoon of kosher salt and refrigerated it while I made my leche. After a 30-minute soak, I tasted the presalted ceviche alongside an unsalted version (I still seasoned each batch before serving). The results were clear: Salting enhanced the flavor of the fish; it stood out against the other bold flavors in the ceviche. Further testing showed that a mere 10 minutes was all it took for the salt to have a noticeable effect on the small pieces of fish.

All that was left was sorting out the mix-ins: It's the layering of flavors and textures that makes a great ceviche. I liked the bright lime from the leche de tigre, but I thought it would be nice to bring in another citrus, so I added orange segments for sweet notes. Thinly sliced radishes added crisp texture and colorful contrast to the yellow leche and green cilantro. For salty, crunchy garnishes, I made a batch of popcorn (much to the delight of my colleagues) and set out a bowl of corn nuts. Both are traditional in Latin America.

Now that I've experienced this whole new world of elegant-yet-easy ceviches made with leche de tigre, I know what I'm making for dinner the next time it's too hot to cook.

## Shrimp: The Starter Ceviche

Unlike with fish ceviches, many shrimp ceviches begin by lightly poaching the shellfish, making these versions a good entry point into the world of ceviche for the uninitiated. Shrimp proteins are slow to denature in acid as compared with fish (or scallops), so the quick poach firms the shrimp before they're marinated. We found that thawed frozen shrimp work just as well as fresh in this application, making it a great option when superfresh fish isn't available. Our version blends fresh tomato, jalapeño, and lime juice into the *leche de tigre*. After a 30-minute marinade, the poached shrimp are tossed with jícama, tomato, avocado, Vidalia onion, and cilantro. Our recipe for Peruvian Shrimp Ceviche with Tomato, Jícama, and Avocado is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/aug18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/aug18).



### PERUVIAN FISH CEVICHE WITH RADISHES AND ORANGE

SERVES 4 TO 6 AS A MAIN DISH  
OR 6 TO 8 AS AN APPETIZER

It is imperative that you use the freshest fish possible in this recipe. Do not use frozen fish. Sea bass, halibut, or grouper can be substituted for the snapper, if desired. *Aji amarillo* chile paste can be found in the Latin section of grocery stores; if you can't find it, you can substitute 1 stemmed and seeded habanero chile. Serving the popcorn and corn nuts separately allows diners to customize their ceviche to suit their taste. Our recipes for Peruvian Scallop Ceviche with Cucumber and Grapefruit and Peruvian Shrimp Ceviche with Tomato, Jícama, and Avocado are available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/aug18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/aug18).

- 1 pound skinless red snapper fillets, ½ inch thick
- Kosher salt
- ¾ cup lime juice (6 limes)
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon aji amarillo chile paste
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- 3 oranges



- 8 ounces radishes, trimmed, halved, and sliced thin
- ¼ cup coarsely chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 cup corn nuts
- 1 cup lightly salted popcorn

1. Using sharp knife, cut snapper lengthwise into ½-inch-wide strips. Slice each strip crosswise ⅛ inch thick. Set aside ⅓ cup (2½ ounces) snapper pieces. Toss remaining snapper with 1 teaspoon salt and refrigerate for at least 10 minutes or up to 30 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, process reserved snapper pieces, lime juice, 2 tablespoons oil, chile paste, garlic, and 2½ teaspoons salt in blender until smooth, 30 to 60 seconds. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer set over large bowl, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible. Discard solids. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours. It will separate slightly; whisk to recombine before proceeding with recipe.)

3. Cut away peel and pith from oranges. Holding fruit over bowl, use paring knife to slice between membranes to release segments. Cut orange segments into ¼-inch pieces. Add oranges, salted snapper, and radishes to bowl with sauce and toss to combine. Refrigerate for 30 to 40 minutes (for more-opaque fish, refrigerate for 45 minutes to 1 hour).

4. Add cilantro to ceviche and toss to combine. Portion ceviche into individual bowls and drizzle with remaining 1 tablespoon oil. Serve, passing corn nuts and popcorn separately.

### Add Some Crunch (and Pop)

In Peru and Ecuador, where many different types of corn are grown, popcorn and corn nuts are often served alongside ceviche. Their salty crunch is the perfect complement to ceviche's bright, fresh flavors. Plantain chips (recipe on page 111) and tortilla chips are also popular accompaniments.

# Fish for Meat Lovers

Most types of fish require a gentle temperature and a delicate touch. But for rich, meaty swordfish, it's best to crank up the heat.

≧ BY LAN LAM ≦

It seems funny to admit that a fish was once my nemesis, but there was a spell back when I was a line cook when that was exactly the case. For five straight nights, I carefully prepared what appeared to be pristine swordfish steaks and began to plate them up, only to find that they were soft and mushy. The restaurant waitstaff then had to inform the diner that his or her entrée choice had been taken off the menu for the evening. Back then, I didn't know what to attribute the poor—not to mention wasteful—results to, and we ultimately stopped serving swordfish altogether. But I've long wondered why the texture of swordfish can sometimes be perfect—meaty, juicy, and tender—and other times so unpleasant. It was time to use a scientific approach to figure out why—and come up with a solution.

It would be a worthwhile effort: I knew that swordfish, unlike silky salmon or flaky halibut, at least had the potential to offer a unique dense meatiness. This distinctive texture, combined with a sweet, mild flavor, could excite even a staunch carnivore. In fact, swordfish steaks are similar enough to beef steaks that I decided to start my investigation by looking to one of the test kitchen's favorite methods for cooking steak.

We call it reverse searing: First, we gently cook the meat in the oven until it's perfectly juicy and tender, and then we transfer it to the stovetop to quickly brown the exterior. I seasoned four 8-ounce swordfish steaks with salt and cooked them gently in a 300-degree oven for about 45 minutes, until they were a few degrees shy of 140 degrees, a temperature



Go ahead and use tongs to flip the fish. Because of its firm, steak-like texture, swordfish is easy to maneuver and won't flake apart.

that the test kitchen likes for white fish. Next, I briefly seared the fish steaks in an oil-slicked nonstick skillet until they acquired a golden-brown crust and let them rest for a few minutes. They looked gorgeous, but I knew all too well that a good-looking swordfish exterior often hides a disappointing interior. Sure enough, although some tasters charitably described the fish as “too tender,” most reported that it had the soft, tacky, almost mushy texture of canned tuna.

## SWORDFISH BASICS

**SHOPPING:** Swordfish steaks typically have a bloodline—a dark muscle rich in myoglobin—running through them. Since we found that the bloodline has an unpleasant mineral taste, we recommend looking for steaks with as minimal a bloodline as possible.

**PREP:** Thick, rubbery swordfish skin tightens up more than the flesh during cooking and can cause the steak to buckle. You can either ask your fishmonger to remove it for you or trim it off yourself using a thin, sharp knife.



## Flipping Out

I had flipped the steaks only once during cooking. What if I flipped them more frequently? After the first flip, the steaks would cook from both sides. Simultaneously, the top side would get a reprieve from the hot pan, which could minimize overcooking (see “The Benefits of Frequent Flipping”).

When my oiled skillet began to smoke, I added the swordfish steaks. I flipped them every 2 minutes, and after about 10 minutes, they hit 140 degrees.

## The Breakdown

After consulting with our science editor, I understood what was going on. Just like meats, fish contains enzymes called cathepsins. If the circumstances are right, the cathepsins will snip the proteins that give swordfish its sturdy texture, turning it soft. Although they're ultimately destroyed by heat, cathepsins are increasingly active at low cooking temperatures. By slowly bringing the swordfish steaks up to 140 degrees, I was giving the cathepsins plenty of time to take the flesh from meaty to mushy (see “Why Swordfish Can Turn Mushy”).

Clearly, I needed to speed up the cooking. The fastest way to cook these (or any) steaks indoors would be to sear them in a skillet. The metal in the pan would conduct heat to the fish more rapidly than even the hottest oven or broiler. In a skillet, flipped once halfway through cooking, the steaks were done in just 16 to 18 minutes. Tasters agreed that this was a step in the right direction: Each bite was firmer since the enzymes hadn't been given much time to act. But I wasn't going to get off that easy. The swordfish was dry and tough just beneath the well-browned crust.

It made sense that the portions of the swordfish that had been nearest to the hot skillet were overcooked. The part of the fish that's in contact with the pan heats up very quickly because of the skillet's ability to transfer heat. That portion of the flesh must in turn transfer that heat to the layers adjacent to it. And most food, swordfish included, doesn't transfer heat quickly. The upshot is that as the interior slowly heats up, the exterior overcooks. But if gentle cooking turned these steaks to mush and a hard sear—necessary for preserving their texture—left them wrung out, where did that leave me?

## SCIENCE The Benefits of Frequent Flipping

We have noticed that frequently flipping swordfish (as well as beef steaks, pork chops, and tuna) during searing leads to faster, more evenly cooked results. To demonstrate this, we pan-seared nine swordfish steaks, nine strip steaks, and nine pork chops until they reached 130, 125, and 140 degrees, respectively. We flipped three of each protein every 30 seconds, three every 2 minutes, and three just once, recording how long it took each to reach the desired temperature.

The proteins flipped every 30 seconds cooked the fastest, while those flipped just once were the slowest. The 30-second and 2-minute samples were well browned and evenly cooked, whereas the once-flipped samples were also nicely browned but had a large band of overcooked flesh.

➤ **Here's why frequent flipping is efficient:** A hot skillet cooks food from the bottom up. When a protein is flipped, the seared side, which is then facing up, is also quite hot. Some of its heat dissipates into the air, and some of it cooks the protein from the top down. The more often a protein is flipped, the more it will cook from both the bottom up and the top down.

Though flipping pan-seared proteins every 30 seconds results in the speediest, most even cooking, it is impractical. However, flipping every 2 minutes cuts the cooking time by about 30 percent, which makes it well worth the effort.

This significantly cut the cooking time, and the steaks were much improved. They were cooked throughout and sported golden-brown crusts, and each bite was dense and meaty. There was just one problem: The fish oozed juices as it rested. A quick temperature check revealed the reason. The aggressive cooking had caused the fish to carry over to 150 degrees. And at such a high temperature, the proteins shrank and squeezed out juices. I seared another batch, this time pulling the steaks from the skillet when they registered just 130 degrees. That did the trick: During a 10-minute rest, they climbed to the target temperature of 140 degrees.

Though the rich, meaty, juicy steaks were great with just a squeeze of lemon, I wanted to celebrate the conquering of my nemesis (how I wish I knew then what I know now!) with a couple of sauces. One was a classic Italian swordfish accompaniment, an *agrodolce*-style relish based on piquant capers and sweet currants; the other was an ultragarlicky sauce with the unique addition of dried mint.

### PAN-SEARED SWORDFISH STEAKS

SERVES 4

For the best results, purchase swordfish steaks that are  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch thick. Look for four steaks that weigh 7 to 9 ounces each or two steaks that weigh about 1 pound each. If you purchase the latter, cut them in half to create four steaks. We've found that skin-on swordfish often buckles in the hot skillet. Ask your fishmonger to remove the skin or trim it yourself with a thin, sharp knife. Serve with Caper-Currant Relish or Spicy Dried Mint-Garlic Sauce (recipes follow), if desired. Our recipes for Pan-Seared Swordfish Steaks for Two and Harissa-Oregano Sauce are available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18).

- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 2 pounds skinless swordfish steaks,  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch thick
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons kosher salt
- Lemon wedges

1. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. While oil heats, pat steaks dry with paper towels and sprinkle on both sides with salt.

2. Place steaks in skillet and cook, flipping every 2 minutes, until golden brown and centers register 130 degrees, 7 to 11 minutes. Transfer to serving platter or individual plates and let rest for 10 minutes. Serve with lemon wedges.

### CAPER-CURRENT RELISH

MAKES ABOUT  $\frac{1}{2}$  CUP

Golden raisins can be substituted for the currants.

- 3 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed and chopped fine
- 2 tablespoons currants, chopped fine
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
- plus 2 tablespoons juice

Combine all ingredients in bowl. Let stand at room temperature for at least 20 minutes before serving.

### SPICY DRIED MINT-GARLIC SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT  $\frac{1}{2}$  CUP

This sauce gets its spiciness from the raw garlic. If you are not using a garlic press, use a fork to bruise the minced garlic when stirring the sauce together.

- 4 teaspoons dried mint
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon salt

Place mint in fine-mesh strainer and use spoon to rub mint through strainer into bowl. Discard any solids left in strainer. (You should have about 1 tablespoon mint powder.) Add oil, vinegar, garlic, and salt to mint powder and stir to combine.

## SCIENCE Why Swordfish Can Turn Mushy

Just as with land-bound critters, enzymes can have a profound impact on the texture of swordfish. To explore this, we cooked 12 swordfish steaks to 130 degrees—the temperature at which they need to be taken off the heat to carry over to a 140-degree serving temperature. We then held batches of four steaks at 130 degrees for 15 minutes, 45 minutes, and 1 hour and 45 minutes. Next, we measured the amount of force required to compress each sample  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch to quantify the experience of taking a bite. We found that the longer the fish stayed at 130 degrees, the softer it became. In fact, the force required to compress the fish at 15 minutes had decreased by about 15 percent after 45 minutes and 30 percent after 1 hour and 45 minutes.

➤ **Here's the explanation:** Enzymes in swordfish called cathepsins snip the proteins that hold the muscle fibers together. In fish, cathepsins are highly active at 130 degrees. When swordfish is cooked very slowly, its cathepsins have a long time to turn its flesh soft and mushy.



We used a highly sensitive machine called a CT3 texture analyzer to measure the amount of force required to compress each sample of fish.

Swordfish steaks, cooked for 15 minutes and held at 130 degrees for:	Force required to compress $\frac{1}{2}$ inch
15 min	1,062 g
45 min	898 g
1 hr, 45 min	734 g



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18)

# One-Hour Pizza

The ultimate challenge for a pizza master with 30 years of experience?  
Making a good one in just 60 minutes.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

If there is anything in life I can claim to have mastered, it's making pizza: It was the first food I learned to cook, at age 15. Since then, I've developed nine pizza recipes. I've built two outdoor pizza ovens. Heck, I even teach pizza-making classes in my free time. But mastery can turn to complacency, so I was intrigued when editor in chief Dan Souza tasked me with the following challenge: Make really good pizza from scratch in just 1 hour, start to finish.

It would be the ultimate test, as it went against the gospel I've been preaching for years, which says that for superlative pizza—a mildly yeasty, slightly tangy crust that's crisp on the outside and pleasantly chewy within—you must let the dough proof in the refrigerator for at least one day or up to three days.

## Burden of Proof

Time is so important because it significantly affects both flavor and texture. During a slow, cold rise, yeast creates fermented and acidic flavor compounds. Meanwhile, enzymes in the flour go to work on the gluten, snipping some bonds to make a supremely extensible dough. I'd have to find speedy ways to accomplish both effects. It would be no easy feat.

I started with a test run using my Thin-Crust Pizza recipe (January/February 2011): Combine



For a supercrisp crust, we preheat the baking stone at 500 degrees; then, for a blast of heat before baking, we turn on the broiler for 10 minutes.

bread flour, a little sugar, and a small amount of yeast in a food processor with water, and then let it sit for 10 minutes; this lets the flour absorb the water, which allows gluten to form. Next, add salt and oil and run

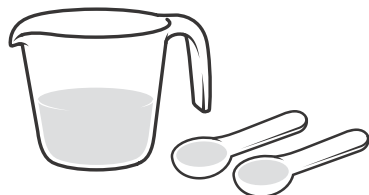
the machine until the dough is smooth. After that, you'd normally refrigerate the dough and wait a few days for fermentation to happen. But the clock was ticking, so I divided the dough into two balls and let them proof at room temperature for just 30 minutes. As I expected, when I tried to shape a ball into a round, it stubbornly sprang back. The only way to get the dough near 12 inches in diameter was to strong-arm it with a rolling pin. It baked up flat, bland, and tough.

Clearly, the few pinches of yeast in my original recipe (which do a great job of leavening in 24 hours) weren't enough to make the dough rise much in 30 minutes—not to mention that the rolling pin was pushing out what little air there was. Increasing the yeast was the obvious answer, but it's also the adjustment where most quick pizza recipes fail. Good pizza dough should taste subtly fermented, not just yeasty. So how much more yeast could I add? I ended up with 2 teaspoons, enough to give the dough lift but not so much that it tasted too yeasty. I also started with warm tap water, which activated the yeast more quickly.

The rise was better, but I still needed a rolling pin to shape the highly elastic dough. Furthermore, while the pizza didn't taste overly yeasty, it didn't taste like much else either. Fortunately, for the latter issue I knew of a trick from our *Almost No-Knead Bread* (January/February 2008): Mix in vinegar and beer. Beer includes many

## Ensuring Extensibility in One-Hour Pizza

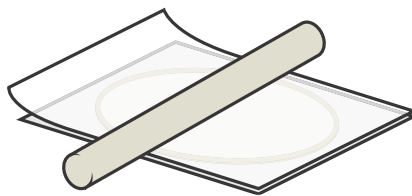
Most of our pizza recipes allow ample time to let the gluten relax, which makes the dough easy to shape and prevents springback. Without the luxury of time, we found other ways to make the dough workable.



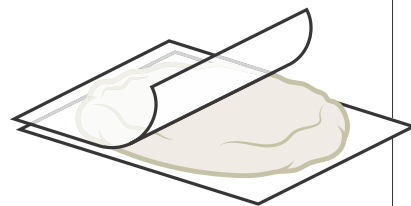
**ADD EXTRA LIQUID** A high hydration level (we use about 7 ounces of liquid for about 10 ounces of flour) makes the dough more extensible.



**USE PART SEMOLINA FLOUR** The gluten network that semolina forms is less elastic, so the dough doesn't snap back as much.

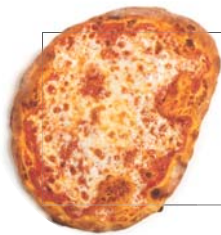


**ROLL; THEN PROOF** Immediately rolling the dough means no wrestling it into shape after proofing—or pushing out any precious air bubbles.



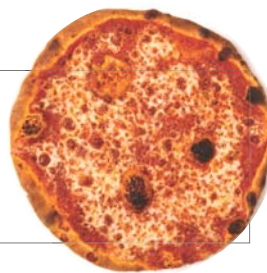
**PROOF PRESHAPED ROUNDS** After 30 minutes, the dough will be puffy and ready to top and bake (the parchment will keep the dough moist).





## A Tale of Two Doughs

Quick pizza dough is particularly hard to shape. Anyone who has tried it is familiar with the misshapen pizza on the left. Our formula and method make it easy to shape the perfect pizza on the right.



of the same flavorful compounds that are created by yeast during bread fermentation—alcohols, aldehydes, and esters—and vinegar adds the acidity that yeast and bacteria create in slow-fermented dough.

### Upper Crust

The two quickest ways to improve my dough's extensibility were to increase its moisture and to take a close look at the type of flour I was using. I was only able to increase the liquid from 6.5 to 7 ounces before the dough became too wet to handle. It was a little more yielding, but not enough.

As for the flour, the bread flour that my Thin-Crust Pizza recipe calls for is high in protein. Generally speaking, the more protein a flour has, the more gluten it forms. That's great if you can use a long proof to let that gluten relax. But without the luxury of time, I wondered if lower-protein (less gluten-forming) all-purpose or cake flour might help. Sure enough, doughs made with these flours were easier to work with. But gluten formation is not the only reason bread bakers use bread flour. High-protein flour also helps a dough bake up crisp and light. It holds more water, which forms bubbles throughout the crust when it turns to steam, and an airier crust crisps up much better than a dense one. Without enough protein, these crusts were anything but crisp.

How about using semolina flour? It's unusual in that it's high in protein but forms a dough that's easier to stretch than typical bread doughs. In other words, it was just what my dough needed: A high protein level would help create crispness, and more stretch would make for a more workable dough.

Indeed, when I swapped a portion of the bread flour for semolina, the crust was transformed, with greater extensibility along with the crispness that is a hallmark of a great pizza. But there was a limit to how much semolina I could use: Beyond 50 percent of the total by weight, the dough didn't have enough structure to hold air bubbles. Even with my modest ½ cup of semolina, it was still too tight to shape without a rolling pin.

### Rolling in Dough

At this point, I'd questioned almost everything about the pizza-making process. But there was one question I'd yet to ask: Why proof the dough and *then* roll it (and push out all those valuable air bubbles)? If I rolled the dough as soon as it was mixed, it could proof in its round shape.

With an eye on the clock, I rolled a ball of dough between sheets of oiled parchment and then let it proof for 30 minutes. I removed the top sheet, sprinkled the puffy round with flour, flipped it onto a peel, and removed the second sheet before topping it with sauce and cheese and baking it on a preheated stone.

Sixty minutes after I'd started, I was enjoying my best quick pizza yet. It had been easy to shape, and the crust was chewy but light since the air bubbles that developed during proofing hadn't been knocked out by shaping. Will it be replacing my three-day pizza recipe? No chance. Will I be making this dough every time I want same-day pizza? Without a doubt.

### ONE-HOUR PIZZA MAKES TWO 11½-INCH PIZZAS

For the best results, weigh your ingredients. We like the depth anchovies add to the sauce, but you can omit them, if desired. For the mild lager, we recommend Budweiser or Stella Artois. Extra sauce can be refrigerated for up to a week or frozen for up to a month. Some baking stones can crack under the intense heat of the broiler. Our recommended stone from Old Stone Oven won't, but if you're using another stone, check the manufacturer's website. If you don't have a pizza peel, use an overturned rimmed baking sheet instead.

#### Dough

- 1½ cups (7½ ounces) bread flour
- ½ cup (3 ounces) semolina flour
- 2 teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- ½ cup plus 2 tablespoons (5 ounces) warm water (115 degrees)
- ¼ cup (2 ounces) mild lager
- 2 teaspoons distilled white vinegar
- 1½ teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Vegetable oil spray
- All-purpose flour

#### Sauce

- 1 (28-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 anchovy fillets, rinsed and patted dry (optional)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes

#### Pizza

- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated fine (½ cup)
- 6 ounces whole-milk mozzarella, shredded (1½ cups)

**1. FOR THE DOUGH:** Adjust oven rack 4 to 5 inches from broiler element, set pizza stone on rack, and heat oven to 500 degrees.

2. While oven heats, process bread flour, semolina flour, yeast, and sugar in food processor until combined, about 2 seconds. With processor running, slowly add warm water, lager, vinegar, and oil; process until dough is just combined and no dry flour remains, about 10 seconds. Let dough stand for 10 minutes.

3. Add salt to dough and process until dough forms satiny, sticky ball that clears sides of workbowl, 30 to 60 seconds. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter and gently knead until smooth, about 15 seconds. Divide dough into 2 equal pieces and shape each into smooth ball.

4. Spray 11-inch circle in center of large sheet of parchment paper with oil spray. Place 1 ball of dough in center of parchment. Spray top of dough with oil spray. Using rolling pin, roll dough into 10-inch circle. Cover with second sheet of parchment. Using rolling pin and your hands, continue to roll and press dough into 11½-inch circle. Set aside and repeat rolling with second ball of dough. Let dough stand at room temperature until slightly puffy, 30 minutes.

**5. FOR THE SAUCE:** Process all ingredients in food processor until smooth, about 30 seconds. Transfer to medium bowl.

**6. FOR THE PIZZA:** When dough has rested for 20 minutes, heat broiler for 10 minutes. Remove top piece of parchment from 1 disk of dough and dust top of dough lightly with all-purpose flour. Using your hands or pastry brush, spread flour evenly over dough, brushing off any excess. Liberally dust pizza peel with all-purpose flour. Flip dough onto peel, parchment side up. Carefully remove parchment and discard.


7. Using back of spoon or ladle, spread ½ cup sauce in thin layer over surface of dough, leaving ¾-inch border around edge. Sprinkle ¼ cup Parmesan evenly over sauce, followed by ¾ cup mozzarella. Slide pizza carefully onto stone and return oven to 500 degrees. Bake until crust is well browned and cheese is bubbly and beginning to brown, 8 to 12 minutes, rotating pizza halfway through baking.

8. Transfer pizza to wire rack and let cool for 5 minutes before slicing and serving. Repeat steps 6 and 7 to top and bake second pizza.

### SHORTCUTTING FERMENTED FLAVOR

Since the yeast in our dough doesn't have enough time to create rich flavors, we add beer, which contains flavor compounds created by yeast fermentation. We also add vinegar, which provides the acetic acid that yeast produces during a slow rise.





**▶ WATCH THE VIDEO**  
A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/apr18)

# Really Good Falafel

Loading up the chickpea batter with fresh herbs and aromatics is what makes falafel the world's greatest fritters. Too bad it also makes them a mess to handle and cook.

≧ BY STEVE DUNN ≦

Rather than insert myself into the age-old debate over the origins of falafel—Egypt, Palestine, and Israel each claim it as a national dish—I prefer to think of it as a preparation with ancient roots and timeless universal appeal. But my recipe may prove to be divisive in another way: The key to its success comes from a technique associated with Asian bread baking. Before I explain how I landed there, however, it's important to understand why falafel is inherently tricky to make well.

Most falafel dough is nothing more than uncooked dried chickpeas or fava beans that have been soaked overnight so that they soften slightly before being coarsely ground in a food processor with onion, garlic, spices, and loads of fresh herbs (parsley and cilantro are typical). Grinding—not pureeing—the beans is what makes good falafel pleasantly nubby and light, not pasty, and the abundant seasonings add freshness, warmth, and complexity to the otherwise starchy, neutral bean base. But both of those factors make forming and frying the fritters a real challenge. Binding up the coarse bean bits is like trying to make gravel stick together. The onion and herbs are full of water that helps make the falafel appealingly moist, but that moisture also makes the dough wet and often too fragile to pack into cohesive rounds or patties, never mind fry in a pot of vigorously bubbling oil.

That's why many recipes call for mixing starch into the dough—flour, cornstarch, and chickpea flour are all common additions. It's a surefire way to soak up that moisture and create a paste that helps bind the components so that the mixture is easy to handle and sturdy enough to withstand cooking. But the drawback, as I discovered when I made falafel with each of the three starches, is that when you use enough starch to act as a binder, it can render the falafel dense, dull-tasting, and overly dry.

## No Can Do

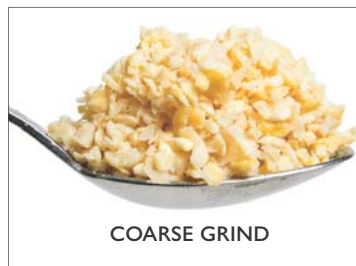
Those competing goals are at the core of the problem and would be the focus of my testing. But before I jumped in, I wanted to give the admittedly rogue idea of using canned chickpeas a whirl to see



Want the ultimate falafel? Make the pita (page 81), pickled vegetables (page 110), and tahini and tomato-chile sauces (page 49) yourself.

if there was a way to eliminate the inconvenience of the overnight soak required by the dried kind. But these were a complete bust. Just a few spins in the food processor turned the drained canned beans into a sludgy puree that translated into falafel that were equally pasty and sludgy. I'd stick with the soaked dried chickpeas after all.

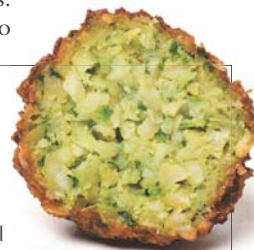
But how to make cohesive dough out of coarsely ground beans and loads of watery onion and herbs without drying out or otherwise ruining the falafel's texture? That was another matter—and where that Asian bread-baking technique came in handy.



COARSE GRIND

## Keep It Coarse

To achieve falafel's desirably nubby, open structure (right), it's crucial to grind the soaked dried chickpeas just until they're broken down into coarse bits (sesame seeds are a good visual reference). Processing them any further will result in a pasty dough and dense fritters.



COARSE INTERIOR

## All About That Paste

It's called *tangzhong*. The gist is that you whisk together a little flour and water and briefly cook the mixture until it forms a smooth, pudding-like paste, which you then combine with the rest of the ingredients. In breads such as our Fluffy Dinner Rolls (January/February 2016), this cooked paste miraculously allows you to add extra water to the dough without making it too sticky or soupy to handle. Even more impressive is the exceptionally moist and tender final result.

A cohesive mixture that would cook up moist and tender was exactly what I needed for my falafel, so I experimented with the ratio of flour paste to chickpea base until the mixture was easy to form and stayed intact during frying. When I scooped a fritter from the hot oil and took a bite, I knew I was onto something: It was not only wonderfully moist and tender but also much lighter-textured than the batches I'd made with uncooked starches (for more information, see "How the Flour Paste Holds the Falafel Together").

The *tangzhong* method was a keeper, and I was able to lighten the texture of the fritters even more by adding a couple of spoonfuls of baking powder—an addition I saw in some modern falafel recipes—to the flour paste after microwaving. The only hitch was that by the time their exteriors were brown and crisp, these fritters, with their added moisture from the paste, were a tad raw at their cores. So I lowered the temperature of the oil from 350 to 325 degrees, which allowed them to fry longer without burning.

These falafel were killer: crisp and mahogany on the outside, with pleasantly nubby, moist, and assertively seasoned centers. When I stuffed them into

fresh Pita Bread (page 81) with traditional fixings such as Quick Pickled Turnips and Carrots with Lemon and Coriander (page 110), lemony tahini sauce, and a zingy tomato-chile puree, I felt convinced that nobody would fault me for introducing an Asian technique into a Middle Eastern classic. It may even go down in falafel history.

## FALAFEL

MAKES 24 FALAFEL; SERVES 4 TO 6

This recipe requires that the chickpeas be soaked for at least 8 hours. Use a Dutch oven that holds 6 quarts or more. An equal amount of chickpea flour can be substituted for the all-purpose flour; if using, increase the water in step 4 to ½ cup. Do not substitute canned or quick-soaked chickpeas; they will make stodgy falafel. Serve the falafel with the tahini sauce as an appetizer or in Pita Bread (page 81) with lettuce, chopped tomatoes, chopped cucumbers, fresh cilantro, Quick Pickled Turnips and Carrots with Lemon and Coriander (page 110), and Tomato-Chile Sauce (recipe follows). Serve the first batch of falafel immediately or hold it in a 200-degree oven while the second batch cooks.

### Falafel

- 8 ounces dried chickpeas, picked over and rinsed
- ¾ cup fresh cilantro leaves and stems
- ¾ cup fresh parsley leaves
- ½ onion, chopped fine
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1½ teaspoons ground coriander
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 quarts vegetable oil

### Tahini Sauce

- ½ cup tahini
- ½ cup plain Greek yogurt
- ¼ cup lemon juice (2 lemons)
- ¼ cup water
- Salt

**1. FOR THE FALAFEL:** Place chickpeas in large container and cover with water by 2 to 3 inches. Soak at room temperature for at least 8 hours or up to 24 hours. Drain well.

**2. FOR THE TAHINI SAUCE:** Whisk tahini, yogurt, and lemon juice in medium bowl until smooth. Whisk in water to thin sauce as desired. Season with salt to taste; set aside. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 4 days. Let come to room temperature and stir to combine before serving.)

**3.** Process cilantro, parsley, onion, garlic, coriander, cumin, salt, and cayenne in food processor for 5 seconds. Scrape down sides of bowl. Continue to process until mixture resembles pesto, about

## No More Fear of Frying

Using the right tools makes deep-frying a breeze: The WMF Profi Plus Spider Strainer 14" (\$19.95) keeps your hands far from the hot oil and can scoop multiple pieces of food at a time. The ThermoWorks ChefAlarm (\$59.00) clip-on probe thermometer monitors the oil temperature and transfers readings to a small countertop receiver.



THE FLY WAY TO FRY

5 seconds longer. Add chickpeas and pulse 6 times. Scrape down sides of bowl. Continue to pulse until chickpeas are coarsely chopped and resemble sesame seeds, about 6 more pulses. Transfer mixture to large bowl and set aside.

**4.** Whisk flour and ⅓ cup water in bowl until no lumps remain. Microwave, whisking every 10 seconds, until mixture thickens to stiff, smooth, pudding-like consistency that forms mound when dropped from end of whisk into bowl, 40 to 80 seconds. Stir baking powder into flour paste.

**5.** Add flour paste to chickpea mixture and, using rubber spatula, mix until fully incorporated. Divide mixture into 24 pieces and gently roll into golf ball-size spheres, transferring spheres to parchment paper-lined rimmed baking sheet once formed. (Formed falafel can be refrigerated for up to 2 hours.)

**6.** Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat to 325 degrees. Add half of falafel and fry, stirring occasionally, until deep brown, about 5 minutes. Adjust burner, if necessary, to maintain oil temperature of 325 degrees. Using slotted spoon or wire skimmer, transfer falafel to paper towel-lined baking sheet. Return oil to 325 degrees and repeat with remaining falafel. Serve immediately with tahini sauce.

## TOMATO-CHILE SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT 1½ CUPS

Hunt's makes the test kitchen's favorite canned diced tomatoes.

- 1 (15-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained
- ½ cup fresh cilantro leaves and stems
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon red pepper flakes
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar, plus extra for seasoning

## SCIENCE How the Flour Paste Holds the Falafel Together

Adding lots of onion and fresh herbs to falafel makes them flavorful and moist—and usually so wet and fragile that they fall apart in your hands or during cooking. Adding flour holds the falafel together and soaks up the excess moisture but makes the fritters dull and dense. Instead, we add a paste of cooked flour and water that contributes moisture and binds the mixture without weighing it down.

➤ **Here's why it works:** When the paste is cooked, the flour's starch granules burst and form a gelatinous web that locks the water in the paste in place, preventing it from making the mixture even looser. Meanwhile, cooking the flour also greatly increases its ability to absorb water, so we can add less flour overall to act as a binder. The result: fritters that are well seasoned, moist, and easy to form.



- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- Salt
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika
- ⅛ teaspoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Process tomatoes, cilantro, garlic, pepper flakes, vinegar, cumin, coriander, ¾ teaspoon salt, paprika, and sugar in food processor until smooth paste forms, 20 to 30 seconds. With processor running, slowly add oil until fully incorporated, about 5 seconds. Transfer to bowl and season with salt and extra vinegar to taste.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/oct18)

# White Bean and Mushroom Gratin

Once you know the building blocks that create savory depth, you won't miss the meat.

BY LAN LAM

Anyone who thinks that meatless bean dishes don't offer the heartiness of a meat-based meal should give the category another chance. As for those who think that meatless bean dishes tend to lack complexity and savory depth, I'm with you—and I have a recipe that will change your mind.

It's a bean-based gratin, and it's not loaded up with esoteric ingredients; in fact, you might have most of what you need on hand. Start to finish, you should be able to get this gratin on the table in just under 2 hours and have plenty of downtime to make a salad or green vegetable while it cooks.

I built the dish around creamy, nutty canned great Northern white beans. Canned beans are a real timesaver, and we've found that their quality can be more consistent than that of dried beans (see "Canned Beans: A Stellar Shortcut"). The other core elements are meaty cremini mushrooms, which I browned with salt in an olive oil-slicked skillet to help quickly extract their moisture, and chunks of carrots, which add earthy sweetness and an appealing pop of color.

Next, I gently sautéed some chopped onion. When it turned translucent, I stirred in minced fresh thyme and garlic along with tomato paste, a rich source of savory glutamates. As the aromatics browned, a sweet, savory, herbal fond developed. Since acid brings flavors into focus, I deglazed the skillet with dry sherry, a fortified wine that would boost complexity.

Finally, I stirred in the carrots; the beans and their well-seasoned, starchy liquid that would add body to the gravy; and some water and simmered the stew in a 300-degree oven until the carrots were tender, which took about 40 minutes. I wasn't surprised when the gravy tasted a bit lean and thin. In meat-based dishes, the meat is an important source of fat. To add richness, I upped the oil I was using to sauté the aromatics to a generous  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup. I also thickened the gravy with a little flour.

For textural contrast, I took a cue from cassoulet, the French bean casserole crowned with a crisp layer of bread crumbs. I tossed cubes of a country-style loaf with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of oil (I was generous here again) and some minced parsley and scattered them over the gratin's surface. I flipped on the broiler toward the end of cooking so the bread would toast evenly.



Creamy great Northern beans stay intact in the oven.

Crack through the crust and get a spoonful of the rib-sticking, savory beans and vegetables that lie beneath. I promise you won't miss the meat.

## WHITE BEAN AND MUSHROOM GRATIN

SERVES 4 TO 6

We prefer a round rustic loaf (also known as a *boule*) with a chewy, open crumb and a sturdy crust for this recipe. Cannellini or navy beans can be used in place of great Northern beans, if desired.

- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 10 ounces cremini mushrooms, trimmed and sliced  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick
- Salt and pepper
- 4–5 slices country-style bread, cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch cubes (5 cups)
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup minced fresh parsley
- 1 cup water
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 1 small onion, chopped fine
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons minced fresh thyme
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup dry sherry
- 2 (15-ounce) cans great Northern beans
- 3 carrots, peeled, halved lengthwise, and cut into  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch pieces

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Heat  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup oil in 12-inch oven-safe skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add mushrooms,  $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon salt, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until mushrooms are well browned, 8 to 12 minutes.

2. While mushrooms cook, toss bread, 3 tablespoons parsley, remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup oil, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon pepper together in bowl. Set aside. Stir water and flour in second bowl until no lumps of flour remain. Set aside.

3. Reduce heat to medium, add onion to skillet, and continue to cook, stirring frequently, until onion is translucent, 4 to 6 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low; add garlic, tomato paste, and thyme; and cook, stirring constantly, until bottom of skillet is dark brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Add sherry and cook, scraping up any browned bits.

4. Add beans and their liquid, carrots, and flour mixture. Bring to boil over high heat. Off heat, arrange bread mixture over surface in even layer. Transfer skillet to oven and bake for 40 minutes. (Liquid should have consistency of thin gravy.)

5. Leave skillet in oven and turn on broiler. Broil until crumbs are golden brown, 4 to 7 minutes. Remove gratin from oven and let stand for 20 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon parsley, and serve.

## RECIPES TO MAKE IT A MEAL

Find these recipes in our archive: Spinach Salad with Fennel and Apples (July/August 2010) and Best Butterscotch Pudding (January/February 2013).

## Canned Beans: A Stellar Shortcut

Choosing canned beans over dried doesn't sacrifice quality. In fact, modern canning practices produce beans that are often more consistent than dried. Manufacturers clean, sort, and inspect dried beans before blanching them (similar in function to an overnight soak) and sealing them in cans with water and often salt, which seasons the flesh and tenderizes the skins. Most producers also add calcium chloride, which maintains firmness and prevents splitting. The final step is pressure-cooking the beans directly in their cans. The result is perfectly cooked, creamy, and intact beans. The "cooking liquid" in the can is great, too: We routinely use it to give body to bean dishes.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/dec18)

# Red Wine Risotto with Beans

Northern Italians put an unexpected spin on risotto for a satisfying one-pot meal.

BY ANNIE PETITO

I was skeptical when I first heard of *paniscia*, a specialty from the city of Novara in Piedmont, northern Italy. It is essentially a merger of two dishes: risotto—flavored with cured meats and red wine—and a minestrone-like bean and vegetable soup. Bean, meat, and red wine risotto? Figuring that *paniscia* must be experienced to be understood, I headed into the kitchen.

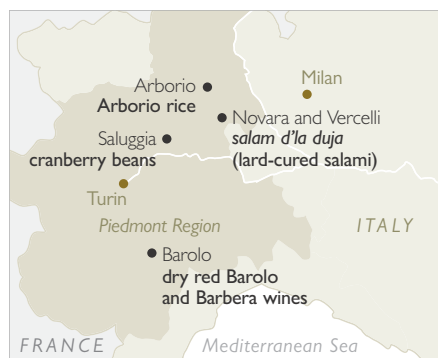
I first made a minestrone, simmering dried soaked cranberry beans in chicken broth along with mirepoix (chopped carrot, celery, and onion), cabbage, and pancetta. Meanwhile, I started a risotto, first browning Genoa salami (my sub for the traditional but hard-to-find lard-cured salami called *salam d'la duja*) and then toasting Arborio rice in the fat before pouring in red wine. Adhering to the established risotto method, I stirred liquid (here, the soup) into the rice in multiple additions. I finished the dish with a little butter.

I ate every grain. This was pure, soul-satisfying nourishment with deep, layered flavor.

With all hesitations about *paniscia* cast aside, I started thinking on a practical level. Was it truly necessary to prepare two dishes to make one? Specifically, could I use our Almost Hands-Free Risotto method to combine the minestrone ingredients with the rice?

The trick in that recipe is to add most of the liquid to the rice up front rather than in stages, which helps the grains cook evenly so that you need to stir only a couple of times. We also cover the pot, which helps evenly distribute the heat so that every grain is tender.

## NEIGHBORING FLAVORS



At first blush, the mix of components in *paniscia* may seem odd, but it makes perfect sense from a geographical standpoint: The dish combines ingredients from Italy's Piedmont region in one pot.

I sautéed pancetta and then added the mirepoix. Next, I added the rice, salami, and wine, stirring until the wine was absorbed. I then incorporated hot chicken broth—which I had bubbling on a back burner—all at once. Cabbage went in next, followed by canned pinto beans (our favorite substitution for dried cranberry beans). A cup of hot water thinned the texture, and after a few minutes the rice was beautifully creamy. But the dish didn't taste very meaty. Also, I wondered if I could make one more shortcut by not preheating the broth.

For more savoriness, I added tomato paste and minced garlic and tripled the amount of salami. As for the broth question, the recipe worked seamlessly with room-temperature broth, saving me a pan to wash.

My streamlined recipe boasted tangy salami, just-wilted cabbage, and creamy beans, combined in a luscious risotto. Fresh parsley and red wine vinegar offset its rich flavors. And, though it's not traditional, I couldn't pass up a bit of grated Parmesan as well.

## RED WINE RISOTTO WITH BEANS (PANISCIA)

SERVES 6 TO 8

We prefer to use a smaller, individually packaged, dry Italian-style salami such as Genoa or *soppressata*, but unsliced deli salami can be used.

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 ounces pancetta, chopped fine
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 1 carrot, chopped fine
- 1 celery rib, chopped fine
- Salt and pepper
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1½ cups Arborio rice
- 6 ounces salami, cut into ¼-inch dice
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 cup dry red wine
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 small head green cabbage, halved, cored, and cut into ½-inch pieces (4 cups)
- 1 (15-ounce) can pinto beans, rinsed
- 1 cup hot water, plus extra as needed
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup), plus extra for serving
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 teaspoons red wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

1. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add pancetta and cook, stirring occasionally, until beginning to brown, 3 to 5 minutes.



Though it's not traditional to *paniscia*, we stir in grated Parmesan at the end to add salty depth.

Add onion, carrot, celery, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are softened, 5 to 7 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, 30 seconds. Add rice and salami and cook, stirring frequently, until rice grains are translucent around edges, about 3 minutes.

2. Stir in tomato paste and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add wine and cook, stirring constantly, until fully absorbed, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in broth, reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer for 10 minutes, stirring halfway through simmering.

3. Stir in cabbage and continue to cook, covered, until almost all liquid has been absorbed and rice is just al dente, 6 to 9 minutes longer.

4. Add beans and hot water and stir gently and constantly until risotto is creamy, about 3 minutes. Remove from heat, cover, and let stand for 5 minutes. Stir in Parmesan and butter. If desired, add up to 1 cup extra hot water to create fluid, pourable consistency. Stir in vinegar and season with salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle with parsley and serve immediately, passing extra Parmesan separately.



## WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](https://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18)

# Rome's Greatest Little-Known Pasta

The porky-peppery flavors of *pasta alla gricia* deserve big recognition.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

Rome has four iconic—and outrageously good—pasta dishes: *cacio e pepe*, *amatriciana*, *carbonara*, and *gricia*. I've long been a huge fan of the more well-known first three but had never tried *gricia*, which features *guanciale* (cured hog jowls), ground black pepper, and tangy, salty Pecorino Romano. So when my colleague Sasha Marx, who grew up in Rome, offered to make it for lunch on a quiet day in the test kitchen, I couldn't refuse.

Sasha put a pot of rigatoni on to boil while he sautéed chopped *guanciale* in a skillet. When the pork was deeply browned but still retained a tender chew, he removed it, leaving behind its rendered fat. In went the drained rigatoni, which was only halfway cooked (also known as *al chiodo*, or “to the nail”), along with a lot of pasta water—roughly 2 cups. As he let the rigatoni simmer until it was *al dente*, he stirred it with the starchy water and pork fat to form a creamy sauce, a technique known as *mantecare*. Finally, he returned the browned *guanciale* to the mix, along with a few more splashes of pasta water, lots of pepper, and grated Pecorino.

It was a memorable lunch: The porky *guanciale* was at the forefront, followed by the heat of the pepper and the tang of the cheese; it all formed a rich yet delicately creamy sauce to coat the rigatoni.

But when I made the dish (using pancetta since *guanciale* can be hard to find), it became clear that the technique was more art than science: As the *al chiodo* pasta cooks through, it absorbs some of the pasta water and releases starch to help emulsify the water



You're 30 minutes away from authentic Roman pasta.

and fat into a creamy sauce. How much pasta water to add depends on knowing how much more cooking the pasta needs and how much water it will absorb. And if there isn't enough pasta water to maintain the emulsion, the sauce will be broken and greasy. I wanted to remove the guesswork for those times when I can't give dinner my undivided attention.

That would mean using the more straightforward approach of adding *al dente* pasta to a finished sauce. But rather than use the standard 4 quarts of water to boil the pasta, I scaled the water to 2 quarts (unsalted since the pancetta and Pecorino contributed plenty of salt). This way, the water would have double the starch, helping ensure emulsification.

I added 2 cups of the starchy pasta water to the rendered fat and boiled the mixture for a few minutes. This not only caused some evaporation to further concentrate the starch but also broke the fat into smaller, more numerous droplets. I stirred in the *al dente* pasta and the browned pancetta, followed by the Pecorino, transforming the liquid from thin and brothy to nicely emulsified.

This method was nearly foolproof, but I made a final tweak to guarantee consistent results. I boiled the fat-water mixture not for a specified time but to a specified volume: 1½ cups. This way, I'd always use the same amount of liquid to coat the pasta.

With this recipe for *gricia* at the ready, I couldn't wait until it was my turn to make lunch.

## PASTA ALLA GRICIA (RIGATONI WITH PANCETTA AND PECORINO ROMANO)

SERVES 6

Because this pasta is quite rich, serve it in slightly smaller portions with a green vegetable or salad. For the best results, use the highest-quality pancetta you can find. If you can find *guanciale*, we recommend using it and increasing the browning time in step 2 to 10 to 12 minutes. Because we call for cutting the pancetta to a specified thickness, we recommend having it cut to order at the deli counter; avoid presliced or preduced products. Our recipe for Pasta alla Gricia (Rigatoni with Pancetta and Pecorino Romano) for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](https://cooksillustrated.com/dec18).

- 8 ounces pancetta, sliced ¼ inch thick
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 pound rigatoni
- 1 teaspoon coarsely ground pepper, plus extra for serving
- 2 ounces Pecorino Romano cheese, grated fine (1 cup), plus extra for serving

1. Slice each round of pancetta into rectangular pieces that measure about ½ inch by 1 inch.

2. Heat pancetta and oil in large Dutch oven over medium-low heat, stirring frequently, until fat is rendered and pancetta is deep golden brown but still has slight pinkish hue, 8 to 10 minutes, adjusting heat as necessary to keep pancetta from browning too quickly. Using slotted spoon, transfer pancetta to bowl; set aside. Pour fat from pot into liquid measuring cup (you should have ¼ to ⅓ cup fat; discard any extra). Return fat to Dutch oven.

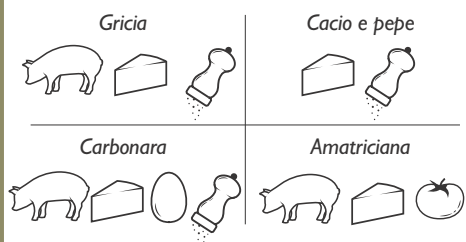
3. While pancetta cooks, set colander in large bowl. Bring 2 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add pasta and cook, stirring often, until *al dente*. Drain pasta in prepared colander, reserving cooking water.

4. Add pepper and 2 cups reserved cooking water to Dutch oven with fat and bring to boil over high heat. Boil mixture rapidly, scraping up any browned bits, until emulsified and reduced to 1½ cups, about 5 minutes. (If you've reduced it too far, add more reserved cooking water to equal 1½ cups.)

5. Reduce heat to low, add pasta and pancetta, and stir to evenly coat. Add Pecorino and stir until cheese is melted and sauce is slightly thickened, about 1 minute. Off heat, adjust sauce consistency with remaining reserved cooking water as needed. Transfer pasta to platter and serve immediately, passing extra pepper and extra Pecorino separately.

### The Roman Pasta Quartet

Four simple pasta dishes serve as pillars of Roman cuisine. Cooks debate the precise details, but the handful of ingredients that goes into each is well established.



#### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](https://cooksillustrated.com/dec18)

# Moroccan Lentil and Chickpea Soup

Spices play more than just a supporting role in this hearty North African soup.

BY STEVE DUNN

If you only know lentil soup as a plain and rather homogeneous dish, prepare to be wowed by the Moroccan version known as *harira*. Not only is this soup, which is native to the Maghreb region of North Africa, full of warm spices and fresh herbs, but it's usually bulked up with chickpeas or fava beans, pasta or rice, tomatoes, hearty greens, and sometimes even lamb, beef, or chicken. The hearty base is usually brightened with a good bit of lemon juice and maybe a spoonful of the spicy North African chili paste, harissa. No wonder it's often the first dish Muslims eat when they break their daily fast during Ramadan.

Like countless other regional dishes, harira's exact ingredients vary from region to region and even from family to family. I wanted my version to be doable on a weeknight and ideally call mainly for staples I already had on hand. I also decided to omit any meat—with all the other robust flavors and textures in the mix, I wasn't sure what more it could offer.

Happily, dried lentils take only about 20 minutes to cook. Since fava beans in any form are hard to find, I opted for chickpeas—canned was a must. Harira recipes can call for a dozen or more spices, but I pared down the list to five that would



Lemon and herbs balance the soup's warm spices.

contribute different flavor notes: cumin and cinnamon for warmth; smoked paprika for depth; coriander for nutty, floral notes; and a tiny bit of crushed red pepper for a hint of heat. Instead of the dried ginger I saw in some recipes, I opted for the brighter zing of fresh ginger. I decided to limit the fresh herbs to cilantro and parsley, and to use an abundance of them, a total of more than 1 cup. I began by sautéing onion, celery, garlic, and ginger in oil and then added tomato paste, my dried spices, and the fresh herbs. Dried lentils, canned chickpeas, and water went in next, followed by crushed tomatoes and a handful of orzo, a common choice. When the pasta was halfway cooked, I added some chopped Swiss chard before finishing the soup with lemon juice. The result? My soup tasted more like Italian minestrone than North African harira.

In my next batch, I eliminated the tomato paste and increased the smoked paprika and coriander, two of the most distinctive spices in the mix. For more depth, I also replaced half the water with chicken broth (any more and the soup tasted too chicken-y).

My soup was just about there, but it lacked the freshness of some versions I'd tried. The solution: I reserved  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup each of the parsley and cilantro to add off the heat before serving.

My tasters certainly agreed: This wonderfully complex-tasting, spice-filled soup, made almost entirely from pantry ingredients, brings humble lentils to a whole new level.

## MOROCCAN LENTIL AND CHICKPEA SOUP (HARIRA)

SERVES 6 TO 8

For a vegetarian version, substitute vegetable broth for the chicken broth and water. We like to garnish this soup with a small amount of harissa, a fiery North African chili paste, which is available at some supermarkets. For our DIY version, see page 110.

- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped fine
- 2 celery ribs, chopped fine
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 2 teaspoons ground coriander
- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon ground cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon red pepper flakes
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup minced fresh cilantro
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup minced fresh parsley
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 4 cups water
- 1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas, rinsed
- 1 cup brown lentils, picked over and rinsed
- 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup orzo
- 4 ounces Swiss chard, stemmed and cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- Salt and pepper
- Lemon wedges

1. Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add onion and celery and cook, stirring frequently, until translucent and starting to brown, 7 to 8 minutes. Reduce heat to medium, add garlic and ginger, and cook until fragrant, 1 minute. Stir in coriander, paprika, cumin, cinnamon, and pepper flakes and cook for 1 minute. Stir in  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cilantro and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup parsley and cook for 1 minute.

2. Stir in broth, water, chickpeas, and lentils; increase heat to high and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low, partially cover, and gently simmer until lentils are just tender, about 20 minutes.

3. Stir in tomatoes and orzo and simmer, partially covered, for 7 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in chard and continue to cook, partially covered, until orzo is tender, about 5 minutes longer. Off heat, stir in lemon juice, remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup cilantro, and remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup parsley. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, passing lemon wedges separately.

## Spice Cabinet Need a Refresh? Now's the Time.



Our soup calls for more than 5 teaspoons of dried spices—so make sure yours are fresh. How to tell? Give them a sniff. If they've lost their pungent aroma, it's time to replace them. In general, ground spices retain their flavor and aroma for about a year when stored in a cool, dark place.

### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/apr18)

# Brazilian Shrimp and Fish Stew

This coconut milk–based stew has such big flavor yet comes together so quickly that it sounded too good to be true—until we made it for ourselves.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

Every region with a coastline seems to boast its own version of seafood stew—bouillabaisse, cioppino, gumbo, and chowder, to name a few. But I'd argue that Brazil's take, called *moqueca* (mo-KAY-kah), particularly the version popular in the country's northeastern region, known as Moqueca Baiana, is a standout among the rest. To make it, cooks typically marinate fish and/or shellfish in lime juice, salt, and garlic; stew the mixture in a clay pot with coconut milk and a few aromatic vegetables and herbs; drizzle the dish with sweet, nutty African *dendê* (palm) oil and a creamy, tangy hot pepper sauce made from local *malagueta* chiles; and serve it with rice alongside. That combination of rich coconut milk, briny seafood, bright citrus, and savory vegetables produces a broth that's full-bodied, lush, and vibrant—a particularly complex concoction compared with stews based solely on dairy, tomatoes, or broth.

But here's an even bigger selling point: Moqueca is fast and easy to make, and except for the fish and condiments, you might even have most of the ingredients on hand already. Dare I say it's one of the most impressive dinners you can throw together on a weeknight, not to mention serve to company?

That doesn't mean you can't make a bad batch. As with any seafood stew, I found that the fish could go from delicately tender to tough and chewy in a flash. And the broth could be either thin and lackluster or exceedingly rich. My goal: a well-balanced, satisfying stew teeming with pristine, perfectly cooked seafood.

## Gone Fishin'

In Brazil, moqueca is made with just about any type and combination of seafood. For simplicity's sake, I settled on just two kinds: shrimp and cod. Both are widely available and would provide great texture: plump-but-tender snap from the shrimp and firm, delicate meatiness from the cod.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/apr18)



Adding the seafood to the boiling coconut milk mixture and then turning off the heat guarantees perfectly cooked shrimp and fish.

I'll be honest: I had a feeling that the marinade, or at least the lime juice, might do more harm than good. Soaking seafood in an acidic liquid such as lime juice causes its proteins to denature and its flesh to turn opaque and firm, much like it does when heated. That's a good thing if you're making ceviche, but what benefit would it provide to seafood I then

planned to cook? Would it give the fish and shrimp more acidic punch?

I set up a side-by-side test to find out. For each batch, I combined a pound each of large shrimp (a reasonably meaty size that wouldn't cook too fast) and cod that I'd cut into chunks. I marinated the first batch of seafood in garlic, salt, and a few tablespoons of lime juice and simply tossed the second batch with garlic and salt (both of which, we've proven in experiments, penetrate foods during marinating). Then I prepared two batches of stew, softening chopped onion, red and green bell peppers, and cilantro in two Dutch ovens (the best alternative to the traditional clay pot). I followed with canned tomatoes (a year-round alternative to the traditional fresh tomatoes) and coconut milk and then the seafood—the batch marinated with lime juice in one pot and the batch without lime juice in the other. I covered the pots and let them simmer for just 5 minutes, hoping that would give the flavors enough time to meld without overcooking the seafood.

I'd guessed right: There was nary a trace of bright citrus flavor in the seafood that had been marinated with lime juice, and its texture was rather chewy and dry. But, admittedly, the seafood in the other stew was also overcooked, and in both cases the broth was thin and overwhelmed by coconutty sweetness.

Thickening the broth was as simple as pureeing the canned tomatoes, the onion, and some of the cilantro in the food processor and then sautéing the mixture briefly with the softened bell peppers to allow some

## Multifaceted Flavor

By hitting a range of different flavor notes, our *moqueca* delivers surprising complexity with little effort and a short ingredient list (including many staples you may already have in your pantry).



### CREAMY RICHNESS

Coconut milk and extra-virgin olive oil



### BRIGHTNESS

Lime juice and tomatoes



### AROMATIC DEPTH

Cilantro, onion, bell peppers, and garlic



### TANGY HEAT

Pickled hot cherry peppers



of the puree's excess moisture to evaporate. Even though I hadn't increased the amount of tomato, onion, or cilantro, the thoroughly processed mixture ably tempered the coconut milk's sweetness; I also added lime juice directly to the pot with the seafood to make up for the lime juice I'd ditched as a marinade. Now the stew had the rich but vibrant flavor profile I was trying to achieve. But could I find a way to cook the seafood even more gently so it would stay moist and tender?

### Shut It Down

The answer was to shut off the stove. We've had good luck in the past poaching delicate proteins such as chicken breasts by heating the cooking liquid, adding the food, covering the pot, removing the pot from the heat, and allowing the liquid's residual heat to cook the food very gently.

Shrimp and cod are easy to overcook, so I wanted to be conservative with the temperature of the liquid. For my first test I let the broth come to just a simmer before adding the seafood to the pot and cutting the heat. But when I checked the seafood after several minutes, the fish and shrimp were still translucent. I realized that the simmering liquid just didn't have enough residual heat to fully cook the 2 pounds of seafood. I tried again, this time bringing the stew to a full boil, gently stirring in the seafood so it was evenly submerged, and then removing the covered pot from the heat. After a 15-minute wait, I had perfectly moist, tender shrimp and cod.

### Fiery Finish

Back to the accompaniments. I tracked down some dendé oil and realized that its distinctively nutty character would be impossible to replicate, so I decided to leave it out. If you can find it, you can season individual bowls to taste. But start small, as its flavor is quite strong. The thin, spicy malagueta chiles used to make the tangy pepper sauce weren't easy to find either, but I was able to approximate them with

vinegar-packed hot cherry peppers. I pulsed these in a food processor with a little onion and a bit of sugar to temper the heat plus extra-virgin olive oil to add creamy body. The sauce brought such tang and brightness to the stew that I decided to stir some of it directly into the pot right before serving, as well as pass it at the table. If there were any leftovers, I'd stash the sauce in the fridge to punch up other soups and stews—and even eggs, meats, and grains.

When all was said and done, I'd made one of the most complex, satisfying stews I'd ever tasted from (mostly) pantry staples—and in just about 45 minutes.

“Delicious broth and tender seafood.

The plates were beautiful—and pretty much licked clean.”

—Home recipe tester

## BRAZILIAN SHRIMP AND FISH STEW (MOQUECA)

SERVES 6

Pickled hot cherry peppers are usually sold jarred, next to the pickles or jarred roasted red peppers at the supermarket. Haddock or other firm-fleshed, flaky white fish may be substituted for cod. We prefer untreated shrimp, but if your shrimp are treated with sodium, do not add salt to the shrimp in step 2. Serve with steamed white rice.

### Pepper Sauce

- 4 pickled hot cherry peppers (3 ounces)
- ½ onion, chopped coarse
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ⅛ teaspoon sugar
- Salt

### Stew

- 1 pound large shrimp (26 to 30 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed
- 1 pound skinless cod fillets (¾ to 1 inch thick), cut into 1 ½-inch pieces



### A FULL BOIL IS KEY

Once the entire surface is bubbling, it's time to add the seafood.



AS THE STEW COOLS, THE SEAFOOD COOKS



### Best-Ever Hot Sauce?

The tangy, creamy hot pepper sauce for our *moqueca*—made with pickled cherry peppers, onion, olive oil, and a pinch of sugar—is so good that we guarantee you're going to want to make more to put on everything from eggs to tacos to rice.

- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- Salt and pepper
- 1 onion, chopped coarse
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes
- ¾ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 (14-ounce) can coconut milk
- 2 tablespoons lime juice

**1. FOR THE PEPPER SAUCE:** Process all ingredients in food processor until smooth, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Season with salt to taste and transfer to separate bowl. Rinse out processor bowl.

**2. FOR THE STEW:** Toss shrimp and cod with garlic, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in bowl. Set aside.

**3.** Process onion, tomatoes and their juice, and ¼ cup cilantro in food processor until finely chopped and mixture has texture of pureed salsa, about 30 seconds.

**4.** Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add red and green bell peppers and ½ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 5 to 7 minutes. Add onion-tomato mixture and ½ teaspoon salt. Reduce heat to medium and cook, stirring frequently, until puree has reduced and thickened slightly, 3 to 5 minutes (pot should not be dry).

**5.** Increase heat to high, stir in coconut milk, and bring to boil (mixture should be bubbling across entire surface). Add seafood mixture and lime juice and stir to evenly distribute seafood, making sure all pieces are submerged in liquid. Cover pot and remove from heat. Let stand until shrimp and cod are opaque and just cooked through, 15 minutes.

**6.** Gently stir in 2 tablespoons pepper sauce and remaining ½ cup cilantro, being careful not to break up cod too much. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, passing remaining pepper sauce separately.

### TECHNIQUE

#### COOKING WITH RESIDUAL HEAT

To gently and evenly cook the delicate fish and shrimp in our *moqueca*, bring the stew to a full boil, and then add the seafood and remove the pot from the heat. Letting food cook in residual heat—a technique we've used in several other recipes, such as Weeknight Roast Chicken, Shrimp Salad, and even Foolproof Boiled Corn—provides insurance against overcooking. After 15 minutes off the heat, the temperatures of the seafood and the cooking liquid equalize at about 140 degrees, our preferred doneness temperature for whitefish such as cod.

Making sure the stew is at a full boil before adding the cold seafood is key for proper cooking—note the significant drop in temperature at the outset. If the stew wasn't at 212 degrees, the seafood would be undercooked.

# Really Good (Oven) Fries

Roasted potato planks aren't French fries. To mimic the real deal's delicately crispy crust and rich flavor in the oven, you first have to understand what makes a fry a fry.

BY LAN LAM

**P**eel, cut, fry, let cool, fry again, drain. Repeat with remaining batches. Let oil cool and, finally, discard oil.

I think I speak for French fry lovers everywhere when I say that the tawny, crispy crusts and velvety interiors you get from a proper fry job are worth all the grease—elbow and otherwise. But given what the process entails, I make real fries about as often as I make croissants or pasta from scratch, which is to say almost never.

Most people's alternative to deep-fried fries is oven fries, which are usually less fussy to make, often less greasy—and always a disappointment. OK, that might be a bit harsh, but I think you'll agree that oven fries frequently fall short. The most basic methods call for simply tossing cut potatoes with a few tablespoons of oil, spreading them in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet, and roasting them in a hot oven for about 30 minutes, turning them a few times so that all sides make contact with the hot surface and brown. More-involved recipes take the time to parcook (either usually by boiling or microwaving) the cut potatoes before the oven phase, which helps the insides turn tender by the time the outsides are brown.

The perks are obvious: No lengthy potato prep work, no grease-splattered stovetop to clean, no vat



A mere 3 tablespoons of oil is all it takes to produce spuds with a crispy crust—and it's actually the key to their rich "fry" flavor.

of hot oil to deal with afterward. But in my experience, oven-fried potatoes rarely cook up with a French fry's evenly golden exterior, instead emerging pale or flabby in spots or shriveled and tough at the edges. Worse still, they lack that unmistakably lush, nutty, subtly savory "fry" flavor of French fries. What do they taste like? Compromise and wasted potential.

But what if you could have it both ways: the flavor and crispiness of deep-fried fries produced with no more work than roasting potatoes? For the sake of French fry lovers everywhere, I had to try.

## Oven Obstacles

To understand what goes wrong when you "fry" in the oven, I took a closer look at the aforementioned basic method. I cut 2 pounds of peeled russet potatoes into ½-inch-thick planks; tossed them with 4 tablespoons of vegetable oil, a common amount used in other oven fry recipes; spread them on a heavy-duty rimmed baking sheet that wouldn't warp in the hot oven; and cooked them at 425 degrees for about 30 minutes. (If the oven were any hotter, the oil would

smoke and give the fries an acrid flavor.) I flipped the planks a few times during cooking so that they could brown all over.

There were two problems. First, the potatoes weren't tender by the time their exteriors were brown, which explained why some oven fry recipes called for parcooking the potatoes. Second, while each side of the potatoes was at least somewhat brown, only the sides originally in contact with the hot baking sheet were actually crispy; the other surfaces were tough and leathery.

Those flaws made sense when I considered how fried fries are typically made. Most recipes call for frying the potatoes twice. The first fry, often called blanching, cooks the potatoes through and causes the surface starch to gel. You then remove the potatoes and let them cool briefly before frying them again, which rapidly drives the water out of the starch gel at the surface, leaving behind tiny cavities. It's these cavities that lighten the crust during the second fry so that it shatters when you bite through it.

The problem with my oven fries was that the water in the potatoes wasn't heating rapidly. It was heating slowly, because air doesn't conduct heat as quickly as oil does. Consequently, no air pockets are formed and the starch molecules nestle together, leading to a tough crust.

## Proof's in the Pudding

To ensure tender fries, parcooking the potatoes was definitely in order. I could blanch them in water, but it would be more efficient to cover the baking sheet tightly with foil for the first part of cooking so that they could steam. After a few trial rounds, I determined that about 12 minutes under cover parcooked the potatoes enough that they would be fully tender by the end of the uncovered phase.

As for creating a crispy exterior, what if I could put a different starchy coating on the outside instead of relying on hot, bubbling oil to crisp the potato starch? Cornstarch is what I had in mind: Like those of potato starch, its particles are quite small, which is why we've had good luck in the past using it as a fry coating on everything from chicken wings to sweet potato wedges. Plus, its starch granules—much finer than those of potatoes—don't hold on to much water and don't hold on to it tightly, so it can easily form a crispy

## Don't Skip the Spray

Vegetable oil spray isn't just oil in a can, which is why it's more effective at preventing sticking than oil alone. It contains a surfactant (an ingredient that reduces tension between a surface and a liquid) called lecithin that helps the oil flow to coat the metal evenly, so it forms a thin, complete layer between the baking sheet and the food. As a result, the potatoes in our recipe don't stick and we can use less oil.



SLICK SOLUTION

crust. Plus, it's an ingredient that most cooks keep on hand. But instead of simply dusting cornstarch directly on the food, which we've found can leave a chalky film in your mouth, we prefer to mix the cornstarch with water to make a slurry. Doing so hydrates the starch, essentially creating a batter that coats the food.

I spent the next several tests mixing up different ratios of cornstarch and water, but I couldn't produce a batter that coated the potatoes evenly. Thinner slurries slid right off the potatoes and pooled on the sheet, while thicker batches formed goopy clumps. What I wanted was that loose, pudding-like consistency you get when cooking cornstarch in a warm liquid, as you

## WHAT PUTS THE "FRY" IN THESE POTATOES?

**CORNSTARCH SLURRY:** Microwaving a mixture of cornstarch and water for a few minutes evenly hydrates the starch molecules, creating a smooth, pudding-like mixture. This batter coats the potatoes evenly, forming a delicately crispy crust as it fries.



The slurry should have a thick, pudding-like texture.

**JUST ENOUGH OIL:** Coating the baking sheet with 3 tablespoons of oil gives our fries rich, truly fried flavor. More oil was unnecessary, and too little yielded fishy off-flavors since the less oil used, the faster it heats and the more it will break down into unpleasant flavor compounds.



Tilt the baking sheet to evenly coat it with oil.

would when thickening a sauce. So for the next test I microwaved the slurry (3 tablespoons of cornstarch mixed with  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of water) for a minute or so, giving it a stir periodically. That helped; the cornstarch absorbed the water and thickened into a smooth pudding that coated the potatoes beautifully. I had, in effect, re-created the starch gel found on the surface of traditional oil-blanching fries.

I arranged the slurry-covered spuds on the oiled baking sheet, covered the sheet tightly with greased aluminum foil (to prevent it from sticking), and cooked the potatoes for 12 minutes before pulling off the cover and letting the potatoes brown for about 10 more minutes. I then flipped the fries and let them brown for another 10 minutes. The results were better than any I'd had to date: On most pieces, the coating was crispy and delicate and gave way to a fluffy, evenly tender interior. The problem was that the oil was pooling on the baking sheet, leaving some of the fries saturated and a tad greasy and others almost dry, meaning that they stuck to the pan and didn't crisp. And they still didn't deliver that rich "fry" flavor.

## How Low Can You Go?

One quick change I made was to swap the russet potatoes for Yukon Gold potatoes, since the latter have a naturally buttery flavor that hinted at the richness of real fries. Their skins are also thinner than those of russets, so they didn't require peeling.

Oil pooling on the cooking surface is a problem we've run into before, most notably when we developed a recipe for Thick-Crust Sicilian-Style Pizza (March/April 2015). Our solution there was to spray the baking sheet with vegetable oil spray before coating it with oil. Odd as that sounds—grease held in place with grease—the cooking spray contains a key ingredient that oil doesn't: lecithin, a surfactant (an ingredient that reduces tension between a surface and a liquid) that helps the oil flow to coat the metal evenly and form a thin, complete layer between the baking sheet and the food.

I made another batch of fries, this time spraying the sheet before adding the 4 tablespoons of oil, and the results were much better. No more sticking, and the fries were evenly golden on the two flat sides. But now that the sticking wasn't a problem, did I even need 4 tablespoons of oil? After all, relative leanness is another supposed selling point of oven fries. Maybe I could get away with less, and that would help the greasiness, too.

I made several more batches, coating the potatoes with varying amounts of fat, including an ambitious batch where I used only the spray. I was able to take the oil down to 3 tablespoons and the fries still cooked up crispy; even better, the greasiness was gone and they delivered that rich, savory, from-the-fry-o-lator flavor (for more information, see "What Puts the 'Fry' in These Potatoes?").

These spuds cooked in the oven truly deserved the title of "fries." They were delicately crispy on the outside, fluffy within, and full of fry flavor. In other words, they tasted like victory.

## THICK-CUT OVEN FRIES

SERVES 4

Choose potatoes that are 4 to 6 inches in length to ensure well-proportioned fries. Trimming thin slices from the ends of the potatoes in step 2 ensures that each fry has two flat surfaces for even browning. This recipe's success is dependent on a heavy-duty rimmed baking sheet that will not warp in the heat of the oven. Spraying the sheet with vegetable oil spray will help the oil spread evenly and prevent sticking. The rate at which the potatoes brown is dependent on your baking sheet and oven. After removing the foil from the baking sheet in step 5, monitor the color of the potatoes carefully to prevent scorching. Our recipe for Thick-Cut Oven Fries for Two is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18).

- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 pounds Yukon gold potatoes, unpeeled
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- Salt

1. Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Generously spray rimmed baking sheet with vegetable oil spray. Pour oil into prepared sheet and tilt sheet until surface is evenly coated with oil.

2. Halve potatoes lengthwise and turn halves cut sides down on cutting board. Trim thin slice from both long sides of each potato half; discard trimmings. Slice potatoes lengthwise into  $\frac{1}{3}$ - to  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick planks.

3. Combine  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup water and cornstarch in large bowl, making sure no lumps of cornstarch remain on bottom of bowl. Microwave, stirring every 20 seconds, until mixture begins to thicken, 1 to 3 minutes. Remove from microwave and continue to stir until mixture thickens to pudding-like consistency. (If necessary, add up to 2 tablespoons water to achieve correct consistency.)

4. Transfer potatoes to bowl with cornstarch mixture and toss until each plank is evenly coated. Arrange planks on prepared sheet, leaving small gaps between planks. (Some cornstarch mixture will remain in bowl.) Cover sheet tightly with lightly greased aluminum foil and bake for 12 minutes.

5. Remove foil from sheet and bake until bottom of each fry is golden brown, 10 to 18 minutes. Remove sheet from oven and, using thin metal spatula, carefully flip each fry. Return sheet to oven and continue to bake until second sides are golden brown, 10 to 18 minutes longer. Sprinkle fries with  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt. Using spatula, carefully toss fries to distribute salt. Transfer fries to paper towel-lined plate and season with salt to taste. Serve.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18)

# Buttery Spring Vegetables

No disrespect to dessert, but perfectly cooked vegetables can dazzle, too.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

Recipes for butter-braised spring vegetables abound, but don't let them lead you astray. Braising simply doesn't work for tender spring produce.

Winter vegetables are another story: If you slowly braise sturdy carrots, parsnips, and potatoes in butter over low heat in a covered pot, they stew in their own juices, turning perfectly tender with an earthy sweetness. But do the same with delicate asparagus and peas and you get sodden, drab mush.

That's why most so-called butter-braised spring vegetables aren't technically braised. Instead they're cooked rapidly in a covered skillet with a small amount of butter and water or broth. But I reject those recipes, too. Because the vegetables cook directly in the buttery liquid, they become dull and waterlogged and the buttery richness is lost. For spring vegetables that retained their vibrant colors and crisp textures and butter that clung to their surfaces, I'd have to find another way.

But first, which vegetables to cook? Asparagus, emblematic of spring, was a must. Sugar snap peas would provide the sweetness of their shelled cousins but with extra, well, snap. And I confess I chose radishes mostly for their dazzling color. Turnips' hint of bitterness rounded out my medley.

To prevent the vegetables from becoming soggy, I decided to cook them in a steamer basket over a small amount of water. I halved the radishes and cut the asparagus and turnips to match the size of the whole sugar snap peas, hoping similar dimensions



An emulsified sauce coats crisp-tender vegetables.

would help the vegetables cook at the same rate.

It didn't quite work out, though. The asparagus and turnips were perfectly crisp-tender after 5 minutes, but by that time the peas had long lost their snap. Much of the radishes' color had leached into the water below, and their crisp pepperiness had given way to a vaguely cabbage-like flavor.

For my next batch, I gave the asparagus and turnips a 2-minute head start before adding the peas. And I added the radishes, cut into slim half-moons, just for the last minute to warm through. I lifted the steamer basket out of the saucepan, discarded the water, and tumbled the vegetables back into the saucepan. I stirred in some butter and a bit of salt and transferred everything to a platter.

The colors were beautiful and the vegetables nearly perfectly cooked. However, the butter had slipped right off the food and pooled on the platter.

For my next batch, I spread the vegetables on the platter right after steaming to let excess heat escape and prevent them from overcooking while I made a quick version of the French butter sauce called *beurre blanc*. An emulsion of flavorful liquid and butter, a *beurre blanc* coats food much better than butter alone.

I poured off most of the water from the saucepan and added minced shallot, white wine vinegar, salt, and a bit of sugar. Once the shallot softened, I whisked in chilled butter, tablespoon by tablespoon,

until the sauce had the viscosity of heavy cream. I added the vegetables to the sauce, gave them a stir, and returned everything to the platter, finishing with a light sprinkle of minced chives.

The result was a platter of buttery, vibrant, perfectly cooked vegetables worthy of a spring celebration—and certainly worth celebrating.

## BUTTERY SPRING VEGETABLES

SERVES 6

To ensure that the turnips are tender, peel them thoroughly to remove not only the tough outer skin but also the fibrous layer of flesh just beneath. This recipe works best with thick asparagus spears that are between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in diameter.

- 1 pound turnips, peeled and cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch by  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch by 2-inch batons
- 1 pound asparagus, trimmed and cut on bias into 2-inch lengths
- 8 ounces sugar snap peas, strings removed, trimmed
- 4 large radishes, halved and sliced thin
- 1 tablespoon minced shallot
- 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons white wine vinegar
- $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon sugar
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 6 pieces and chilled
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh chives

1. Bring 1 cup water to boil in large saucepan over high heat. Place steamer basket over boiling water. Add turnips and asparagus to basket, cover saucepan, and reduce heat to medium. Cook until vegetables are slightly softened, about 2 minutes. Add snap peas, cover, and cook until snap peas are crisp-tender, about 2 minutes. Add radishes, cover, and cook for 1 minute. Lift basket out of saucepan and transfer vegetables to platter. Spread into even layer to allow steam to dissipate. Discard all but 3 tablespoons liquid from saucepan.

2. Return saucepan to medium heat. Add shallot, vinegar, salt, and sugar and cook until mixture is reduced to 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoons (it will barely cover bottom of saucepan), about 2 minutes. Reduce heat to low. Add butter, 1 piece at a time, whisking vigorously after each addition, until butter is incorporated and sauce has consistency of heavy cream, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove saucepan from heat. Add vegetables and stir to coat. Dry platter and return vegetables to platter. Sprinkle with chives and serve.

## STAGGER YOUR STEAMING

Perfectly timed steaming results in perfectly crisp-tender vegetables.



## WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/jun18)

# Sweeter and Easier Than Broccoli

The trick to cooking slender, verdant broccolini is best illustrated using long division.

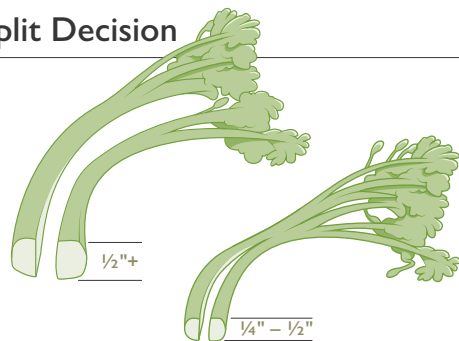
BY STEVE DUNN

You have to hand it to the botanists at Sakata Seed Corporation. When they crossbred conventional broccoli and Chinese broccoli in the early 1990s, the resulting broccolini plant combined the best traits of the two parents with virtually none of their flaws. Whereas broccoli is thick and sturdy and its flavor can be slightly bitter, broccolini is svelte, with the asparagus-like crunch and sweetness of Chinese broccoli. Broccolini also trades broccoli's densely packed crowns and the Chinese version's abundance of cabbagey leaves for just a few delicate, mild-tasting florets and greens. These traits make broccolini easy to prepare, too. There's no fibrous skin to strip away, no shrub-like crowns to break down, and no floret debris to sweep from the cutting board.

A lot of recipes call for treating broccolini like broccoli, searing or roasting it so that it develops flavorful browning. I did the same initially, but browning the vegetable overwhelmed its sweetness, and by the time color had developed, the once-crisp stalks were limp. So I decided to skip the sear and find a method that would preserve broccolini's delicate profile while allowing me to season it simply.

One way would be to blanch and shock the vegetable before sautéing it, plunging the whole stalks into boiling salted water and then submerging them in ice water to stop the cooking. The upshot is that the vegetable turns bright green, loses its raw crunch, and needs only a few minutes in a skillet to turn tender, thus minimizing browning. But I took a shortcut, a combined steam-sauté method that employs a covered skillet and just enough salted water to provide ample steam. Once the water was boiling, I added two trimmed broccolini bunches, threw on a lid, and lowered the heat. When I uncovered the skillet a few

## Split Decision



Cut stalks thicker than  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in half lengthwise; for stalks between  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch and  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick, slice the stalks only up to the florets, leaving the florets intact.



Broccolini is an elegant alternative to broccoli.

minutes later, the water had mostly evaporated (that happens, even with a lid on) and the stalks and florets were vibrant green. But they weren't as perfectly cooked as they appeared; the thinner stems were crisp-tender, but the thicker pieces hid still-crunchy cores.

To equalize the cooking, I chopped the thicker ends into pieces and added them first to give them a head start, which worked fine. But in the same way that I'm hesitant to solve the age-old Thanksgiving problem—white and dark meat cook at different rates—by cooking turkey parts instead of a whole bird, I didn't want to forgo the vegetable's elegant length if I could help it. So instead of chopping the stems, I divided them lengthwise: the widest pieces from floret to base and the moderately thick pieces into two thinner "legs" that remained attached at the base of the florets. I left thinner lengths whole.

This quick knife work made all the difference, except that the stems no longer fit in a single layer in the skillet and those in direct contact with the pan cooked through more quickly. The solution was as simple as rearranging the stems midsteam so that each piece spent time on the skillet bottom.

I continued to cook the stalks until any excess liquid had evaporated and then, off the heat, tossed in some butter and various combinations of seasonings that complemented the broccolini's sweet flavor. I now had a side dish I could serve with, well, anything.

## PAN-STEAMED BROCCOLINI WITH SHALLOT

SERVES 4 TO 6

Shake the rinsed broccolini over the sink to rid it of excess water before slicing the stems. If your skillet lid does not fit securely and allows too much steam to escape, add a bit more water in step 2 to keep the skillet from drying out. Our recipes for Pan-Steamed Broccolini with Lemon and Capers and Pan-Steamed Broccolini with Garlic and Mustard are available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/apr18).

- 1 pound broccolini, trimmed and rinsed
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup water
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 teaspoons minced shallot
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon pepper

1. Cut broccolini stalks measuring more than  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in diameter at base in half lengthwise. Cut stalks measuring  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in diameter at base in half lengthwise, starting below where florets begin and keeping florets intact. Leave stalks measuring less than  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch in diameter at base whole.

2. Bring water to boil in 12-inch skillet over high heat. Add broccolini and sprinkle with salt. Cover, reduce heat to medium-low, and cook for 3 minutes. Uncover and gently toss broccolini with tongs; cover and continue to cook until broccolini is bright green and crisp-tender, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Uncover and cook until any remaining liquid evaporates, about 30 seconds. Remove skillet from heat.

3. Push broccolini to 1 side of skillet. Add butter, shallot, lemon zest, thyme, and pepper to cleared side of skillet and stir to combine. Using tongs, toss broccolini with butter mixture until evenly coated, transfer to platter, and serve.

## PAN-STEAMED BROCCOLINI WITH GINGER

Reduce lemon zest to  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon. Substitute 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger and  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon honey for shallot and thyme.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/apr18)

# How to Grill Tomatoes

Grilling enhances tomatoes with smoky char while preserving their summery taste. But don't simply throw them onto the fire or you'll end up with a mushy mess.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

Here's an idea for showcasing summer tomatoes that you may not have considered: Grill them. A stint over a hot fire softens the fruit's flesh and concentrates its sweetness. Meanwhile, the smoky char of the grill adds another dimension of flavor. If that's not enough to grab your attention, consider this: Tomatoes cook quickly, so you can grill them while your steak or other protein is resting and the coals are still hot.

For my first attempt, I used the easiest approach I could think of: simply placing 2 pounds of whole tomatoes on the grill. But by the time the fruit had sufficiently charred on the exterior, it was starting to turn mushy and disintegrate within. Plus, the interior didn't pick up any grill flavor to speak of.

It worked better to cut the tomatoes in half so that both the interiors and the exteriors could spend some time in contact with the grill grate. This way, there was lots of surface area available to quickly caramelize and char before the flesh started to break down too much. I also found that ripe but still firm tomatoes held their shape best during and after grilling—super-squishy ones fell apart. What's more, the way the tomatoes were cut had a huge impact on the results: It was essential to halve them along their equators, not pole to pole. Cut this way, the tomatoes stayed intact even as they began to soften (see "The Best Way to Halve Tomatoes for Grilling").

While the grill heated up—which took about 15 minutes—I sprinkled the raw tomato halves with salt and pepper and drizzled them with extra-virgin olive oil. Almost immediately, the salt began to draw liquid from the tomato flesh via osmosis, which is just what I wanted. The drier the tomatoes were, the more easily caramelization could occur.

Leaving the tomato liquid in the bowl, I placed the tomatoes skin sides down on the grill. After a few minutes, I flipped them—only to have warmed seeds and liquid flood the coals. The next time around, I grilled the halves cut sides down for about 5 minutes and then flipped them skin sides down and cooked them roughly 5 minutes longer. With this approach, the skins acted as cradles during the second half of cooking, helping contain the flesh as it continued to soften.



Clockwise from top left: Grill the tomatoes while your protein rests and serve them as a simple side. Or make Grilled Tomato Salsa, Grilled Tomato Gazpacho, or Marinated Grilled Tomatoes with Fresh Mozzarella.

When the skins were adequately charred and the juices were bubbling, I pulled the tomatoes off the grill. They tasted sweet and savory, with a light smokiness, but they lacked a bit of brightness. I realized that the liquid shed during the salting step was loaded with fresh, raw tomato flavor, so I drizzled it onto the grilled halves. The fresh tomato juice captured the true essence of summer and beautifully complemented the richer taste of the grilled flesh.

These tomatoes were great for just about anything, including pasta, sandwiches, salads, soup, and sauces. To show off their versatility even further, I developed a simple grilled tomato salsa with onion, jalapeño, cilantro, and lime juice, as well as a marinated mixture of fresh mozzarella cheese and the tomatoes. And for a deeply flavorful twist on gazpacho, I pureed the tomatoes with cucumber, aromatics, olive oil, vinegar, and a slice of bread for body.

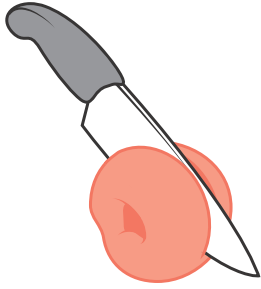


#### ▶ WATCH THE VIDEO

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## GRILLED TOMATOES MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

To serve the tomatoes as a simple side dish, top them with the reserved juice, 2 tablespoons of torn fresh basil leaves, 1 tablespoon of extra-virgin olive oil, and flake sea salt to taste. This recipe can easily be doubled.



1. Core 2 pounds ripe but firm tomatoes and halve along equator.



2. Toss tomatoes with 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in large bowl. Let stand for at least 15 minutes or up to 1 hour. Reserve any juice left in bowl.



3. Place tomatoes, cut sides down, on clean, oiled grate of hot grill and cook (covered if using gas) until charred and beginning to soften, 4 to 6 minutes.



4. Using tongs or thin metal spatula, carefully flip tomatoes and continue to cook (covered if using gas) until skin sides are charred and juice bubbles, 4 to 6 minutes longer. Transfer tomatoes to large plate. (Tomatoes can be refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

For the best results, use in-season, round tomatoes that are ripe yet a bit firm so they will hold their shape on the grill. Plum tomatoes may be used, but they will be drier in texture. If using plum tomatoes, halve them lengthwise. Supermarket vine-ripened tomatoes will work but won't be as flavorful.

For the recipes in which the tomatoes were chopped, I initially slipped off the skins since their texture was distracting. But because some of the smokiness of the grill does transfer into the skins, discarding them meant discarding smoky flavor. It worked much better to chop the skins separately and include them. This way, their flavor could permeate the dish without their texture being bothersome.

These tomatoes are so full-flavored and versatile that I plan on making them all summer long.

### GRILLED TOMATO GAZPACHO SERVES 4

For the best flavor, refrigerate the gazpacho overnight before serving. You can substitute red wine vinegar for the sherry vinegar, if desired.

- 1 recipe Grilled Tomatoes, room temperature, with juice reserved
- 1 small cucumber, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 slice hearty white sandwich bread, crust removed, torn into 1-inch pieces
- 1 small shallot, peeled and halved
- 1 small garlic clove, peeled and quartered
- 1 small serrano chile, stemmed and halved lengthwise
- Salt and pepper
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons finely minced fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon sherry vinegar, plus extra for seasoning
- Water

Process tomatoes and reserved juice, cucumber, bread, shallot, garlic, serrano, and 1 teaspoon salt in blender for 30 seconds. With blender running, slowly drizzle in oil; continue to process until completely

smooth, about 2 minutes longer. Strain soup through fine-mesh strainer into large measuring cup, using back of ladle or rubber spatula to press soup through strainer. Stir in parsley and vinegar. Add enough water to yield 4 cups soup. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours to chill and develop flavors. Season with salt, pepper, and extra vinegar to taste. Serve.

### GRILLED TOMATO SALSA MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

For more heat, reserve and mince the jalapeño ribs and seeds and add them to the salsa.

- 1 recipe Grilled Tomatoes, room temperature, with juice reserved
- ¼ cup finely chopped onion
- 1 jalapeño chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro
- 1–2 tablespoons lime juice
- Salt and pepper

Remove and reserve tomato skins; chop tomato flesh coarse and chop skins fine. Combine tomatoes, skins, reserved juice, onion, jalapeño, cilantro, and 1 tablespoon lime juice in medium bowl. Let stand at room temperature until flavors meld, about 30 minutes. Season with salt, pepper, and up to 1 tablespoon additional lime juice to taste. Serve. (Salsa can be refrigerated for up to 2 days; let come to room temperature before serving.)

### MARINATED GRILLED TOMATOES WITH FRESH MOZZARELLA MAKES ABOUT 3 CUPS

Serve this dish at room temperature by itself, alongside crusty bread, as a topping for bruschetta or grilled pizza, or as part of an antipasto platter.

### 1 recipe Grilled Tomatoes

- 8 ounces fresh mozzarella cheese, torn into bite-size pieces and patted dry
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup chopped fresh basil
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- Pinch red pepper flakes

Remove and reserve tomato skins; cut tomato flesh into ½-inch pieces and chop skins fine. Combine tomatoes, skins, mozzarella, oil, basil, vinegar, salt, pepper, and pepper flakes in bowl, ensuring that tomatoes and mozzarella are submerged in oil-vinegar mixture. Let stand at room temperature until flavors meld, up to 1 hour, stirring occasionally to ensure that tomatoes are evenly coated. Serve. (Mixture can be refrigerated for up to 2 days; let come to room temperature before serving.)

### TECHNIQUE

#### THE BEST WAY TO HALVE TOMATOES FOR GRILLING

Moisture evaporates via open seed pockets.



How you halve a tomato affects how well it will hold its shape during grilling. Cutting it pole to pole leaves intact seed pockets that will burst when heated, causing the tomato to slump. However, cutting it along the equator slashes the seed pockets so that moisture can escape and the tomato stays intact.

# Great Barley Side Dishes

Producing distinct, perfectly textured grains is as easy as boiling water.

BY STEVE DUNN

If you've only ever used barley to bulk up a brothy soup, consider this your introduction to another hearty grain with great versatility. Like farro, wheat berries, and brown rice, barley is nutty but neutral, so it pairs well with most seasonings and can deliver satisfying chew.

I wanted to feature barley in a handful of simple sides, so I cooked a batch using the absorption method that we commonly use for rice. I soon realized why barley is typically relegated to soup: After I'd simmered 1 cup of barley in 3 cups of water in a covered pot until the grains were tender and had absorbed all the liquid, the barley clumped together, bound by a starchy paste—think gluey oatmeal. Undeterred, I cooked more batches with all the different barleys I could find at the supermarket, and the results were all over the place: Depending on the barley product, the grains took anywhere from 20 minutes to 1 hour to cook and soaked up between 2½ and 4 cups of water.

It turns out that barley has two big strikes against it. Most barley sold in the United States is “pearled”—meaning that the inedible hull has been removed and that the grain has been pearled, or polished. The problem is that depending on the amount of abrasion used during pearling, different amounts of bran (or germ or endosperm) may be left intact. The more bran that is left intact, the more liquid and time barley needs to cook. What's more, barley is prone to releasing starch and clumping (see “Treat Barley Like Pasta”).

## Treat Barley Like Pasta

Barley is prone to clumping for two reasons: First, its starch granules burst relatively early in the cooking time. Second, the starch is sticky because it's loaded with amylopectin, the branching molecule that's responsible for the stickiness of short-grain rices. Boiling barley in a large volume of water, just as you would when cooking pasta, and then draining it prevents clumping because it dilutes the starch in abundant water, which we then drain away.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/jun18)

With this in mind, I turned to the pasta cooking method, in which the barley grains are cooked in a large volume of water and then drained. The cooking times still varied from product to product, but since I could periodically test the grains for doneness, that no longer mattered. Plus, draining the cooking water rid the grains of most of their surface starch, so they remained separate.

Before tossing the cooked barley with bold dressings, I spread the grains on a rimmed baking sheet to cool a bit. The cooled barley would be drier and thus less sticky and wouldn't wilt the fresh herbs I planned to combine it with. Once the grains were no longer steaming, I tossed them with a punchy lemon vinaigrette—a 1:1 ratio of oil to lemon juice rather than the typical 3:1 oil-to-acid ratio—to complement their earthy, nutty flavor, and I further brightened the mix with lemon zest, scallions, and generous amounts of fresh mint and cilantro. I flavored a second batch with a ginger-miso dressing to which I added celery and carrots for crunch; a third version included fresh fennel and dried apricots and was dressed with an orange juice–based vinaigrette. See? Barley's not just for soup anymore.

### BARLEY WITH LEMON AND HERBS

SERVES 6 TO 8

The cooking time will vary from product to product, so start checking for doneness after 25 minutes.

- 1½ cups pearled barley
- Salt and pepper
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons minced shallot
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest plus 3 tablespoons juice
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 6 scallions, sliced thin on bias
- ¼ cup minced fresh mint
- ¼ cup minced fresh cilantro

1. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper and set aside. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in Dutch oven. Add barley and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, adjusting heat to maintain gentle boil, until barley is tender with slight chew, 25 to 45 minutes.

2. While barley cooks, whisk oil, shallot, lemon zest and juice, mustard, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper together in large bowl.

3. Drain barley. Transfer to prepared sheet and spread into even layer. Let stand until no longer steaming, 5 to 7 minutes. Add barley to bowl with



For distinct grains, let the barley cool before dressing it.

dressing and toss to coat. Add scallions, mint, and cilantro and stir to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

### BARLEY WITH CELERY AND MISO DRESSING

Substitute 3 tablespoons seasoned rice vinegar, 1 tablespoon white miso paste, 1 tablespoon soy sauce, 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil, 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger, 1 minced garlic clove, 1 teaspoon packed brown sugar, and ¼ to ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes for olive oil, shallot, lemon zest and juice, mustard, salt, and pepper in step 2. Substitute 2 celery ribs, sliced thin on bias, and 2 peeled and grated carrots for scallions. Omit mint and increase cilantro to ½ cup.

### BARLEY WITH FENNEL, DRIED APRICOTS, AND ORANGE

Substitute 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar and ½ teaspoon grated orange zest plus 2 tablespoons juice for lemon zest and juice. Omit mustard. Reduce olive oil to 2 tablespoons and add 1 minced garlic clove to dressing in step 2. Substitute 20 chopped dried California apricots and 1 small fennel bulb, 2 tablespoons fronds minced, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and chopped fine, for scallions. Omit mint and substitute parsley for cilantro.



# Pasta Salad Rehab

Our fixes: Overcook the noodles. Raid the pantry. Puree the dressing.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

**M**ention pasta salad and most folks think of a hodgepodge of overly firm noodles, raw broccoli florets, and spongy canned black olives, all drenched in bottled Italian dressing. That's why my colleagues looked gleeful when I—not one of them—got the assignment of trying to rehab this sorry dish. But then I thought, I spend a lot of time perfecting hot pastas (often for this magazine), so why not give some attention to a cold one?

Before I started cooking, I settled on fusilli. Its corkscrew shape would trap dressing, and it's easy to spear with a fork. And right off the bat, I addressed the rubbery pasta problem. Instead of boiling the noodles until they were al dente, I cooked them longer until they were a little soft. Here's why: As pasta cools (whether in the refrigerator or under cold water), it goes through a process called retrogradation, in which the water in the pasta becomes bound up in starch crystals, making the pasta firm and dry. I made retrogradation work to my advantage by boiling the fusilli about 3 minutes past al dente and then running it under lots of cold water. As the pasta cooled, it went from almost mushy to just right.

Next up: mix-ins. Crunchy raw vegetables overshadow tender pasta and don't contribute much flavor. But I didn't want to take the time to grill or roast vegetables. Instead, I reached for pantry picks with less intrusive textures: chewy, sweet sun-dried tomatoes; briny kalamata olives and capers; and a whole jar of vinegary, spicy, slightly crunchy *pepperoncini*. For heartiness, I also included diced salami, and to balance its salty tang, bits of creamy fresh mozzarella. Finally, I mixed in arugula and basil for freshness and dressed everything with oil and vinegar.

The salad was punctuated with bold bites, but the pasta was bland since the oil and vinegar weren't clinging. I needed a potent mixture that was thick enough to coat the pasta, so I decided to puree some of the mix-ins into the dressing. I pulsed the capers and half the pepperoncini in a food processor. In place of vinegar, I drizzled in some of the piquant pepperoncini brine. Then, I gave the oil a flavor boost by microwaving it with garlic, anchovies, and red pepper flakes. As the oil bubbled, the garlic's raw edge disappeared and the oil took on the deep savoriness of the anchovies. I processed the infused oil into the other ingredients, creating a vibrant dressing with lots of body.

Giving pasta salad my full attention paid off: The thick, bold dressing settled into the grooves of the fusilli, and the mix-ins were ideal complements to the perfectly tender pasta. Now it was my turn to be gleeful.



Our hearty salad is chock-full of antipasto ingredients.

## ITALIAN PASTA SALAD

SERVES 8 TO 10 AS A SIDE DISH

The pasta firms as it cools, so overcooking is key to ensuring the proper texture. We prefer a small, individually packaged, dry Italian-style salami such as Genoa or *soppressata*, but unsliced deli salami can be used. If the salad is not being eaten right away, don't add the arugula and basil until right before serving.

- 1 pound fusilli
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 cup pepperoncini, stemmed, plus 2 tablespoons brine
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed
- 2 ounces (2 cups) baby arugula
- 1 cup chopped fresh basil
- ½ cup oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, sliced thin
- ½ cup pitted kalamata olives, quartered
- 8 ounces salami, cut into ¾-inch dice
- 8 ounces fresh mozzarella cheese, cut into ¾-inch dice and patted dry

1. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring often,

until pasta is tender throughout, 2 to 3 minutes past al dente. Drain pasta and rinse under cold water until chilled. Drain well and transfer to large bowl.

2. Meanwhile, combine oil, garlic, anchovies, and pepper flakes in liquid measuring cup. Cover and microwave until bubbling and fragrant, 30 to 60 seconds. Set aside.

3. Slice half of pepperoncini into thin rings and set aside. Transfer remaining pepperoncini to food processor. Add capers and pulse until finely chopped, 8 to 10 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add pepperoncini brine and warm oil mixture and process until combined, about 20 seconds.

4. Add dressing to pasta and toss to combine. Add arugula, basil, tomatoes, olives, salami, mozzarella, and reserved pepperoncini and toss well. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve. (Salad can be refrigerated for up to 3 days. Let come to room temperature before serving.)

## SCIENCE Al Dente Pasta Is So Retro(grade)

Just as leftover rice hardens when it is refrigerated, al dente pasta tastes overly firm once it cools. Retrogradation is to blame: As pasta cooks, its starch granules absorb water and swell. The chain-like starch molecules that formerly stuck together separate, allowing water to seep in among them. Then, as the pasta cools, the starch chains creep back together, forming tight microscopic crystals. The water that was keeping the molecules separate becomes bound up inside the crystals, and the pasta becomes overly firm because the starch is more rigidly compacted and the water is trapped.

➤ **Our solution:** When serving pasta cool, cook it until it is a little too soft. This way, when it retrogrades, it will firm up to just the right texture.



### OVERCOOK IT

When chilled, the pasta will firm up to the perfect texture.



### ▶ WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](https://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18)

# Mexican Corn Salad

Make this bright, creamy charred-corn salad without firing up the grill.

BY LAN LAM

If you're enjoying grilled corn only with butter and salt, you're missing out. Take just one bite of Mexican street corn, called *elote*, and you'll know why it has become wildly popular in the United States. A charred ear of corn is slathered with rich, tangy crema; coated with salty cotija cheese; sprinkled with chili powder; and finished with a squeeze of lime. This smoky, creamy, bright, salty ear has just one catch: It's messy to eat.

Some vendors offer *elote* in salad form (*esquites*), with charred kernels layered or tossed with the garnishes. You get the ideal ratio of flavors and textures in every bite but with the convenience of a fork. I wanted to find a way to make this flavor-packed side dish even when I'm not firing up the grill.

The broiler seemed a good place to start since its intense radiant heat is similar to that of a grill. I placed six ears of corn on a baking sheet and broiled them on the highest oven rack, rotating them every few minutes. Unfortunately, only the rows of kernels closest to the broiler browned; the rest turned dry and leathery. I thought that if I cut the kernels off the cob and spread them into an even layer, more of them might char, so I gave it a try. While more kernels browned, nearly all were overcooked. Because they



Handfuls of scallions and cilantro round out our salad.

were farther from the heating element, it had taken them much longer to develop any color.

It was time to try the stove. It seemed like cutting the kernels off the cob was still the way to go since it allows more kernels to come in contact with the heat. Plus, cut kernels release a starchy, sugary liquid that, in theory, would help with browning.

I grabbed a nonstick skillet and cooked the kernels in a little oil over high heat, without stirring them. The kernels touching the pan's surface charred beautifully and those in the middle were plump and perfectly cooked, but those on top remained raw and starchy. I was fine with some of the kernels not being charred so long as they were tender and plump, but what if I split the corn into two batches? This would put more kernels in contact with the hot skillet, and fewer kernels in the pan might lead to more even cooking.

I heated some oil in a fresh skillet, added half the kernels, and covered the skillet to trap steam. After 3 minutes, the corn on the bottom was perfectly charred and the rest was juicy and tender. After repeating the technique with the remaining kernels, I had plenty of charred corn to give my salad its signature flavor.

It was time to dress the dish. Mexican crema can be hard to find, but a combination of mayonnaise, sour cream, and lime juice produced a similar creamy tang and clung even better to the corn. To give my salad heat and bite, I incorporated some sliced serrano chile

and some chili powder and garlic that I'd toasted in the empty skillet after cooking the corn. Finally, once the mixture had cooled, I tossed in cilantro, scallions, and some salty crumbled cotija cheese. The next time I'm craving my favorite way to eat corn, I can make a batch in less time than it takes to fire up the grill.

## MEXICAN CORN SALAD (ESQUITES)

SERVES 6 TO 8

If desired, substitute plain Greek yogurt for the sour cream. We like serrano chiles here, but you can substitute a jalapeño chile that has been halved lengthwise and sliced into 1/8-inch-thick half-moons. Adjust the amount of chiles to suit your taste. If cotija cheese is unavailable, substitute feta cheese.

- 3 tablespoons lime juice, plus extra for seasoning (2 limes)
- 3 tablespoons sour cream
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise
- 1–2 serrano chiles, stemmed and cut into 1/8-inch-thick rings
- Salt
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 6 ears corn, kernels cut from cobs (6 cups)
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/2 teaspoon chili powder
- 4 ounces cotija cheese, crumbled (1 cup)
- 3/4 cup coarsely chopped fresh cilantro
- 3 scallions, sliced thin

1. Combine lime juice, sour cream, mayonnaise, serrano(s), and 1/4 teaspoon salt in large bowl. Set aside.

2. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat until shimmering. Add half of corn and spread into even layer. Sprinkle with 1/4 teaspoon salt. Cover and cook, without stirring, until corn touching skillet is charred, about 3 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and let stand, covered, for 15 seconds, until any popping subsides. Transfer corn to bowl with sour cream mixture. Repeat with 1 tablespoon oil, 1/4 teaspoon salt, and remaining corn.

3. Return now-empty skillet to medium heat and add remaining 1 teaspoon oil, garlic, and chili powder. Cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer garlic mixture to bowl with corn mixture and toss to combine. Let cool for at least 15 minutes.

4. Add cotija, cilantro, and scallions and toss to combine. Season salad with salt and up to 1 tablespoon extra lime juice to taste. Serve.

## A Neat Way to Cut Corn



The most common method of cutting corn from the cob involves standing the corn up vertically, which causes the kernels to scatter. Here's an alternative that keeps the kernels more contained:

- Stand corn vertically and remove strip by slicing downward. Place corn horizontally on cut side.
- Use narrower front third of chef's knife to slice downward along cob and remove kernels. With less distance to fall, kernels don't scatter as far.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/jun18)

# Burn Your Beans

Skillet-charring produces deeply browned green beans with satisfying chew.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Sichuan cooks have a method for preparing green beans called “dry frying.” It’s a two-step approach in which the beans are deep-fried, and then stir-fried with aromatics and maybe a little ground pork. There’s not much sauce because the beans are the real draw: blistered, with a soft chew and concentrated flavor. It’s a technique I would use regularly if dry frying didn’t require the hassle of, well, frying. Especially because the beans could pair well with so many flavors beyond the typical Sichuan profile.

Instead, I tried shallow-frying a pound of beans in a couple of tablespoons of oil. They were only spottily blistered after 10 minutes because the ends of the raw beans curled up and didn’t make full contact with the oil. They were still firm inside, too, and showed no signs of softening even after 20 minutes. It turns out that completely softening green beans is a lengthy process. That’s because components in the beans’ cell walls that give the raw vegetable its snap also take a while to soften during cooking (see “Green Beans Are Tougher Than You’d Think”).

The advantage of deep frying is that the beans are fully submerged in the hot oil, which softens them more quickly than shallow frying, where only part of the bean is in contact with the oil. But what if I pre-cooked the beans, which would wilt them enough so they’d at least make greater contact with what oil is in the pan? Simmering the beans in water in a covered nonstick skillet was an obvious way to wilt them. Then I drained them, wiped the pan dry, got 2 tablespoons of oil smoking-hot, and added back the beans. This time, they blistered after 5 minutes. I shook the pan so that they would brown on the other sides, and after a few minutes they were downright charred. In fact, they boasted even richer flavor than typical dry-fried beans because the charring was deeper and because more of the beans’ water had been driven off and their flavor concentrated. But simmering the beans left a residue that stuck to the pan during the frying stage, which meant I had to stop and wash the pan. I found it easier to soften the beans in a covered bowl in the microwave (but we provide a method for doing it in a skillet as well). If I rinsed but didn’t dry them, there was just enough water clinging to the beans to produce steam that softened them further.

Seasoning the beans with salt, pepper, and lemon was more than ample. But seasoned panko bread crumbs—finely crushed so that they clung to the beans—offered great contrast to their tender chew.

Dry-fried beans will still be my Sichuan restaurant order. But I dare say my charred beans might have them beat—especially since they’re hassle-free.



The secret to truly charred beans? Steam them first.

## SKILLET-CHARRED GREEN BEANS

SERVES 4

Microwave thinner, more tender beans for 6 to 8 minutes and thicker, tougher beans for 10 to 12 minutes. To make the beans without a microwave, bring  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of water to a boil in a skillet over high heat. Add the beans, cover, and cook for 5 minutes. Transfer the beans to a paper towel-lined plate to drain and wash the skillet before proceeding with the recipe. Our Skillet-Charred Green Beans with Crispy Sesame Topping recipe is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18).

- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon grated lemon zest plus 1 teaspoon juice
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon kosher salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon pepper
- 1 pound green beans, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1. Combine lemon zest, salt, and pepper in small bowl. Set aside.

2. Rinse green beans but do not dry. Place in medium bowl, cover, and microwave until fully tender, 6 to 12 minutes, stirring every 3 minutes. Using tongs, transfer green beans to paper towel-lined plate and let drain.

3. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat until just smoking. Add green beans in single layer. Cook, without stirring, until green beans begin to blister and char, 4 to 5 minutes. Toss green beans and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until green beans are softened and charred, 4 to 5 minutes longer. Using tongs, transfer green beans to serving bowl, leaving any excess oil in skillet. Sprinkle with lemon-salt mixture and lemon juice and toss to coat. Serve.

## SKILLET-CHARRED GREEN BEANS WITH CRISPY BREAD-CRUMB TOPPING

Process 2 tablespoons panko bread crumbs in spice grinder or mortar and pestle until uniformly ground to medium-fine consistency that resembles couscous. Cook panko and 1 tablespoon vegetable oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-low heat, stirring frequently, until light golden brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Remove skillet from heat; add  $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon kosher salt,  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon pepper, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon red pepper flakes; and stir to combine. Transfer panko mixture to bowl; set aside. Wash out skillet thoroughly and dry with paper towels. Proceed with recipe as directed, substituting panko mixture for lemon-salt mixture.

## Green Beans Are Tougher Than You’d Think

Green beans are rugged. Their cell walls are rich in hemicellulose and pectin that make them firm enough to snap when fresh. Those components, plus a substance called lignin, also make them very resistant to heat, which explains why they can be cooked for a long time or over high heat, as we do for our Skillet-Charred Green Beans, without turning to mush. Instead, prolonged heat exposure gives them a silky yet stable quality.



FIT TO BE TIED



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18)

# The Easiest Winter Squash

Tired of struggling to peel and cut heavy-duty squash? Try something more delicate.

BY LAN LAM

A few years ago, this magazine ran a tip on how to break down a large, dense winter squash such as Hubbard: Place it in a zipper-lock bag and drop it onto asphalt from chest height, smashing it to pieces. It sounds severe, but taking a knife to a giant rock-hard squash (even a modest-size butternut can be a struggle) isn't for the faint of heart, never mind that peeling its tough skin is a real chore.

Allow me to suggest an alternative: crenellated, creamy yellow delicata squash. These beauties, available from late summer through early winter, boast thin, edible striped skin that softens when cooked. Their small size means they are relatively easy to cut and seed. What's more, they offer a delicate, nutty taste that's entirely different from the pronounced sweetness of most winter squashes.

Mild delicata is complemented by flavorful browning. That can be achieved by sautéing slices, but doing so requires multiple batches since each flat side needs to be touching the pan to pick up color. Oven roasting is a better option since you can prepare enough squash to serve four on a single baking sheet. The squash can then be finished with fresh herbs or a simple sauce.

Most recipes call for simply arranging oiled squash slices on a baking sheet and roasting. But as the squash cooks, its water evaporates, leaving each piece with a leathery surface and a dry interior. I figured I'd have better luck with the technique that we use for other hard vegetables such as carrots: Oven-steam the squash until tender, and then brown the exterior.

I halved and seeded three squashes, sliced them ½ inch thick—skin and all—and tossed them with oil and salt. After spreading the slices into an even layer on a baking sheet, I covered the sheet with aluminum foil and placed it on the middle rack of a 425-degree oven. The foil trapped steam and helped the slices cook evenly without becoming desiccated. After half an hour, the slices were tender, so I removed the foil. Within minutes, any residual moisture evaporated and the starches and sugars on the surface of the squashes began to brown. After 15 minutes, I flipped the slices and then let the second side turn deep golden brown, which took about 15 minutes longer.

These squash slices were tender and moist, but I was sure I could speed up the cooking and coax an even fuller, richer flavor from the delicata. I moved



Add butter near the end of cooking so it has time to develop nuttiness but not enough time to burn.

the oven rack to the lowest position so that the baking sheet would be closer to the heat source. This shaved 15 minutes off the total time and deepened the browning.

To reinforce the delicata's unique nuttiness, I dotted it with butter for the final 10 minutes—enough time for it to brown with no risk of burning. These tender, golden slices looked gorgeous, and each bite featured a slightly resilient strip of skin and toasty squash flavor—all without breaking a sweat.

## ROASTED DELICATA SQUASH

SERVES 4 TO 6

To ensure that the flesh cooks evenly, choose squashes that are similar in size and shape. Delicata have thin, edible skin that needn't be removed; simply use a vegetable peeler to pare away any tough brown blemishes. You can substitute chives for parsley, if desired. Serve the squash as is or drizzled with Basque-Style Herb Sauce (Tximitxurri) or Spicy Honey (recipes follow). Our recipe for Goat Cheese and Chive Sauce is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/dec18).

- 3 delicata squashes (12 to 16 ounces each), ends trimmed, halved lengthwise, seeded, and sliced crosswise ½ inch thick

- 4 teaspoons vegetable oil
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 8 pieces
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley

1. Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Toss squash with oil and salt until evenly coated. Arrange squash on rimmed baking sheet in single layer. Cover tightly with aluminum foil and bake until squash is tender when pierced with tip of paring knife, 18 to 20 minutes.

2. Remove foil and continue to bake until sides touching sheet are golden brown, 8 to 11 minutes longer. Remove sheet from oven and, using thin metal spatula, flip squash. Scatter butter over squash. Return to oven and continue to bake until side touching sheet is golden brown, 8 to 11 minutes longer. Transfer squash to serving platter, sprinkle with parsley, and serve.

## BASQUE-STYLE HERB SAUCE (TXIMITXURRI)

MAKES ½ CUP

For a sauce with some heat, substitute hot smoked paprika for the regular smoked paprika.

- ¼ cup minced fresh parsley
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons sherry vinegar
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- ¼ teaspoon salt

Stir all ingredients together in bowl and let stand for at least 15 minutes before serving.

## SPICY HONEY

MAKES ½ CUP

We prefer vinegary Frank's RedHot Original Cayenne Pepper Sauce here. Do not substitute a thick hot sauce, such as sriracha; it will make the honey too thick to drizzle. Microwaving in 20-second intervals will prevent the mixture from boiling over.

- ¼ cup honey
- 2 tablespoons hot sauce

Stir honey and hot sauce together in liquid measuring cup. Microwave until sauce comes to boil, about 1 minute. Continue to microwave in 20-second intervals until sauce is reduced to ¼ cup. Let cool for at least 10 minutes before serving.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/dec18)

# Great—Not Grated—Carrot Salads

Forget the grater. We've got something better.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

I'd spent days scraping pounds upon pounds of carrots—and my knuckles—against a box grater, but I still wasn't any closer to improving upon the classic shredded carrot salad, which is usually damp and clumpy. It wasn't until I stumbled on an unusual recipe from Joan Nathan that I realized I'd been approaching my revamp all wrong. It wasn't so much the flavors or the ratio of dressing to carrots or even my shredding technique that needed to change—the grater had to go.

Nathan's recipe calls for finely chopping the carrots in a food processor. The resulting texture is entirely different from the wet, heavy consistency of a shredded carrot salad. The fine bits deliver juicy, earthy sweetness but offer a texture that's more like grains with a pleasant crunch. To lighten things up, Nathan mixes the chopped carrots with fresh herbs, garlic, and nuts and binds the salad together with a lemony dressing. The result is a refreshing take on a too-familiar vegetable and a frustrating technique. Best of all, it takes mere seconds to make, since the food processor does the lion's share of the work.

I was sold on this template but had a few ideas for tweaking the technique, starting with exactly how thoroughly to process the carrots and herbs to produce even pieces. Another change on my list was to dial down the garlic flavor and mix in other components to add complexity and further lighten the consistency of the salad. I wanted the bits of carrots and herbs to be fine, not ground. But as anyone who's blitzed vegetables or herbs in the food processor knows, if you process until every last piece is finely chopped, some of the mixture turns to mush. However, if you don't process the pieces enough, you're likely to leave large carrot chunks or whole herb leaves in the processor bowl. Cutting the peeled carrots into 1-inch chunks before adding them to the processor helped produce fine, even bits.

The herbs were more challenging. No matter when I added the leaves to the processor, some turned to mush, muddying the salad's fresh flavor and sabotaging the delicately crunchy texture I was after. Mincing the cilantro by hand was a bit more work, but it gave me much better control over the final product.

The only part of the prep that was a drag was peeling all those carrots. I wondered if I could skip peeling them and just give the roots a trim and a good scrub instead. I gave it a shot and was pleased to find that it was actually advantageous: Not only was the skin's slightly tougher texture imperceptible in those tiny pieces but the skin also lent the salad a subtle earthy bitterness that matched well with the vegetable's sweeter core and all those grassy-tasting fresh herbs.

Circling back to the garlic, I found that its harsh taste overwhelmed the more subtle flavors of the other components, so I left it out altogether.

Now for some salads with flavors of my own. As a nod to Nathan's original, I kept the lemon-based dressing and the pistachios but added honey, swapped out the cilantro for mint, seasoned the mixture with smoked paprika and a touch of cayenne, and mixed in pomegranate seeds for bursts of tangy sweetness and vibrant color. I also made a riff on the classic American carrot salad, with raisins, celery, and parsley.

## CHOPPED CARROT SALAD WITH MINT, PISTACHIOS, AND POMEGRANATE SEEDS

SERVES 4 TO 6

We prefer the convenience and hint of bitterness that leaving the carrots unpeeled lends to this salad; just be sure to scrub the carrots well before using them.

- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup shelled pistachios, toasted
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon honey
- Salt and pepper
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon smoked paprika
- $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 pound carrots, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 cup pomegranate seeds
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup minced fresh mint

Pulse pistachios in food processor until coarsely chopped, 10 to 12 pulses; transfer to small bowl. Whisk oil, lemon juice, honey, 1 teaspoon salt,  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon pepper, paprika, and cayenne in large bowl until combined. Process carrots in now-empty processor until finely chopped, 10 to 20 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Transfer carrots to bowl with dressing; add  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup pomegranate seeds, mint, and half of pistachios and toss to combine. Season with salt to taste. Transfer to serving platter, sprinkle with remaining pomegranate seeds and pistachios, and serve.

## CHOPPED CARROT SALAD WITH CELERY AND RAISINS

Omit pistachios, paprika, cayenne, and pomegranate seeds. Substitute parsley for mint. Add 3 celery ribs, trimmed and sliced thin, and  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup raisins to dressing with carrots.



We finely chop the carrots in the food processor.

## CHOPPED CARROT SALAD WITH FENNEL, ORANGE, AND HAZELNUTS

Substitute toasted and skinned hazelnuts for pistachios. Omit paprika, cayenne, and pomegranate seeds. Substitute  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon grated orange zest plus  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup juice and 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar for lemon juice. Substitute chives for mint, saving  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup to use as garnish. Before processing carrots, pulse 1 fennel bulb, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and cut into 1-inch pieces, in food processor until coarsely chopped, 10 to 12 pulses, then add to dressing.

## CHOPPED CARROT SALAD WITH RADISHES AND SESAME SEEDS

Omit pistachios. Substitute 3 tablespoons vegetable oil and 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil for olive oil. Substitute rice vinegar for lemon juice and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons Korean red pepper flakes for paprika, cayenne, and pepper. Increase honey to 2 tablespoons and salt to  $1\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoons. Before processing carrots, pulse 8 ounces radishes, trimmed and halved, in food processor until coarsely but evenly chopped, 10 to 12 pulses; add to dressing. Substitute  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup toasted sesame seeds for pomegranate seeds and cilantro for mint.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](https://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18)

# Fresh Tomato Sauce

Tomato flavor is fleeting—which is why we examined every part of the fruit and our cooking method until we'd engineered a sauce that was bright, sweet, and aromatic.

≧ BY STEVE DUNN ≦

**H**igh-end, tech-minded chefs and bartenders cheat the normal laws of cooking by using a contraption called a rotary evaporator (or “rotovap”). The device, which costs upwards of \$8,000, works by gently heating a liquid, such as tomato juice, in a vacuum chamber. The vacuum lets the juice boil at near room temperature, which lets volatile flavors get extracted from the liquid and concentrated.

It's a tool that could revolutionize fresh tomato sauce, which has an inherent dilemma: Simmering cooks out the very thing that makes a ripe tomato so special—its bright, sweet, delicate flavor. On the other hand, if you don't cook juicy tomatoes long enough to evaporate a good bit of their liquid, the sauce won't have enough body to cling to pasta, and its flavor won't be intense enough.

Imagine: a fresh tomato sauce that actually tastes like a fresh tomato. I didn't have a rotovap. But I did have a garden chock-full of tomatoes, along with a test kitchen and a dream.

## The Tomato Lab

I combed through a number of sauce recipes that called for fresh tomatoes (conventional round ones, not plum or cherry varieties), but I came away with more questions than I'd started with. Not only was there no consensus on which parts of the tomato should be included or eliminated (other than the core), but the cooking times ranged from just 20 minutes to as long as 2 hours. When I made some of the recipes, I wasn't surprised that the quick-cooked sauces retained much more fresh tomato flavor than those that simmered for longer. But there were also stark flavor differences among the lot—one-dimensional sweetness in some, balanced savoriness in others—that seemed to relate directly to which parts of the tomato I'd used.

That informed my next round of tests, in which I made batches of the same simple sauce (5 pounds of tomatoes, extra-virgin olive oil, and a little minced



This vibrant-tasting sauce has a lighter consistency than most tomato sauces, so don't add any pasta cooking water or it will be too loose.

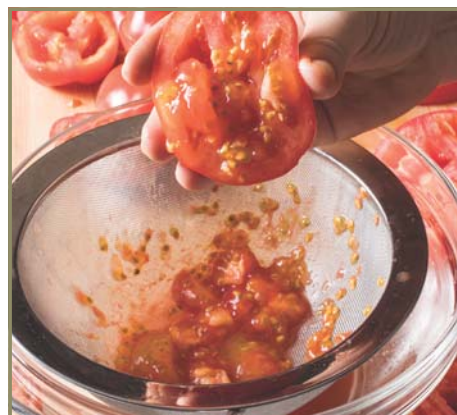
garlic) but varied which tomato components I used: For one batch I removed only the core, keeping the skin, the flesh, and the thick “jelly” and seeds; for another I cored the tomatoes and removed the skin; and for the third I cored the tomatoes and removed the skin, jelly, and seeds, using just the tomato flesh. I roughly chopped the tomatoes and simmered each

batch for about 40 minutes, by which point the sauces had enough body to coat pasta.

There was no question that using the whole tomato, sans the core, contributed to a more complex flavor in the sauce and that eliminating any single component could throw off the balance. Most notably, the batch that contained no skins or jelly was so sweet and one-dimensional that tasters likened it to tomato “candy.” Leaving in the jelly and seeds yielded a sauce with better sweet-savory balance, and using the skins improved it even further. (For more information on what each part of the tomato contributes, see “Calibrating Balanced Tomato Flavor.”)

A drawback to including the seeds and skins was that they marred the sauce's consistency. Also, many sources claim that tomato seeds impart bitterness, so I figured I'd make a seedless batch to find out. Seeding the tomatoes would be simple: After halving the tomatoes, I gently squeezed the jelly into a fine-mesh strainer that I'd set over a bowl, discarding the seeds and capturing the flavor-packed liquid to add to the sauce. Then I chopped the tomato flesh and, to break down the skins, pureed the pieces with their liquid in a blender until the mixture was smooth.

That yielded about 10 cups of tomato puree, which tasted sweet, savory, bright, and delicately aromatic. (Including the skins also made the recipe ultrasimple because there was no need to blanch, shock, and peel the tomatoes as many recipes



## Save Some Fresh Flavor for Later

Raw ripe tomatoes are loaded with flavor and aroma compounds that make them taste sweet, bright, and aromatic. But many of those compounds are volatile when heated, which is why cooking the fruit to a sauce-like consistency destroys its fresh flavor. To make a sauce that was thick enough to coat pasta but retained as much fresh tomato flavor as possible, we reserved some of the raw tomato jelly that we'd strained of its seeds and added it to the sauce at the end of cooking, along with fresh basil and some extra-virgin olive oil.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/aug18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/aug18)

## RECIPE TESTING Calibrating Balanced Tomato Flavor

Did you know that the most concentrated source of fresh tomato flavor is in the fruit's skin? Neither did we, until we tasted batches of our Fresh Tomato Sauce made with varying parts of the fruit: skin, flesh, jelly, and seeds. (In each batch, we first discarded the core.) Our goal was to determine which elements of a tomato we should keep and which we should discard for a sauce that tasted sweet, bright, and aromatic.

➤ **The upshot:** The sauce that contained skin, flesh, and jelly delivered the most balanced flavor. (The seeds didn't contribute any noticeable flavor, but their texture was distracting, so we strained them out.) Here's a breakdown of the dominant flavor and aroma compounds in each component.

**Skin:**  
Aroma compounds (including terpenes, ketones, and aldehydes)



**Flesh:**  
Aroma compounds, sugars (glucose and fructose), and acids (citric and malic acids)

**Jelly:**  
Umami compounds (including amino acids), sugars, and acids

require.) Notably, the seedless puree tasted no different from the previous batch, proving that the seeds hadn't contributed any significant flavor, bitter or otherwise. But achieving that flavor balance brought me only partway to my goal. I needed to reduce the puree by about half to achieve a sauce-like consistency, but many of the aromatic flavor compounds in the fruit that made the puree taste fresh and balanced are volatile, meaning they evaporate at a relatively low temperature. That's why simmering the sauce all but kills fresh tomato flavor.

### Freshen Up

When making sauces or stews with ingredients that contain volatile flavors, such as wine, we often reserve a small portion to add at the end of cooking to reintroduce any flavors that were lost. So for my next test, I reserved 1 cup of the strained jelly to add back to the sauce. Happily, I found that it restored much of the tomatoes' bright sweetness. The only hitch was that the jelly thinned the sauce too much, so I made another batch in which I reduced the sauce to 4 cups instead of 5 cups to compensate for the liquid I'd be adding back. The result: a balanced sauce with just the right amount of body.

All I had left to do was polish the flavors, and I did so with a light touch to keep the tomato notes at the forefront. I sautéed dried oregano and red pepper flakes along with the garlic, and to reinforce

the freshness, I added a couple of tablespoons of olive oil and a cup of shredded basil to the cooked sauce with the reserved tomato jelly.

The result boasted all the nuances of a ripe summer tomato—delicate sweetness, fragrant aroma, vibrant but balanced acidity—with just enough body to cling to pasta. (No rotovap necessary!) This is the sauce I'll be making every summer, and since the recipe makes a generous amount and can easily be doubled, I'll be stashing a supply in the freezer to enjoy in the dead of winter when I need to remind myself what a ripe tomato tastes like.

### FRESH TOMATO SAUCE

YIELDS 5 CUPS; ENOUGH FOR 2 POUNDS PASTA

We developed this recipe using ripe in-season tomatoes. Supermarket vine-ripened tomatoes will work here, but the sauce won't be as flavorful. Don't use plum tomatoes; they are low in moisture and don't work well in this recipe. This is a light-bodied sauce, so don't adjust its consistency with reserved pasta cooking water as you would with most other pasta sauces or it will be too runny. This recipe can easily be doubled.

- 5 pounds ripe tomatoes, cored
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ¼ teaspoon dried oregano
- Salt
- 1 cup fresh basil leaves, shredded

1. Cut tomatoes in half along equator. Set fine-mesh strainer over medium bowl. Gently squeeze tomato halves, cut sides down, over strainer to collect seeds and jelly, scraping any seeds that cling to tomatoes into strainer. Using rubber spatula, press on seeds to extract as much liquid as possible. Discard seeds. Set aside 1 cup liquid and transfer any



### Don't Can It—Freeze It

If you have a bumper crop of tomatoes, the recipe for our Fresh Tomato Sauce can be easily doubled. But we don't recommend canning this sauce; doing so requires adding acid to make the sauce food-safe, which will distort its delicate, sweet flavor. Simply portion it into airtight containers or jars and freeze it for up to three months. Here are two tips that make the process easy.

1. To quickly cool the sauce, transfer it to a stainless-steel bowl, set the bowl over a larger bowl filled with ice, and stir the sauce until cool.
2. Be sure to leave at least ½ inch of headspace—that is, some space between the top of the food and the rim of the container—to account for the liquid's expansion as it freezes.

remaining liquid to large bowl.

2. Cut tomatoes into rough 1½-inch pieces. Working in 2 or 3 batches, process tomatoes in blender until smooth, 30 to 45 seconds; transfer puree to large bowl with strained liquid (you should have about 10 cups puree).

3. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add garlic, pepper flakes, and oregano and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in tomato puree and 1 teaspoon salt. Increase heat to medium-high and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until reduced to 4 cups, 45 minutes to 1 hour.

4. Remove pot from heat and stir in basil, reserved tomato liquid, and remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Season with salt to taste. Use immediately or let cool completely before refrigerating or freezing. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 1 week or frozen for up to 3 months.)

### You've Never Had Tomato Sauce Like This

If you've never tasted tomato sauce made from ripe summer fruit, prepare to be wowed. Unlike sauces made from canned tomatoes, which have a more concentrated, "cooked" flavor and heavier body, this version boasts a lighter consistency and vibrant, more aromatic flavor that actually tastes like a fresh tomato.

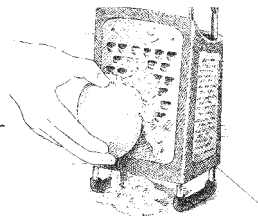
# Quick Pasta Sauces, Perfected

We retooled a week's worth of classic sauces to keep in our back pockets for busy nights. BY ELIZABETH BOMZE

## QUICK TOMATO SAUCE

**What Can Go Wrong:** With little time to simmer and meld flavors, quick tomato sauces can taste dull or, worse, like you simply dumped a can of tomatoes on the pasta.

**How We Fix It:** Minimally processed crushed tomatoes offer bright, fresh flavor and preclude the need to puree whole canned tomatoes ourselves. Grating the onion releases a lot of its flavor quickly. Sautéing the onion in butter, versus oil, contributes rich meatiness from the browned milk solids. Garlic, oregano; and a touch of sugar; plus basil and olive oil further ramp up the flavor.



### GRATE ONION

Efficiently creates more of the compounds that give cooked onion complex flavor

**Cooking Time:**  
15 minutes

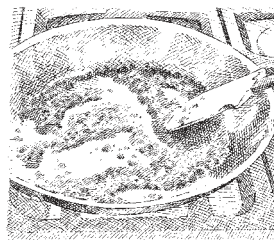
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ¼ cup grated onion
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh oregano or ¼ teaspoon dried
- Salt and pepper
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- ¼ teaspoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

Melt butter in medium saucepan over medium heat. Add onion, oregano, and ½ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened and lightly browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in tomatoes and sugar, bring to simmer, and cook until slightly thickened, about 10 minutes. Off heat, stir in basil and oil and season with salt and pepper to taste. Add sauce to pasta and toss well to coat, adjusting consistency with pasta cooking water as needed.

## PUTTANESCA

**What Can Go Wrong:** Assertive flavors such as anchovies, garlic, olives, capers, and pepper flakes can overwhelm a sauce.

**How We Fix It:** Gently sautéing the garlic, anchovies, and pepper flakes in oil mellows and blends their flavors. We use diced tomatoes, since they retain their shape better than whole or crushed products; the bright, sweet-tasting tomato pieces balance the other flavors and yield a sauce with a chunky texture. Drizzling olive oil over each portion adds richness.



### SAUTÉ AROMATICS

Mellows and melds assertive anchovy and garlic flavors

**Cooking Time:**  
15 minutes

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
- 8 anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 (28-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained
- ½ cup pitted kalamata olives, chopped coarse
- ¼ cup minced fresh parsley
- 3 tablespoons capers, rinsed
- Salt

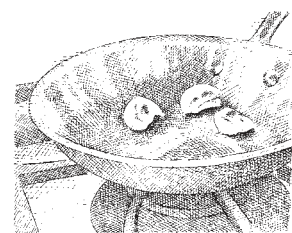
1. Heat oil, anchovies, garlic, and pepper flakes in 12-inch skillet over medium heat. Cook, stirring often, until garlic turns golden but not brown, about 3 minutes. Stir in tomatoes and cook until slightly thickened, about 8 minutes.

2. Stir in olives, parsley, and capers. Add sauce to pasta and toss well to coat, adjusting consistency with pasta cooking water as needed. Season with salt to taste. Drizzle extra oil over individual portions and serve immediately.

## CLASSIC BASIL PESTO

**What Can Go Wrong:** Sharp raw garlic can overpower delicate, aromatic basil. The basil can also turn a drab, unappealing dark green.

**How We Fix It:** To mellow the garlic, we toast unpeeled cloves in a dry skillet before processing. Adding parsley (which doesn't discolor as easily as basil) helps keep the pesto green. Pounding the herbs before pureeing them releases their flavorful oils.



### TOAST UNPEELED GARLIC CLOVES

Softens and sweetens garlic's harsh bite

**Prep Time:**  
10 minutes

- 3 garlic cloves, unpeeled
- 2 cups fresh basil leaves
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley leaves
- 7 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup pine nuts, toasted
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese, plus extra for serving

1. Toast garlic in small, heavy skillet over medium heat, shaking skillet occasionally, until fragrant and color of cloves deepens slightly, about 7 minutes. Let garlic cool slightly, then peel and chop.

2. Place basil and parsley in heavy-duty 1-gallon zipper-lock bag. Pound bag with flat side of meat pounder or rolling pin until all leaves are bruised.

3. Process oil, pine nuts, ½ teaspoon salt, garlic, and basil-parsley mixture in food processor until smooth, about 1 minute, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Stir in Parmesan and season with salt and pepper to taste. Add sauce to pasta and toss well to coat, adjusting consistency with pasta cooking water as needed. Serve, passing extra Parmesan separately.

## Pasta Sauce Pantry Staples

High-quality ingredients make a big difference in any sauce. Here are our favorites.



Muir Glen Organic Whole Peeled Tomatoes



Hunt's Diced Tomatoes



SMT Crushed Tomatoes



Goya Tomato Paste



King Oscar Anchovies Flat Fillets in Olive Oil



California Olive Ranch Extra Virgin Olive Oil

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOWNE



## CHOOSE YOUR NOODLE

Each recipe will sauce 1 pound of pasta, serving 4 to 6, and the sauces pair well with any pasta shape.

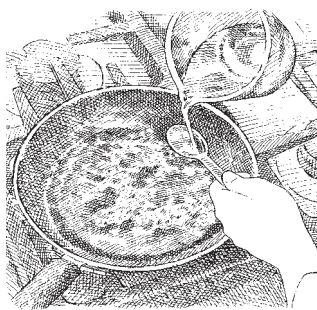
## DON'T DUMP THE WATER!

Each sauce relies on the addition of pasta cooking water, so be sure to reserve at least ½ cup before draining. Set a measuring cup in the colander to remind yourself.

### GARLIC AND OIL SAUCE (AGLIO E OLIO)

**What Can Go Wrong:** The garlic tastes harsh, and the oil-based sauce doesn't cling to the pasta.

**How We Fix It:** Treating the minced garlic two different ways—gently sautéing some of it until pale golden brown and then stirring in the rest raw—yields garlic flavor that is nutty, mellow, and sweet, with a pleasantly sharp finish. We use the pasta cooking water as the sauce's base, not just to adjust its consistency. The starchy liquid helps the sauce cling to the noodles and helps evenly distribute the garlicky oil.



#### BUILD SAUCE WITH PASTA COOKING WATER

Helps sauce cling to pasta; evenly distributes garlic flavor

**Cooking Time:**  
15 minutes

- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 12 garlic cloves, minced
- Salt
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 2 teaspoons lemon juice
- ¾ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- Grated Parmesan cheese

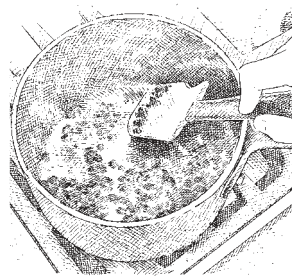
1. Heat 3 tablespoons oil, two-thirds of garlic, and ½ teaspoon salt in 10-inch nonstick skillet over low heat. Cook, stirring constantly, until garlic foams and is sticky and straw-colored, about 10 minutes. Off heat, add parsley, lemon juice, pepper flakes, remaining garlic, and 2 tablespoons reserved pasta cooking water.

2. Add garlic mixture and remaining 3 tablespoons oil to pasta and toss well to coat, adjusting consistency with pasta cooking water as needed. Season with salt to taste, and serve immediately, passing Parmesan separately.

### SIMPLE ITALIAN-STYLE MEAT SAUCE

**What Can Go Wrong:** The ground meat dries out. The meaty flavor is only superficial.

**How We Fix It:** We brown mushrooms, onion, and tomato paste to develop meaty flavor without browning (and drying out) the beef. Blending bread and milk into the meat keeps it tender. Crushed and diced tomatoes add body and bright flavor.



#### BROWN VEGETABLES, NOT MEAT

Develops meaty flavor without drying out meat

**Cooking Time:**  
45 minutes

- 4 ounces white mushrooms, trimmed
- 1 slice hearty white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 2 tablespoons whole milk
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound 85 percent lean ground beef
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped fine
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained with ¼ cup juice reserved
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese, plus extra for serving

1. Process mushrooms in food processor until finely chopped, about 8 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed; transfer mushrooms to bowl. Process bread, milk, ½ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper in now-empty processor until paste forms, about 8 pulses. Add beef and pulse until mixture is well combined, about 6 pulses.

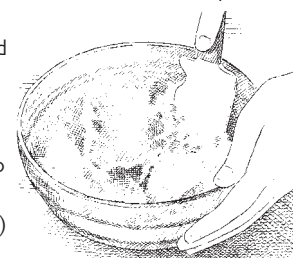
2. Heat oil in large saucepan over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add onion and mushrooms and cook, stirring frequently, until vegetables are browned and dark bits form on saucepan bottom, 6 to 12 minutes. Stir in garlic, tomato paste, and pepper flakes; cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add reserved tomato juice and oregano, scraping up any browned bits. Add beef mixture and cook, breaking meat into small pieces, until beef is no longer pink, 2 to 4 minutes.

3. Stir in crushed tomatoes and diced tomatoes and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to low and gently simmer until sauce has thickened and flavors have blended, about 30 minutes. Stir in Parmesan and season with salt and pepper to taste. Add sauce to pasta and toss well to coat, adjusting consistency with pasta cooking water as needed. Serve, passing extra Parmesan separately.

### AMATRICIANA

**What Can Go Wrong:** *Guanciale*, which is made by salting and drying hog jowls, is hard to find in the States. Stirring grated Pecorino Romano into the hot pasta causes the cheese to clump.

**How We Fix It:** We swap guanciale for easy-to-find salt pork (salt-cured, unsmoked pork belly). Simmering it first renders its fat, which allows the meat to quickly brown once the water evaporates. Mixing the cheese with rendered pork fat prevents it from clumping (the fat keeps the cheese proteins dispersed so they don't bond to each other in clumps) and adds extra pork flavor to the dish.



#### MIX CHEESE WITH PORK FAT

Prevents cheese from clumping; distributes rich pork flavor

**Cooking Time:**  
30 minutes

Use salt pork that is 70 percent fat and freeze it for 15 minutes to make it easier to slice. Use imported Pecorino Romano cheese, not domestic cheese labeled "Romano."

- 8 ounces salt pork, rind removed, rinsed thoroughly and patted dry
- ½ cup water
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ¼ cup red wine
- 1 (28-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 2 ounces Pecorino Romano cheese, grated fine (1 cup)

1. Slice pork into ¼-inch-thick strips, then cut each strip crosswise into ¼-inch pieces. Bring pork and water to simmer in 10-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat; cook until water evaporates and pork begins to sizzle, 5 to 8 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and continue to cook, stirring frequently, until fat renders and pork turns golden, 5 to 8 minutes longer. Using slotted spoon, transfer pork to bowl. Pour off fat from skillet and set aside.

2. Return skillet to medium heat and add 1 tablespoon reserved fat, tomato paste, and pepper flakes; cook, stirring constantly, for 20 seconds. Stir in wine and cook for 30 seconds. Stir in tomatoes and their juice and pork and bring to simmer. Cook, stirring frequently, until thickened, 12 to 16 minutes. While sauce simmers, smear 2 tablespoons reserved fat and ½ cup Pecorino together in bowl to form paste.

3. Add sauce, ½ cup pasta cooking water, and Pecorino-fat mixture to pasta and toss well to coat, adjusting consistency with remaining cooking water as needed. Serve, passing remaining ½ cup Pecorino separately.



Boar's Head  
Parmigiano-Reggiano



Boar's Head  
Pecorino Romano

# Creamy Dressings, Hold the Cream

A surprising ingredient quietly imparts the smooth richness of dairy or mayonnaise while letting the other ingredients shine.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

Last year, the test kitchen published a vegan cookbook (*Vegan for Everybody*), so for a while there was a lot of dairy- and egg-free food around here. It's not a diet I've ever subscribed to, but watching (and tasting) the development process gave me a healthy respect for how flavorful and satisfying vegan cooking can be. In fact, it prompted me to retool a recipe category that typically relies heavily on dairy and eggs: creamy dressings and dips.

Vegan recipe authors tout all sorts of supposedly stealthy dairy alternatives, such as beans, tofu, avocado, and coconut milk. But if you ask me, most of them don't live up to their promise. I tried dressings with avocado, which was conveniently bland but visually obvious. Tofu and coconut milk worked aesthetically, but their flavors were too dominant. And beans tasted starchy.

But then I learned about nut cream, which is used as a starting point for vegan cheeses and creamy sauces. To make it, you simply soak raw nuts overnight to soften them and then drain them and process them in a blender until they form a puree that's creamy, smooth, and rich (nuts are a source of fat, after all). And here's a big perk: Unlike with tangy dairy products or mayonnaise, their neutral flavor lets seasonings come to the fore, producing results with potent flavor and creamy body all in one.

## Soaked Through

Sources suggested a wide variety of nuts and seeds for the job, but I narrowed it down to cashews and blanched almonds because their pale color and subtle flavor (when raw) would make them easy to hide. I soaked the whole nuts overnight, drained them, and pureed each in a blender for 5 minutes, adding just enough water to keep things moving.

Both purees looked creamy, but the almond one tasted a bit grainy. I'd proceed with the smoother cashews (for more information, see "Cashews:



Want to make a batch of dressing for the week? These thick, creamy concoctions keep well in the refrigerator for up to seven days.

Cream of the [Nut] Crop"), but first I wanted to see if I could trim down that soaking time.

I wondered if creating more surface area on the cashews would help them absorb water more quickly, so I roughly chopped them and soaked them for only 3 hours. This yielded a smooth puree, so next I finely chopped them and soaked them for 1 hour. Success again, but could I skip the knife work altogether?

My next batch of cashews went straight into the blender, where I let the machine grind them until

they looked like fine gravel mixed with sand. Then I transferred them to a bowl, covered them with water, and let them sit for just 15 minutes, after which I drained them in a fine-mesh strainer and returned them to the blender. One minute on low speed and 4 minutes on high turned them smooth and creamy. Time to make dressing.

I started out with a ranch-style herb dressing, the simplicity of which would test the cashews' anonymity. After grinding, soaking, and draining 1 cup of nuts, I returned them to the blender. I added just enough water to enable the mixture to form a vortex while blending, along with cider vinegar, shallot and garlic, salt and pepper, and a touch of sugar for balance.

After 4 minutes of churning, the mixture was silky and thick—the perfect consistency for dipping but too heavy for dressing greens, so I thinned it with water. It was also warm from the friction of blending, so I chilled it before stirring in minced chives and parsley to avoid wilting the delicate herbs.

This dressing was wonderfully creamy, and the neutral cashew base allowed the flavors of the herbs, alliums, and vinegar

to emerge in a way that dairy hadn't. Delighted, I popped it into the refrigerator and, per test kitchen protocol, sent the recipe to volunteer testers (go to [AmericasTestKitchen.com/recipe\\_testing](https://AmericasTestKitchen.com/recipe_testing) for more information) while I dreamt up flavor variations. But my enthusiasm was premature. Some testers complained of harsh allium flavors; others reported that their dressing was watery and that it seemed wasteful to send so much of the ground nuts down the drain. The second comment confused me, since I'd only

## The Power of Powdered Alliums

Seasoning our dressings with onion and garlic powders instead of fresh alliums might sound odd, but these pantry staples offer two perks that their fresh counterparts don't. First, measured amounts of these powders will yield more consistent flavor than garlic cloves and onions (or shallots), which can vary widely in size. Second, the flavors of these dehydrated products are more stable than those of fresh garlic and onions, since breaking the cells of the fresh vegetables causes them to develop sharp-tasting compounds that change in flavor over time. The upshot: Powdered alliums give our dressings more consistent flavor and a longer shelf life.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](https://CooksIllustrated.com/dec18)

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

## Cashews: Cream of the (Nut) Crop

Nut creams—purees of nuts that have been soaked and ground with water until smooth—are commonly used as a base for vegan cheeses and sauces. We made creams from nine different raw nuts—almonds, cashews, peanuts, pecans, walnuts, hazelnuts, pistachios, macadamia nuts, and Brazil nuts (all but the pecans and walnuts were blanched)—to see which puree had the best texture. All but one produced purees that were variously “gritty,” “grainy,” “foamy,” and/or “chalky.” Only the cashew cream stood out for a consistency so velvety that one taster called it “pure satin.” Here’s why: Cashews are uniquely low in fiber, which resists breaking down, and high in starch, the particles of which suspend nicely in liquid and provide body.

						
<b>HAZELNUTS</b> Starches: 5 g Fiber: 2.7 g Grainy; weepy	<b>BRAZIL NUTS</b> Starches: 7 g Fiber: 2.1 g Pulpy; chalky	<b>MACADAMIA NUTS</b> Starches: 0.2 g Fiber: 2.4 g Foamy; finely gritty	<b>WALNUTS</b> Starches: 1.3 g Fiber: 1.9 g Curdled; chalky	<b>PISTACHIOS</b> Starches: 2.9 g Fiber: 2.9 g Loose; wet	<b>ALMONDS</b> Starches: 0.9 g Fiber: 3.3 g Sawdusty	<b>CASHEWS</b> Starches: 6 g Fiber 0.9 g Ulcreamery

ever drained away the soaking water. But then it hit me: Blenders and strainers vary, and a combination of a superfine grind and a coarse strainer would mean that fewer cashews were making it into the dressing, resulting in a thin consistency.

Fortunately, I saw a way to foolproof and streamline my method: “Soak” the cashews in the other dressing ingredients right in the blender jar so there was nothing to drain and no variation in consistency.

### Fresh Isn’t Always Best

Back to the complaints of overly potent allium flavor, which I initially attributed to personal taste and the use of larger-than-average shallots and garlic cloves. I opened the container of dressing I had made 48 hours earlier and was hit by a powerful waft of shallot and garlic. With all those allium cells broken during blending, their sharp flavors had continued to build during storage.

Our science research editor explained that the alliin that forms when garlic cells are ruptured breaks down over time, hydrolyzing into a variety of sulfide compounds with unpleasant flavors. The easy fix: substituting garlic and onion powders for fresh garlic and shallots, respectively. The flavors of these pantry alliums are standard and more stable over time, so

the substitution increased the dressing’s shelf life by several days (for more information, see “The Power of Powdered Alliums”).

Finally, the variations. I started with classics such as ketchup-and-horseradish-based Russian dressing and herby, anchovy-rich Green Goddess, the latter of which was just as good on greens as it was on vegetables, grilled chicken, and fish. Then I went modern with roasted red peppers and tahini and ginger and miso, knowing that all these dressings were as creamy and rich as dairy- and egg-based ones but even more flavorful.

### CREAMLESS CREAMY HERB DRESSING

MAKES 2 CUPS

You’ll need a conventional blender for this recipe; an immersion blender or food processor will produce dressing that is grainy and thin. If you use a high-powered blender such as a Vitamix or Blendtec, blending times may be shorter. Use raw unsalted cashews, not roasted, to ensure the proper flavor balance. This dressing works well drizzled over a hearty salad, but it can also be used as a dip for vegetables.

- 1 cup raw cashews
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup water, plus extra as needed
- 3 tablespoons cider vinegar
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh chives
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon pepper

1. Process cashews in blender on low speed to consistency of fine gravel mixed with sand, 10 to 15 seconds. Add water, vinegar, salt, onion powder, sugar, and garlic powder and process on low speed until combined, about 5 seconds. Let mixture sit for 15 minutes.

2. Process on low speed until all ingredients are well blended, about 1 minute. Scrape down blender jar. Process on high speed until dressing is smooth and creamy, 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer dressing to bowl.

Cover and refrigerate until cold, about 45 minutes. Stir in chives, parsley, and pepper. Thin with extra water, adding 1 tablespoon at a time, if desired. Dressing can be refrigerated for up to 1 week.

### CREAMLESS CREAMY GINGER-MISO DRESSING

Decrease water to  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup. Substitute  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup rice vinegar for cider vinegar, 2 tablespoons white miso for onion powder, 2 tablespoons grated fresh ginger for pepper, and 2 tablespoons soy sauce for sugar and add 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil. Omit salt, garlic powder, chives, and parsley.

### CREAMLESS CREAMY GREEN GODDESS DRESSING

Decrease cashews to  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup. Substitute lemon juice for cider vinegar and  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup chopped fresh parsley,  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup chopped fresh chives, and 1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon for onion powder. Substitute 2 rinsed anchovy fillets for sugar. Decrease salt to  $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon and pepper to  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon. Omit minced chives and parsley in step 2.

### CREAMLESS CREAMY ROASTED RED PEPPER AND TAHINI DRESSING

Decrease cashews to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup and increase garlic powder to  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon. Substitute 1 (12-ounce) jar roasted red peppers, drained and chopped coarse, for water. Substitute sherry vinegar for cider vinegar and 3 tablespoons tahini for onion powder. Substitute 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil for sugar and smoked paprika for pepper. Increase salt to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons and garlic powder to  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon and add pinch cayenne pepper. Omit chives and parsley.

### CREAMLESS CREAMY RUSSIAN DRESSING

Substitute  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup distilled white vinegar for cider vinegar and paprika for sugar. Substitute 2 teaspoons hot sauce; 2 teaspoons prepared horseradish, drained; and 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce for garlic powder. Decrease salt to  $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon and onion powder to  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon. Add  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup ketchup. Omit chives and parsley.

## Dressing or Dip? You Choose

Right after blending, these dressings are thick and rich enough to use as dips, but they can also be thinned with water and drizzled over greens.



# Game-Changing Turkey Gravy

Of course it had to taste great. But we also wanted a gravy that could be made in advance, didn't require drippings, and could accommodate dietary restrictions.

≧ BY LAN LAM ≦

When there are pies to bake, potatoes to mash, and a turkey to carve, the gravy can become an afterthought, often thrown together at the last minute amid the chaos of getting all the food to the table. At that point, there's no time to eke out a flavorful stock for the base, and the roasted bird may or may not have generated the drippings you were counting on to infuse the gravy with rich turkey flavor. The result—whether gloppy, runny, greasy, or just plain dull—is a shame, since many of us drizzle gravy over the entire plate.

After spending weeks reimagining the gravy-making process from start to finish, I came away with an approach that produces a full-bodied gravy that truly tastes like turkey and can be almost entirely prepared days (or even weeks) ahead of time. Best of all, you don't need drippings to make it taste great (though you should certainly add them if you have them), and the recipe can be easily tweaked to accommodate guests with dietary restrictions. Read on and I'll review the important points.

## Make a Seriously Flavorful Stock

Gravy is simply a sauce made by seasoning and thickening stock, so it's essential that the stock be full-flavored. Usually, that's accomplished by browning turkey parts (the neck and giblets—more about these later); adding chopped aromatics such as onions, carrots, and celery; deglazing the pot with wine; and adding several cups of liquid.

But I made our turkey stock even more flavorful by turning the process on its head: I skipped browning the turkey parts and instead simmered them straightaway in a couple of cups of chicken broth. The hot liquid surrounding the parts thoroughly extracted their flavorful fat and juices, which, when the liquid evaporated, created a more substantial layer of savory fond than I would have gotten by initially searing the turkey parts. (Fond is what's left in the pan when the proteins and sugars in the



The stock can be made up to two days ahead, and the gravy can be made and refrigerated up to three days ahead or frozen for up to two weeks.

drippings undergo the Maillard reaction and brown, which creates hundreds of new flavor compounds. For more information, see “How We Built Gravy with Better Flavor.”)

From there, I sautéed the aromatics, deglazed the pot with wine, added more broth, covered the pot to limit evaporation, simmered the stock for about 1 hour, and strained out the solids.

## Trim Extra Bits for Extra Flavor

Like most gravies, ours relies on the neck, heart, and gizzard for building big turkey flavor. But we also trim excess skin and fat from the raw bird and add it to the stock to supplement those parts (it's easy to do with kitchen shears). The trimmings further enhance the stock's turkey flavor, and the roasted bird looks tidier.

See the illustration for exactly where to trim, and be sure to cut pieces of skin that are no larger than 1 inch (bigger pieces tend to curl up on themselves and stick out of the liquid). If your turkey does not have excess skin or fat, use kitchen shears to snip off the tail and cut it into three or four pieces.

## Use Broth, Not Water

Many gravy recipes call for a combination of chicken broth and water, but the latter dilutes flavor and requires reducing to concentrate savoriness. I used only broth.

## Make Room for More Fond

More surface area in the pot allows a thin, even layer of the drippings to make contact with the hot pan and brown; this results in maximum fond development and a more flavorful stock. (In a narrower pan, a thicker layer of drippings forms and only those in contact with the pan bottom brown, so there's less fond development.) So instead of a large saucepan, which offers about 40 square inches of surface area, I opted for the 75 square inches of a large Dutch oven.

## Use the Neck and Some Giblets

The neck, heart, and gizzard—parts usually found packaged in the bird's cavities—are flavor powerhouses that should be used to fortify the stock. Avoid the liver (it's large, shiny, and dark red); its strong mineral flavor ruins gravy.

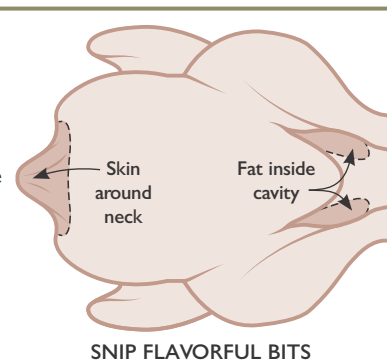
## Add Fat and Skin for Extra Flavor

In addition to adding the neck, heart, and gizzard, I enriched the stock's turkey flavor by trimming and adding excess skin from the top of the breast and excess fat from the bottom of the cavity. These bits and pieces should be trimmed away anyway for tidy presentation, and they contribute valuable turkey flavor to the stock. (For information on exactly where to trim, see “Trim Extra Bits for Extra Flavor.”)



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/dec18)



## How We Built Gravy with Better Flavor

The rich turkey flavor in our gravy boils down to one critical component: fond, the flavor-packed browned bits and tacky layer of evaporated juices that form on the bottom of a pan when meat or vegetables are browned. The brown color is a sign that the proteins and sugars have undergone the Maillard reaction and transformed into hundreds of new flavor compounds that can add terrific savory depth when the fond is incorporated into a gravy or another sauce.

Most gravy recipes build fond by searing turkey parts such as the neck and giblets, but we came up with an approach that's more effective. Instead of initially searing the parts, we simmer them (plus turkey fat and skin for extra flavor) in chicken broth until the liquid evaporates. Simmering actually extracts the juices and fat much more thoroughly than searing does. The proof is visible on the bottom of the pot: Once the liquid evaporates, the entire bottom of the vessel (we use a Dutch oven for maximum surface area) is coated with a gorgeously browned layer of fond.



### Don't Defat the Stock

Gravy recipes often call for defatting the stock, but that's a mistake. In tests, I found that the bird's fat is integral to making gravy that tastes like turkey—not just generically like poultry—because an animal's fat is a repository for its unique aromatic compounds.

### Be Sure to Brown the Roux

A roux, a cooked paste of roughly equal parts fat and flour, is what transforms the liquid stock into a full-bodied gravy. The key to making a good one is taking the time to cook the mixture until it's deep golden brown, since that color translates into a gravy with equally rich color and nutty depth. Browning the roux also yields a gravy that stays fluid longer (a boon to dinner guests who go back for second helpings) because the starches in the flour break down into smaller molecules that are slow to link up with one another as the gravy cools.

### Add Drippings (If You've Got Them)

If you have them, drippings will make the gravy taste even better. Be sure to defat them first (the stock adds enough fat), and don't add more than ¼ cup or the gravy will be too thin.

### Make It Ahead

To avoid as much last-minute work as possible, there are two make-ahead opportunities built into the recipe. The turkey stock can be prepared and refrigerated three days in advance or the gravy can be prepared and frozen up to two weeks ahead and gently reheated with the drippings (if using).

### Make It Gluten- (or Alcohol-) Free

Flour and wine are traditional components in most turkey gravies, but my recipe works just fine with alternatives for both: a gluten-free flour blend and cider vinegar diluted with water, respectively. (Don't substitute cornstarch for the flour; because cornstarch contains less protein and a higher proportion of starch, it doesn't brown as well and yields gravy with a slippery consistency.)

#### OUR FAVORITE TURKEY GRAVY

MAKES 4 CUPS

Much of this gravy's flavor is derived from the trimmed skin and fat plus the neck and giblets of a turkey. Use kitchen shears to cut away extra skin from the neck region (leaving enough to cover the opening) and any loose fat from the cavity. Cut large pieces of skin into 1-inch pieces. If your turkey does not have excess skin or fat, use kitchen shears to snip off the tail and cut it into three or four pieces to use as trimmings. Do not use the liver that is packaged with the giblets. The gravy's consistency can be adjusted to suit your taste: Simmer longer for a thicker gravy or thin with additional broth for a thinner gravy. This gravy is better with turkey drippings; you can add them either in step 4 or when reheating the gravy. To double the recipe, double all the ingredients including the trimmings and make the stock in two separate pots.

- 6 cups chicken broth, plus extra as needed
- Reserved turkey neck and giblets
- Reserved turkey trimmings, cut into 1-inch pieces (½ cup)
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 carrot, chopped
- 1 celery rib, chopped
- 8 sprigs fresh parsley
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- Salt and pepper
- ⅓ cup dry white wine
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 5 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup defatted turkey drippings (optional)

1. Bring 2 cups broth, reserved neck and giblets, and reserved trimmings to simmer in Dutch oven

### Listen for a Sizzle

There's no need to babysit the pot during the initial vigorous simmer; there's no chance of scorching since the liquid keeps the temperature well below the point where browning would occur. Only once you hear sizzling—an audible indication that only pockets of liquid remain and are turning to steam—has the temperature risen to the point where browning will occur and you need to start stirring.

over high heat. Cook, adjusting heat to maintain vigorous simmer and stirring occasionally, until all liquid evaporates and trimmings begin to sizzle, about 20 minutes. Continue to cook, stirring frequently, until dark fond forms on bottom of pot, 2 to 4 minutes longer.

2. Reduce heat to medium-high. Add onion, carrot, celery, parsley sprigs, thyme sprigs, garlic, ½ teaspoon pepper, and ¼ teaspoon salt. Cook, stirring frequently, until onion is translucent, 8 to 10 minutes.

3. Stir in wine and bring to simmer, scraping up any browned bits. Add remaining 4 cups broth and bring to simmer over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer for 1 hour. Strain stock through fine-mesh strainer set over bowl; discard solids. (You should have 3½ to 4 cups stock. Turkey stock can be refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

4. Melt butter in medium saucepan over medium heat. Add flour and increase heat to medium-high. Cook, stirring constantly, until mixture is deep golden brown, 5 to 8 minutes. Reduce heat to low and slowly whisk in strained stock. Increase heat to medium-high and bring to simmer. Simmer until thickened, about 5 minutes. Add drippings, if using, and thin gravy with extra broth, if desired. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve. (Gravy can be refrigerated for up to 3 days or frozen for up to 2 weeks; to reheat, bring to simmer over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally.)

#### OUR FAVORITE GLUTEN-FREE TURKEY GRAVY

The test kitchen's favorite gluten-free flour blends are King Arthur Gluten-Free All-Purpose Flour and Betty Crocker All-Purpose Gluten Free Rice Flour Blend. Do not use a gluten-free flour made with beans here.

Substitute gluten-free flour blend for all-purpose flour.

#### OUR FAVORITE ALCOHOL-FREE TURKEY GRAVY

Substitute ⅓ cup water and 2 teaspoons cider vinegar for wine.

# Applesauce for Everyone

Transform just about any apple variety into flavorful, rosy applesauce in less than 30 minutes. Our secret weapon: the peels.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

As I began this project, I was often asked the question “Do adults actually eat applesauce?” My response: If they don’t, they should, because applesauce is easy to make and it packs all the sweet-tart character of orchard-fresh apples into a deliciously concentrated format. Spooned warm and fragrant from a bowl, it’s a cozy treat on its own, but it also makes a great accompaniment to roasted meat or potato pancakes. Don’t let memories of that vaguely apple-flavored beige stuff from the supermarket turn you against applesauce. As a discerning adult, you deserve the real thing.

The traditional method for making applesauce is simple: Cut unpeeled apples into chunks; throw them into a saucepan with some water, a bit of sugar, and maybe a pinch of salt; and bring it all to a boil. Cover and simmer until the apples are soft, and then transfer everything to a food mill and crank away. As the blade smears the apples along the perforated floor of the mill, the flesh passes into the bowl below while the tough skins and seeds remain in the hopper. But I don’t own a food mill, and a lot of other folks don’t either, so I wanted to see if I could make equally flavorful applesauce without one.

I started with 3 pounds of McIntosh apples, which I chose for their balance of sweetness and acidity. It’s a good middle-of-the-road variety, neither too tart nor too sweet, neither too firm nor too tender. Because I wouldn’t have a food mill to filter out the undesirable bits, I first peeled and cored the apples before cutting them into big chunks. I cooked them in a saucepan with ¼ cup of sugar, a pinch of salt, and 1½ cups of water until they were soft, about 20 minutes. As I mashed them with a potato masher, I noticed an advantage to a food mill-free recipe: I could leave my sauce as chunky as I liked.

But irregular texture wasn’t enough to redeem this sauce. Its pale appearance and bland, flat flavor made it nearly indistinguishable from the jarred stuff.



A potato masher makes applesauce as chunky—or smooth—as you like.

made sense that the flavor of a sauce made without them was comparatively insipid. And there’s another benefit to using the peels if they’re red: The pigments transfer into the sauce during cooking, giving it a charming pink blush.

## A Tedious Task

For my next batch, I cut the unpeeled apples in quarters and removed the cores from each wedge. I put them into a saucepan with sugar, water, and salt; and stirred occasionally over medium-high heat. After painstakingly fishing out the skins and mashing the apples, I was disappointed to find that this sauce wasn’t a huge improvement. The flavor was lackluster, and I could barely make out a hint of pink. Clearly I wasn’t making the most of the peels. I started my next batch the same way, but instead of picking out the skins after cooking, I transferred everything to a blender and let it rip. When the peels were reduced to mere specks and the sauce had taken on a rosy hue, I took a taste. Those specks of skin, so tiny in the blender, felt huge on my tongue, and the rest of sauce was unnaturally smooth and uniform, with an odd stickiness.

What went wrong? The cells of an apple are held together by pectin, a complex polysaccharide that acts as a sort of glue. When you mash cooked apples or pass them through a food mill, you break apart some of those clusters of cells, freeing the pectin that holds them together, but you leave a lot intact. That’s why applesauce has a pleasantly nubby texture. When I pureed the apples in a blender, I obliterated more cells, which released more pectin. It gelled with the water in the sauce, giving it an unpleasantly sticky texture. But, texture aside, the flavor was fantastic: sweet and a bit tart, with just a touch of cleansing astringency. It must have come from the peels.

## More Than a Peeling

The only difference between applesauce made with a food mill and my sad sauce was those discarded peels. Research revealed that the peels are the source of a lot of distinctive apple aromas (see “Apple A-peel”), so it

### Apple A-peel

Apple skin is chock-full of flavor and aroma compounds, which is why applesauce made with the peels tastes far more, well, appley. Cooking the peels in a small amount of water transfers flavor compounds and pigments to the liquid, which gets incorporated into our cooked applesauce.



ADD THE PEEL FOR MORE APPLE FLAVOR

## Sweeter with Age

During storage, apples consume tart malic acid, meaning older apples are often perceived as sweeter than younger ones. Different apples require different amounts of added sugar to make a balanced applesauce, so we season ours to taste after cooking.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CookIllustrated.com/oct18)

## TECHNIQUE | HOW TO CORE AND PEEL APPLES

We use every bit of the apple by cooking the cores and peels separately from the flesh and then straining the mixture over the sauce.

### WITH AN APPLE CORER

We prefer coring apples before peeling to ensure that no bits of skin remain on the apples' tops or bottoms.



1. Use corer to remove apple core. Reserve core.



2. Peel cored apple, working in wide strips. Reserve peel.



3. Cut apple into quarters.

### WITHOUT AN APPLE CORER



1. Peel apple top and bottom, then sides. Reserve peel.



2. Cut apple into quarters.



3. Cut away core from each wedge. Reserve core.

I was stuck. The gentle mashing approach yielded applesauce that was anemic in flavor and appearance, while the blender produced great flavor but the texture suffered. What about a hybrid approach?

I peeled and cored another batch of apples, but this time I put the skins in a separate saucepan with a cup of water. (I also added the cores to the pot along with the skins. After all, the cores have plenty of flesh on them to contribute flavor and pulp, so why throw them away?) I then quartered the apples and put them in another saucepan with ½ cup of water and some sugar and salt. I brought both saucepans to a simmer and let them cook for about 15 minutes.

I periodically mashed the cores and peels and was gratified to see them turn pulpy and plum-colored. I mashed the softened apples and then placed a fine-mesh strainer over the saucepan. I poured the peel-and-core mush into the strainer and scraped it along the mesh with my spatula. Flesh from the cores and many of the flavor- and color-rich compounds from the peels passed through, and the tough stuff (including any seeds or seed pods) was left behind.

This batch had all the hallmarks of a great applesauce: rosy color, pleasantly chunky texture, and true, clear apple flavor. And it was just as good with a wide variety of apples (See “[Almost] No Bad Apples”). It’s truly an applesauce anyone can make and everyone will love—adults included.

### APPLESAUCE MAKES 4 CUPS

We like the tart flavor of McIntosh apples in this recipe, but nearly any variety of apple can be substituted, except for Red or Golden Delicious. You may mash this applesauce until it’s smooth or leave it chunky for a more rustic effect. If you have a food mill, we suggest preparing our Simple Applesauce; the recipe is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18). Our recipe for Savory Applesauce with Parsnips and Mustard is also available.

- 3 pounds McIntosh apples, peeled and cored, peels and cores reserved
- 1½ cups water
- ¼ cup sugar, plus extra to taste
- Pinch salt
- Pinch ground cinnamon (optional)

1. Bring reserved peels and cores and 1 cup water to boil in small saucepan over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to medium, cover, and cook, mashing occasionally with potato masher, until mixture is deep pink and cores have broken down, about 15 minutes.

2. While peels and cores cook, cut apples into quarters and place in large saucepan. Add sugar;

salt; cinnamon, if using; and remaining ½ cup water and bring to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to medium, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally with rubber spatula, until all apples are soft and about half are completely broken down, about 15 minutes. Using potato masher, mash apples to desired consistency.

3. Transfer peel-and-core mixture to fine-mesh strainer set over saucepan of mashed apple mixture. Using rubber spatula, stir and press peel-and-core mixture to extract pulp; discard solids. Stir to combine. Sweeten with extra sugar to taste. Serve warm, at room temperature, or chilled. (Applesauce can be refrigerated for up to 1 week.)

### DESSERT-WORTHY APPLESAUCE WITH BROWN SUGAR AND RUM

Substitute packed brown sugar for granulated sugar. Substitute ⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg and pinch ground allspice for cinnamon. Stir 2 tablespoons gold rum into applesauce before serving. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream.

### SAVORY APPLESAUCE WITH BEETS AND HORSE RADISH MAKES 2 CUPS

Decrease apples to 1¼ pounds and sugar to 2 tablespoons. Increase salt to ¼ teaspoon and omit cinnamon. Add 1 beet, peeled and grated (1 cup), to quartered apples with sugar and salt. (Beet will not completely soften.) Stir 2 teaspoons prepared horseradish into applesauce and season with salt to taste. Serve with roast beef or potato latkes.

### (Almost) No Bad Apples

Our method works with just about any apple, even those that may have turned a little mushy. Keep in mind: Crisp, dense apples take longer to break down, and green or yellow apples make a beige sauce.



**OUR FAVORITE**  
We love tart, sweet, colorful McIntosh.



**NOT SO DELICIOUS**

Red Delicious were far too sweet, and Golden Delicious never fully broke down.



**BARREL OF CHOICES**

Experiment with different varieties to see which you like best.

# Irish Brown Soda Bread

Ireland's everyday bread is so quick, foolproof, and wholesome that you'll want to make it every day, too.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

Compared with the white soda bread strewn with raisins and caraway seeds that makes its annual appearance in the United States around St. Patrick's Day, Ireland's rustic brown soda bread might seem austere. It's traditionally made with just four ingredients: wholemeal flour (more about that later), baking soda, salt, and buttermilk. But those minimal ingredients make a crusty bread with a savory, nutty flavor that pairs well with a wide variety of foods. Soups, cheese, cured fish, beer, and hard cider all make excellent accompaniments, and it's equally good with a smear of salted butter. Considering its versatility, it's little wonder that brown soda bread is the preferred version in Ireland.

The other appeal of soda bread—both white and brown versions—is that it's dead simple to make. In fact, it's even easier and faster to make than so-called quick breads such as banana bread, because it contains fewer ingredients (there are no eggs, for instance) and they can all be mixed by hand in a single bowl. The mixture forms a thick dough, not a batter, which immediately gets shaped into a round: There's no kneading or proofing. Then it's scored on the



You can serve brown soda bread alongside soup, cheese, or cured fish or simply slathered with good butter or marmalade.

## The Other Irish Soda Bread

The white-flour version of Irish soda bread shares a name and a basic round shape with the more rustic brown version, but that's about it. Whereas brown bread is craggy, coarse, and savory, the white kind tends to have a finer, tighter, sweeter crumb and is typically strewn with either currants or raisins and/or caraway seeds.



top and baked, either free-form or in a pan, until it's risen, brown, and crusty.

What you get is a homemade whole-grain, multipurpose bread in less than an hour. I ate it often when I was in Ireland and returned home planning to make it just as regularly. But, as I discovered, the main ingredient, Irish wholemeal flour, is hard to come by in the States. I hoped that the closest equivalent, American whole-wheat flour, would suffice.

## The Whole (Wheat) Story

I was optimistic that it would, since both domestic whole-wheat and Irish wholemeal flours consist of entire wheat kernels that have been dried and ground to a powder. So I followed a traditional recipe, combining 3 cups of whole-wheat flour (a straight substitution for wholemeal), 1½ teaspoons of baking soda, and 1 teaspoon of salt in a bowl. Then I stirred in 2 cups of buttermilk to make a shaggy dough. I turned it out onto the counter, shaped it into a round, and, as most recipes instruct, cut a shallow cross in the top to allow for expansion in the

oven before baking it on a baking sheet for about 45 minutes. The process was indeed simple, but the loaf was disappointing.

Granted, lightness is not a characteristic attribute of brown soda bread, but this loaf hardly rose at all in the oven, so it was dense—real doorstep material. It also lacked the rustic crumb of authentic Irish breads, and it spread too much, so it was quite flat. Wondering if I had underestimated the importance of using that authentic Irish flour, I ordered some.

Side by side, the two flours actually looked quite different. The American whole-wheat flour, which does contain bran and germ, was uniformly ground very fine and had a monochrome deep-tan hue. The Irish flour was lighter in color, but it contained discrete pieces of bran and germ and felt rough when I rubbed it between my fingers. Those distinct bits, I guessed, were necessary to produce the coarser crumb I was after, and I proved it by making the same recipe again using the Irish flour. This bread was still as dense and flat as the previous loaf, but it had a nicely rustic texture that made it more like the bread I had eaten in Ireland.

The obvious way to replicate the bran and germ presence of the Irish flour? Add bran and germ to domestic whole-wheat flour. Doing so didn't make the loaf any less dense or flat, but it did interrupt the uniformity of the American flour, creating the rustic consistency I was after.

I tend to scoff when people talk in terms of anything more than 100 percent. But as I did the math, I realized that by adding bran and germ to whole-wheat flour, I had created a loaf that was roughly 150 percent whole wheat. That extra jolt actually made the bread taste too wheaty, but I'd worry about that later and stay focused on the texture for now.

## Liftoff

In this bare-bones recipe, the lift is dependent upon the acidic buttermilk reacting with the alkaline baking soda to create carbon dioxide gas, which gets trapped in the dough. When the dough heats up in the oven, the trapped gas expands and the bread rises. At least, that's what is supposed to happen.

But that reaction between buttermilk and baking soda is both instant and fleeting. Lacking the



## Soda Makes the Flavor Pop

You don't need baking soda to leaven Irish soda bread. We discovered that baking powder is actually a more practical rising agent here because its chemical reaction that causes the bread to rise is not as time-sensitive or fleeting as that of baking soda.

But you do need baking soda for flavor. The loaf we made without it lacked this bread's mineral-y tang and salinity—and frankly, its identity. So we added back the soda for its flavor contribution (and for improved browning).



**BLAND WITHOUT IT**  
Baking soda isn't crucial for leavening, but it is for flavor.

deftness and muscle memory of a lifelong soda bread baker, I was probably taking too long to get the bread into the oven and possibly also knocking air out of the dough as I shaped it. Either way, there wasn't enough air left to lighten the loaf. Luckily, I found salvation in the pantry. Actually, I found baking powder, but it amounted to the same thing.

Baking powder came late to Ireland, so really old soda bread recipes don't call for it, but it's a far more reliable leavener than baking soda. It contains both acid and alkaline components, so it's a complete leavening system, but here's the really clever bit: Some of the acids don't dissolve until they warm up, so the chemical reaction is delayed until the dough is safely in the oven. The upshot: When you have baking powder in your recipe, you don't have to be as speedy or as gentle when handling the dough.

### Flavor Makers

I made another loaf with American whole-wheat flour, wheat germ, and bran, this time substituting baking powder for the baking soda. I still mixed and shaped the dough minimally to preserve its craggy, rustic look. I slashed the top, and put it in the oven.

The baking powder did the trick, as I finally produced a risen loaf with the nubbly, coarse, tender crumb I was after. But while I no longer needed the baking soda for lift, I was surprised to discover that I missed its flavor. When I tried the loaf without the baking soda, my tastebuds were confused: It didn't have the tang of a yeast bread or the distinctive flavor of a soda bread (see "Soda Makes the Flavor Pop"). What's more, the crust looked a bit wan, since alkaline baking soda raises the pH of the dough and encourages browning. I'd add baking soda back to the recipe.

Since the wheat bran and germ were making the loaf too wheaty, I made some adjustments to my next loaf: I combined whole-wheat and white flour in a ratio of 2 to 1, and I added 2 teaspoons

of sugar. I mixed in bran and germ for texture and baking powder for leavening. After adding baking soda and salt for flavor, I stirred in the buttermilk. This time I baked the dough in a cake pan instead of on a baking sheet. The pan gently corralled the soft dough in the oven, preventing too much spread, so the loaf expanded up as well as out.

Crusty and risen, with a coarse, tender crumb and slightly tangy flavor, this loaf finally checked all the boxes. Like the people of Ireland, I now had a quick and versatile soda bread I could enjoy every day.

### IRISH BROWN SODA BREAD

MAKES ONE 8-INCH LOAF

Our favorite whole-wheat flour is King Arthur Premium. To ensure the best flavor, use fresh whole-wheat flour. Wheat bran can be found at natural foods stores or in the baking aisle of your supermarket. This bread is best when served on the day it is made, but leftovers can be wrapped in plastic wrap for up to two days.

- 2 cups (11 ounces) whole-wheat flour
- 1 cup (5 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 cup wheat bran
- ¼ cup wheat germ
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1½ teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups buttermilk

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Lightly grease 8-inch round cake pan. Whisk whole-wheat flour, all-purpose flour, wheat bran, wheat germ, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together in medium bowl.

2. Add buttermilk and stir with rubber spatula until all flour is moistened and dough forms soft,

## Making Ireland's Bread Without Ireland's Flour

The main ingredient in Irish brown bread, wholemeal flour, is responsible not only for the loaf's nutty flavor but also for its craggy crumb. But that product isn't easily found in the States, and we discovered that the domestic equivalent, whole-wheat flour, doesn't deliver the same coarse consistency. What's the difference? The size of the grind. Whereas whole-wheat flour is ground uniformly fine, wholemeal contains distinct bits of bran and germ that produce a coarse crumb. To mimic that texture, we supplement whole-wheat flour with additional bran and germ, which disrupt the uniform consistency of domestic flour.



## Hearth-Baked Original

The first Irish soda bread would have been made in an open hearth over a turf fire. The cook would have heated a footed cast-iron pot called a bastable in the glowing coals, placed the shaped loaf inside, put the lid on concave side up, and filled the lid's cavity with coals so that the loaf would bake evenly. Just for fun, we simulated this setup with a similar lidded cast-iron vessel, which we set on bricks over the coals to raise the pan as feet would.



### POT O' BROWN BREAD

Baking our brown soda bread in a covered cast-iron pot that we set over coals produced a loaf with a particularly thick, well-browned crust.

ragged mass. Transfer dough to counter and gently shape into 6-inch round (surface will be craggy). Using serrated knife, cut ½-inch-deep cross about 5 inches long on top of loaf. Transfer to prepared pan. Bake until loaf is lightly browned and center registers 185 degrees, 40 to 45 minutes, rotating pan halfway through baking.

3. Invert loaf onto wire rack. Reinvert loaf and let cool for at least 1 hour. Slice and serve.

## The Quickest Bread, Even Quicker

Since all the wheat components in this bread are best stored in the freezer, we made up a mix that can be frozen and used to make fresh bread in a flash. You can even take the mix with you on vacation.

➤ **Here's how to do it:** Combine one batch of dry ingredients with ½ cup of powdered buttermilk and freeze the mixture in a zipper-lock bag for up to six months. When ready to use, simply transfer the mix to a bowl, stir in 2 cups of water, and proceed with the recipe as directed.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](https://CooksIllustrated.com/apr18)

# Why You Should Make Pita Bread

The tender chew and complex flavor of fresh-baked pitas are revelatory. Once you've experienced homemade, you'll swear off supermarket rounds for good.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

If your only experiences of pita have been the dry, flavorless rounds from the supermarket, you might wonder how this ancient bread—which dates back thousands of years—has persisted. But I can think of several reasons. The first being that good, fresh pita is a revelation: soft, tender, and pleasantly elastic, with flavor that's both faintly sweet and reminiscent of the hearth on which it was baked. It's got broad functionality, too: Tear it apart and use it as a vehicle for swiping up dips; wrap it around sandwich fillings; or take advantage of its built-in pocket and stuff it with falafel (see our recipe on page 49). And compared to the precision and skill required for other breads, making pita is a low-tech, casual endeavor—basically, you flatten a swath of dough into a thin disk, toss it onto a ripping-hot stone, and watch it puff.

Despite these compelling reasons to make pita at home, the bread's one drawback is that its soft, tender chew is extremely ephemeral. Within hours of being baked, the rounds turn dull and dry—hence the lackluster options at most supermarkets. Maybe there was a way to prolong some of that fresh-baked tenderness and moisture. I also discovered when I tried out a few recipes that pita's inherent casualness leaves room for pitfalls such as breads that lack complexity and don't reliably puff. I would look for tricks for overcoming those issues, too.

## From Pizza to Pita?

Since pita is a form of flatbread like pizza, I wondered if the dough for our Thin-Crust Pizza (January/February 2011) would also work here. Using roughly the same ratios with some tweaks to bump up the dough's flavor—after all, I wouldn't be topping every inch of it with sauce and cheese—I combined bread flour, yeast, and honey (more complex-tasting than sugar) in a food processor and then added olive oil and ice-cold water, mixing briefly to form a dough. A 10-minute rest



A strong yet pliable dough and a hot oven help our pita dough rounds inflate and form pockets.

allowed the flour to hydrate and gluten formation to begin, at which point I added the salt (delaying this addition ensures good gluten development) and processed until a smooth dough formed, which took just minutes. I shaped the dough into eight balls, placed them on an oiled baking sheet, and let them proof overnight in the refrigerator. This long fermentation not only is convenient—you can make the dough one day and bake it the next—but also lets the yeast develop complex flavors without producing too much gas, which

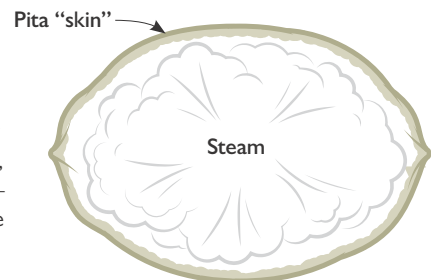
would result in an overly bubbly dough. It also makes for a less elastic dough that's easier to work with. Those bubbles lead to weak spots when the dough is rolled out—and, as I soon learned, weak spots are an enemy of properly pocketed pitas. The next day, I rolled out my pitas and baked them on a stone in a 425-degree oven for just a few minutes per side, until they had tanned and puffed.

Correction: until most of them had puffed, since several never did. Even those that did inflate were dry, so I took the surest route to increasing the perception of moisture: adding more fat. Starting cautiously, I doubled the 2 teaspoons I had been using and was rewarded with bread that stayed moist noticeably longer than my previous attempts. Encouraged, I kept going until I'd enriched the dough with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of oil. Twenty-four hours later, the bread was still nicely moist and reheated impressively well, but its texture was not optimal in other ways. All that fat had compromised the dough's gluten development—that is, its ability to form a structural network—so much that the rounds lacked even a gentle chew, and my already-mediocre success rate with pitas that puffed dropped even lower.

Clearly, I'd overdone it. But backing down on the oil would mean losing the benefits of its rich flavor and moisture, so instead I balanced its tenderizing effect by adding more water. Doing so made the flour proteins more mobile and increased the gluten's ability to form a stronger network during mixing. More water also created more steam once the breads were in the oven, which helped them puff—though only somewhat more reliably than previous batches had.

## SCIENCE How Pita Puffs

The way that pitas inflate in the oven looks like magic, but it's caused by some simple science. When a disk of pita dough hits the oven, the hot air quickly bakes the outermost layer, forming a thin "skin." Simultaneously, water in the dough turns to steam, pushing outward. The "skin" stretches and expands—small bubbles first form around the edge of the pita and eventually merge into a single large signature pocket.



## WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CookIllustrated.com/oct18)

## Puffed to Perfection

I couldn't solve the puffing problem until I figured out what causes the dough to inflate in the first place. The gist is that the oven's heat causes the dough's exterior to form a "skin" while steam from water in the dough causes the interior to expand. If the raw dough is perfectly smooth and taut, the skin that forms during baking is strong enough to withstand the steam pressure, and the dough expands impressively like a balloon. But if the dough has creases, thin patches, or other imperfections, as mine often did, they create weak spots where air can escape, preventing the signature puff.

Knowing that, I was careful to roll the proofed dough balls into flat, smooth, evenly thick disks. If the dough was insufficiently or unevenly coated with flour, it would stick to the counter or the rolling pin and could easily crease. I found a better way of thoroughly coating the dough with flour: Instead of dusting the counter with flour, I put the flour in a bowl and turned the dough in it (see "A New Way to Coat Your Dough"). That way, the dough was completely coated with flour even before it hit the counter. I still needed to use additional flour on the counter, too, since the dough becomes sticky again as it is rolled out.

But even my perfectly smooth dough rounds wouldn't always puff properly; some would inflate halfway and then frustratingly collapse, as if the top layer was too heavy for the steam to lift. When I examined the collapsed pitas, I saw that the top skins were quite thick—likely the result of baking too quickly. So I moved the baking stone from the middle rack to the lowest rack, which created more space between the pitas and the reflected heat at the top of the oven.

At last, every single round puffed beautifully—and all were gobbled up minutes after I pulled them from the oven. As a bonus, I tweaked the recipe to produce thick, plush Israeli-style rounds, and a nutty, more rustic version made with whole-wheat flour. That's a total of three compelling reasons why it's worth it to bake your own.



TAKE THE DOUGH FOR A DIP

## A New Way to Coat Your Dough

To ensure that the dough is thoroughly coated in flour before it even hits the counter to be rolled out, we add flour to a bowl and turn each dough ball in it, brushing the excess right back into the bowl. Use this technique to coat other types of dough, such as pizza dough, before rolling out.

## PITA BREAD

MAKES EIGHT 7-INCH PITA BREADS

We recommend weighing the flour and water. We prefer King Arthur bread flour for this recipe for its high protein content. If using another bread flour, reduce the amount of water in the dough by 2 tablespoons (1 ounce). If you don't have a baking stone, bake the pitas on an overturned and preheated rimmed baking sheet. The pitas are best eaten within 24 hours of baking. Reheat leftover pitas by wrapping them in aluminum foil, placing them in a cold oven, setting the temperature to 300 degrees, and baking for 15 to 20 minutes. Our recipes for double-thick Israeli-Style Pita Bread and Whole-Wheat Pita Bread are available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18).

- 2<sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> cups (14<sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> ounces) King Arthur bread flour
- 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> cups (10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> ounces) ice water
- <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 teaspoons honey
- 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> teaspoons salt
- Vegetable oil spray

1. Whisk flour and yeast together in bowl of stand mixer. Add ice water, oil, and honey on top of flour mixture. Fit stand mixer with dough hook and mix on low speed until all flour is moistened, 1 to 2 minutes. Let dough stand for 10 minutes.

2. Add salt to dough and mix on medium speed until dough forms satiny, sticky ball that clears sides of bowl, 6 to 8 minutes. Transfer dough to lightly oiled

counter and knead until smooth, about 1 minute. Divide dough into 8 equal pieces (about 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> ounces each). Shape dough pieces into tight, smooth balls and transfer, seam side down, to rimmed baking sheet coated with oil spray. Spray tops of balls lightly with oil spray, then cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 16 hours or up to 24 hours.

3. One hour before baking pitas, adjust oven rack to lowest position, set baking stone on rack, and heat oven to 425 degrees.

4. Remove dough from refrigerator. Coat 1 dough ball generously on both sides with flour and place on well-floured counter, seam side down. Use heel of your hand to press dough ball into 5-inch circle. Using rolling pin, gently roll into 7-inch circle, adding flour as necessary to prevent sticking. Roll slowly and gently to prevent any creasing. Repeat with second dough ball. Brush both sides of each dough round with pastry brush to remove any excess flour. Transfer dough rounds to unfloured peel, making sure side that was facing up when you began rolling is faceup again.

5. Slide both dough rounds carefully onto stone and bake until evenly inflated and lightly browned on undersides, 1 to 3 minutes. Using peel, slide pitas off stone and, using your hands or spatula, gently invert. (If pitas do not puff after 3 minutes, flip immediately to prevent overcooking.) Return pitas to stone and bake until lightly browned in center of second side, 1 minute. Transfer pitas to wire rack to cool, covering loosely with clean dish towel. Repeat shaping and baking with remaining 6 pitas in 3 batches. Let pitas cool for 10 minutes before serving.

## STEP BY STEP | HOW TO SHAPE PITAS THAT RELIABLY FORM POCKETS

Shaping the dough into smooth, taut balls and rolling the proofed balls into even disks are the keys to pitas that reliably puff in the oven.



### BEFORE PROOFING

1. Working in a circle, pull the edges of the dough into the center, forming a ball.



2. Holding the ball in your hand, pinch the seams together to seal, creating a taut surface.



### AFTER PROOFING

3. Use the heel of your hand to press the thoroughly floured dough ball into a 5-inch circle.



4. Roll the dough into a 7-inch disk. Roll slowly and gently to prevent any creasing.



5. Before baking, make sure the side that was facing up when you began rolling is faceup again—this helps with puffing.

# Bringing Back Gougères

Airy, elegant French cheese puffs, known as *gougères*, deliver toasty flavor within delicately crisp shells. Bonus: Ours are a cinch to make.

≧ BY LAN LAM ≦

While some French classics can feel stodgy and old-fashioned (think Mornay sauce or chicken fricassee), I'm willing to bet that *gougères* (and their sweet cousins, profiteroles) will never go out of style. It's not just that their crisp, browned exteriors and airy, popover-like interiors flavored with nutty Gruyère cheese give them huge appeal. These two-bite puffs also look impressive and can be made in advance and reheated.

The foundation for *gougères* (and profiteroles) is *pâte à choux*, or choux pastry. The most classic versions involve cooking butter, water, and flour in a saucepan until the loose batter stiffens and turns into a dough—this ensures that it's pipeable rather than a runny mess. Eggs then get beaten in, one at a time, for structure and flavor. To make the choux into *gougères*, the next steps are to stir in grated cheese, pipe the dough into little rounds, and bake. Starting in a hot oven (425 degrees is typical) ensures that the puffs expand dramatically. The temperature is then lowered to 375 degrees or so to finish cooking them through.

Following a few such recipes, I found room for improvement. Fresh out of the oven, the best puffs were crisp outside and just custardy enough inside to provide contrast—but if they sat around for even 20 minutes, they softened. I also found that, depending on the oven, the puffs could overbrown. They weren't nearly cheesy enough, and beating in the eggs by hand was a chore.

## Choux Drop

I cooked a paste of ½ cup of water, 5 tablespoons of butter, and ½ cup of flour along with a little salt and cayenne for depth. But instead of beating in the eggs by hand, I worked them into the dough in a food processor, along with an extra egg white. The proteins in the white would boost crispness and provide structure for more airiness. The water in the white would provide steam to help the dough puff.

I also adjusted the baking process. With the help of a probe thermometer, I confirmed that when I turned the dial on my well-insulated oven from 425 to 375 degrees, the temperature didn't always drop much, depending on where the oven was in its heating cycle. When the temperature didn't drop much,



The dough, which comes together in minutes, can be made several hours in advance. Baked *gougères* can be stored for 24 hours and rewarm nicely.

the puffs browned and dried out on their exteriors by the time the interiors were done. But when I pulled them earlier, the interiors were gummy and dense. I wondered if I could get more consistent results by simply shutting off the oven. This would guarantee that the temperature inside the oven, no matter how well insulated, would drop more rapidly. I gave this approach a shot: After 15 minutes at 425 degrees,

more strength so that the bubbles could expand properly without tearing. To that end, I switched from using all-purpose flour to higher-protein bread flour. Second, since fat inhibits gluten formation, I reduced the amount of butter from 5 tablespoons to 2; this would mitigate greasiness. To my disappointment, these changes brought only marginal improvement.

I turned off the oven and left the puffs inside with the door closed for another 15 minutes. This batch came out just right: perfectly browned with the ideal airy centers.

## Stretched to the Limits

With the choux settled, it was time to bring cheese into the picture. I made another batch of choux, but this time after adding the eggs to the processor I added 4 ounces (1 cup) of grated Gruyère—a full ounce more than other recipes—and then piped my rounds and baked them as before.

When I removed my *gougères* from the oven, I could see that they were over-browned on the bottoms and a little greasy. But the bigger problem was the interiors, which were dense and doughy. When I inspected them carefully, I noticed that most of the air bubbles had tears in their walls. The addition of such a hefty amount of cheese was preventing the bubbles from expanding fully.

To find a solution, I gave the choux ingredients a closer look. First, I considered the gluten-forming proteins in the flour. Gluten creates a stretchy network that provides structure to baked goods, so it seemed logical that more gluten would provide

## Two Tricks to Prevent Burnt Bottoms

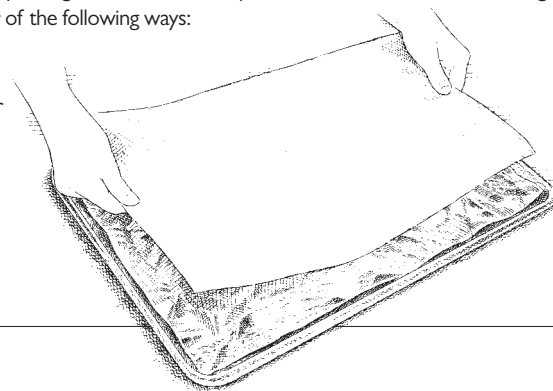
Baking the *gougères* on the upper rack of the oven helps mitigate the bottoms' exposure to heat, but so does creating an air gap beneath the puffs. You can do this in either of the following ways:

### NEST BAKING SHEETS

Nesting two rimmed baking sheets creates a thin air gap between them that keeps the top sheet cooler.

### LINE SHEET WITH CRINKLED FOIL

If you don't have two baking sheets, you can create multiple tiny air gaps by lining the sheet with crinkled foil before covering it with parchment.



## Smooth the Way to Perfect Puffs



Use the back of a spoon lightly coated with vegetable oil spray to smooth away any creases and large peaks on each mound of dough.

I wondered if I could do better by manipulating the egg proteins. Raw egg proteins are coiled up in tight bundles. When heated, they uncoil and form strong, springy networks. I ran a series of tests: more whole eggs, more whites, and more yolks in varying amounts. But in all cases, the dough became too wet, making it hard to work with. Was there some way to get the two eggs and one white I'd been using all along to set up and establish some structure more quickly?

Egg proteins unwind not only when heated but also when beaten well (something we've learned from making omelets and baked goods). But after a chat with our science editor, I discovered another way to make them unwind more quickly: Combine them with salt. Up to this point, I'd been adding the salt to the dough, but in my next batch I added it directly to the eggs instead. What an impressive difference one little change made. When I tore open these gougères, I found the airy centers I was after. (See "For Airy Puffs, Salt Is Key" for a full explanation.)

Still, the puffs were browning too much on their bottoms. Baking them on the upper-middle rack helped, but it wasn't enough. The fix was nesting my rimmed baking sheet in a second baking sheet, which created a thin air gap between the two. This gap insulated the pastry bottoms just enough to keep them from overbrowning. (For an alternative solution, see "Two Tricks to Prevent Burnt Bottoms").

Now I took a closer look at portioning the dough. Piping the dough with a pastry bag was of course an option, but two spoons worked almost as well. (With this dough, a zipper-lock bag with the corner snipped off was not a possibility, as the dough was too stiff and came out of the bag in odd shapes.) Whether I used a pastry bag or spoons, I only had to smooth away any creases or large peaks with the back of a spoon coated in vegetable oil spray.

From here, I came up with a few more recipes that varied the cheese and the spices, making sure to pick cheeses that are similar in age and texture—and, thus, moisture content—to Gruyère so as not to alter my puffs' perfect texture. Manchego and black pepper paired well, as did Gouda and smoked paprika.

These luxuriously cheesy, delicately crisp bites are sure to make an appearance at my next party. Though they'll stay perfectly crisp for a full hour, I don't expect they'll last that long.

### GOUGÈRES

MAKES 24 PUFFS

Use a Gruyère that has been aged for about one year. The doubled baking sheets prevent the undersides of the puffs from overbrowning. Alternatively, loosely roll up an 18 by 12-inch piece of aluminum foil, unroll it, and set it in a rimmed baking sheet. Cover the foil with a sheet of parchment paper and proceed with the recipe. In step 4, the dough can be piped using a pastry bag fitted with a 1/2-inch plain tip.

- 2 large eggs plus 1 large white
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup water
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 1/2 cup (2 1/2 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 4 ounces Gruyère cheese, shredded (1 cup)

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper and nest it in second rimmed baking sheet. In 2-cup liquid measuring cup, beat eggs and white and salt until well combined. (You should have about 1/2 cup egg mixture. Discard excess.) Set aside.

2. Heat water, butter, and cayenne in small saucepan over medium heat. When mixture begins to simmer, reduce heat to low and immediately stir in flour using wooden spoon. Cook, stirring constantly, using smearing motion, until mixture is very thick, forms ball, and pulls away from sides of saucepan, about 30 seconds.

3. Immediately transfer mixture to food processor and process with feed tube open for 5 seconds to cool slightly. With processor running, gradually add reserved egg mixture in steady stream, then scrape down sides of bowl and add Gruyère. Process until paste is very glossy and flecked with coarse commmeal-size pieces of cheese, 30 to 40 seconds. (If not using immediately, transfer paste to bowl, press sheet of greased parchment directly on surface, and store at room temperature for up to 2 hours.)

4. Scoop 1 level tablespoon of dough. Using second small spoon, scrape dough onto prepared sheet into 1 1/2-inch-wide, 1-inch-tall mound. Repeat, spacing mounds 1 to 1 1/4 inches apart. (You should have 24 mounds.) Using back of spoon lightly coated with vegetable oil spray, smooth away any creases and large peaks on each mound.

5. Bake until gougères are puffed and upper two-thirds of each are light golden brown (bottom third will still be pale), 14 to 20 minutes. Turn off oven; leave gougères in oven until uniformly golden brown, 10 to 15 minutes (do not open oven for at least

## For Airy Puffs, Salt Is Key

Adding a little salt is important in almost all recipes to enhance flavor; the salt in our Gougères also improves their structure, allowing us to make puffs that are airy, not dense. But how the salt is added is critical. Rather than add it to the dough, we beat the salt with the eggs before they are combined with the flour mixture. Why?

Mixing salt with the eggs changes the electrical charges on the egg proteins so they uncoil at a lower temperature, allowing them to set up into a strong network earlier in the baking time. This means they can buttress the dough as it inflates, ensuring that it doesn't collapse under the added weight of the cheese. Bottom line? Our Gougères contain fewer and larger interior bubbles, creating the airy results we were after.



### PERFECTLY HOLLOW

Salting the eggs before incorporating them into the dough makes a strong puff that inflates well.



### POORLY INFLATED

Mixing salt directly into the dough makes for a weaker puff that doesn't inflate well.

8 minutes). Transfer gougères to wire rack and let cool for 15 minutes. Serve warm. (Cooled gougères can be stored in airtight container at room temperature for up to 24 hours or frozen in zipper-lock bag for up to 1 month. To serve, crisp gougères in 300-degree oven for about 7 minutes.)

### GOUGÈRES WITH AGED GOUDA AND SMOKED PAPRIKA

Substitute aged gouda for Gruyère and 1/2 teaspoon smoked paprika for cayenne.

### GOUGÈRES WITH MANCHEGO AND BLACK PEPPER

Substitute Manchego for Gruyère and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper for cayenne.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](https://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18)

# Rethinking Coffee Cake

Could we streamline the process for this breakfast treat and still produce a soft, tender crumb crowned with a crunchy, nutty streusel?

BY LAN LAM

The custom of sipping a hot beverage while enjoying a sweet cake or bread goes back to 17th-century Europe when German, Dutch, and Scandinavian cooks were habitual pastry makers and coffee was fast becoming part of the daily routine. Eventually, the practice spread to the United States, and today, three types of coffee cake are common: the yeasted kind, featuring a sweet cheese and/or fruit filling; the rich sour cream Bundt version that shows off elegant bands of crumb filling when sliced; and the streusel-topped type, with a nutty crunch highlighting a moist cake. It is this last cake that appeals to me the most. Instead of drawing attention with graceful swirls of filling or the dramatic curves of a Bundt shape, its focus is on the contrasting textures and complementary flavors of the cake and topping.

The trouble is, many such coffee cake recipes are relatively complicated, requiring multiple bowls and appliances. I wanted a simpler method suitable for off-the-cuff baking—but one that produced the same tender cake and crunchy, flavorful topping.

## Working in Stages

The cake portion of this treat is commonly made by creaming butter and sugar using a handheld or stand mixer and then alternately incorporating the flour and liquid ingredients. Since I like to use a food processor to chop nuts for streusel and I wanted to avoid dirtying a second appliance, my first instinct was to adapt this method to a food processor. But while the food processor deftly whipped the butter and sugar into a pale, aerated state, its powerful motor was incapable of gently folding in flour and liquids. The result of those aggressively whizzing



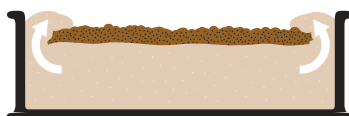
Adding just a teaspoon of water to the streusel ingredients while pulsing them in the food processor helps the mixture adhere to the cake.

blades was one seriously tough cake. That's because flour contains proteins, which, in the presence of water, link up to form gluten. As the gluten strands are manipulated by mixing, they link and form a stretchy network. While some gluten is necessary to give baked goods structure, cakes with too much gluten are unpleasantly tough.

Luckily, there was another method to consider. Reverse creaming—what pastry texts refer to as a “two-stage” method—limits gluten formation by “waterproofing” the gluten-forming proteins.

## RECIPE TESTING Stabilizing the Streusel

During testing, we noticed that the streusel at the edges of the cake sometimes appeared to sink into the batter. Eventually, we realized that it was actually the cake batter and not the streusel that was on the move. As the batter at the edges of the pan heats up, it becomes more fluid and rises, eventually flowing over the topping. To solve the problem, we added extra flour to stiffen the batter and prevent it from climbing up and over the streusel.



### SINKING STREUSEL

As the thin batter heated, it climbed the pan's sides and flowed over the streusel layer. Some extra flour took care of that problem.

Without access to water, gluten can't develop, so the method virtually guarantees a soft, tender crumb. It goes like this: In stage one, you work the butter into the dry ingredients until the flour is mostly coated in fat. In stage two, you mix in the wet ingredients. It seemed like the technique would adapt well to a food processor, so it was definitely worth trying.

## From the Top

Since I planned to use the food processor for both components of my coffee cake, I started by making the streusel. I prepared a standard topping by processing toasted pecans (their slightly sweet, buttery flavor makes them a favorite for streusel) and brown sugar until the nuts were finely ground. Then it was a simple matter of incorporating flour, cinnamon, salt, and finally, some melted butter.

After scraping the streusel from the processor bowl and setting it aside, I prepared the cake batter using a recipe I'd cobbled together from my research. First, I whizzed together flour, sugar, baking soda, baking powder, salt, and cinnamon. Then I added softened butter and pulsed until only very small pieces of the butter

remained. Finally, I pulsed in milk, an egg, an egg yolk (for extra richness), and vanilla extract to form a thick batter. After scraping the batter into a greased and floured round cake pan, I smoothed the top with a rubber spatula, sprinkled the streusel evenly over the top, and baked the cake in a 350-degree oven.

An hour later, as I was flipping the cake out of the pan and inverting it onto a wire rack to cool, I could see that my streusel—though it was wonderfully nutty and delicately spiced—needed some help. It was sinking into the batter at the edge, losing its crunch and marring the cake's appearance. What's more, it was too fine and rained down from the pan when I inverted the cake. The good news was that the reverse-creaming method had lived up to my expectations: The cake itself was tender as could be.

But back to the streusel. It didn't make sense to invert a cake with a crumbly topping. How about switching from the typical cake pan to a springform pan, which would allow me to remove the collar without dislodging the topping?

## TECHNIQUE | GIVE IT A SHAKE

When checking for doneness, don't just poke a toothpick or skewer into the cake. Give the pan a gentle shake first to make sure the batter has set enough to support the streusel. If the batter still jiggles, the pressure of the skewer on the streusel may cause the center of the cake to sink.



I gave it a go. Once the springform pan was prepared, I set it on a rimmed baking sheet to catch any batter that oozed out. To help the streusel cling together, I added 1 teaspoon of water. After just a couple of pulses, I could see that this seemingly minor addition made this batch much more cohesive. After scattering the topping over the batter, I placed my assembled cake in the oven. When I released the collar on the springform pan and sliced the cooled cake, I was pleased to see that this streusel was just right, boasting a cohesive, lightly clumped texture.

### Not-So-Sinking Feeling

Now I just needed to prevent the streusel from disappearing into the edges of the cake. To better understand the problem, I peered into the oven to monitor a batter-filled pan during baking. After a while, I realized that the streusel wasn't actually sinking at all. Rather, the cake batter at the edges, nearest the hot pan, was heating up first and thus thinning out, filling with bubbles from the leavener, and climbing the sides of the pan, where it flowed over onto the streusel.

At first I thought I needed to reduce the amount of leavener in the cake to prevent it from rising so much, but no matter how much I cut back and no matter what combination of baking soda and baking powder I tried, I couldn't stop the cake from rising up and over onto sections of the streusel. Furthermore, in some cases, the reduction in leavening produced a dense, heavy crumb.

What ultimately worked was increasing the viscosity of the batter to make it less prone to climbing. I had been using 1½ cups of flour and decided to bump the amount up to 1⅔ cups. Sure enough, this slight addition thickened and firmed the batter just enough to keep it and the streusel in place at the edges as it heated up. And fortunately, the additional flour wasn't enough to make the crumb noticeably drier.

Each bite of this coffee cake offered an appealing combination of crunchy cinnamon-pecan streusel and rich, tender cake. And I could make it quickly, using a single kitchen appliance.

## A Better Way to Make Coffee Cake

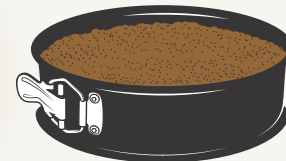
We rewrote the rule book on coffee cake, changing up both the equipment and the mixing method.



**SKIP THE STAND MIXER**  
With a food processor, we need just one appliance for chopping the nuts, mixing the streusel, and preparing the batter.



**"WATERPROOF" THE FLOUR**  
Blending the butter into the flour—instead of creaming the butter and sugar—before adding liquids limits gluten formation, so the cake is extra-tender.



**DITCH THE CAKE PAN**  
A springform pan eliminates the tricky prospect of inverting a streusel-topped cake onto a serving platter.

### COFFEE CAKE WITH PECAN-CINNAMON STREUSEL

SERVES 8 TO 10

For the best results, we recommend weighing the flour in this recipe. Do not insert a skewer into this cake to test for doneness until the center appears firm when the pan is shaken. If you do, the weight of the streusel may squeeze out air and the cake may sink. This cake can be stored at room temperature, wrapped in plastic wrap, for up to 24 hours.

#### Streusel

- 1 cup pecans, toasted
- ⅓ cup packed (2⅓ ounces) brown sugar
- ½ cup (2½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¾ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- 1 teaspoon water

#### Cake

- 1⅔ cups (8⅓ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 cup (7 ounces) sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- 7 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 7 pieces and softened
- ¾ cup milk
- 1 large egg plus 1 large yolk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour 9-inch springform pan and place on rimmed baking sheet.

2. **FOR THE STREUSEL:** Process pecans and sugar in food processor until finely ground, about 10 seconds. Add flour, cinnamon, and salt and

pulse to combine, about 5 (1-second) pulses. Add melted butter and water and pulse until butter is fully incorporated and mixture begins to form clumps, 8 to 10 (1-second) pulses. Transfer streusel to bowl and set aside.

3. **FOR THE CAKE:** In now-empty processor, process flour, sugar, cinnamon, baking powder, baking soda, and salt until combined, about 10 seconds. Add butter and pulse until very small but visible pieces of butter remain, 5 to 8 (5-second) pulses. Add milk, egg and yolk, and vanilla; pulse until dry ingredients are moistened, 4 to 5 (1-second) pulses. Scrape down sides of bowl. Pulse until mixture is well combined, 4 to 5 (1-second) pulses. Transfer batter to prepared pan and smooth top with rubber spatula.

4. Starting at edges of pan, sprinkle streusel in even layer over batter. Bake cake on sheet until center is firm and skewer inserted into center of cake comes out clean, 45 to 55 minutes. Transfer pan to wire rack and let cake cool in pan for 15 minutes. Remove side of pan and let cake cool completely, about 2 hours. Using offset spatula, transfer cake to serving platter. Using serrated knife, cut cake into wedges and serve.

### Wake and Bake

Our Coffee Cake with Pecan-Cinnamon Streusel is great for a make-ahead breakfast. Wrap the topped but unbaked cake in plastic wrap and refrigerate it overnight. The next morning, transfer the cake to the preheated oven, increasing the baking time by 15 to 20 minutes.



#### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](https://CooksIllustrated.com/feb18)

# Anytime Pancakes

Put down the box mix. You've got everything you need to make tall, fluffy pancakes in minutes.

BY LAN LAM

Everyone loves sitting down to a plate of fluffy, golden, flavorful pancakes, but making them is another matter. Nobody wants to run out for buttermilk or sour cream before the first meal of the day, never mind haul out (and then clean) their stand mixer to whip egg whites. That's where box mixes come in, but their convenience is hardly worth the results they deliver: rubbery pancakes with a Styrofoam-like flavor that no amount of butter or syrup can hide. Besides, most prefab products still require you to add milk and eggs to the dry mix, so at that point, why not throw together a batter of your own?

So that's what I set out to do. I limited myself to basic ingredients—no buttermilk or sour cream—and no appliances and spent a few weeks as a short-order cook.

## Blandcakes

I started with an approach that was as simple and pantry-friendly as possible. Dry ingredients (flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt) went in one bowl, wet (eggs, milk, and vegetable oil) in another. Then I stirred together the wet and dry components. I didn't bother to leave lumps, as almost all pancake recipes instruct, since we found while developing a crêpe recipe that the batter is liquid-y enough that thorough mixing won't develop too much gluten and make the pancakes tough.

I portioned the batter into an oiled, preheated skillet. When bubbles appeared on the surface of the pancakes, I flipped them and cooked them until golden brown. But they weren't good. In fact, they weren't much better than the box-mix kind—thin, splotchy, and, without the tang of buttermilk or sour cream, somewhat bland.

At least the flavors would be easy to fix, I thought as I mixed up another batch with vanilla extract and a dash more salt. I also made a point of beating the eggs with the oil before combining



Flip the pancakes when the edges are set and the surface bubbles are just beginning to break.

them with the milk and vanilla, which was less messy than whisking all the liquid ingredients together at once. These pancakes tasted more complex, but there was still room for improvement.

So for the next round I upped the amount of sugar from 2 tablespoons to three. I also added a little baking soda, which plays a more important role in the flavor of baked goods than you might think: Many pancakes, biscuits, and quick breads rely on its saline tang and are noticeably flat-tasting without it. A mere ½ teaspoon did the trick here; it also helped the pancakes brown more deeply (baking soda increases the pH of the batter, which speeds browning reactions) and rise higher. But they were by no means tall or fluffy.

## Through Thick and Thin

One way to increase lift was to add more leavener. I tested increasing amounts of baking powder until I settled on 4 teaspoons—at least double the amount per cup of flour compared with other recipes—but the pancakes were still thin. Next, I thickened the batter by reducing the milk from 2 cups to 1½ cups. This improved the rise—but not enough.

I couldn't further increase the leavener without making the pancakes taste soapy, nor could I further reduce the liquid without producing dry, cottony results. But there was one more variable: the mixing method. A lumpy batter is thicker than a smooth batter since the lumps prevent water from flowing and the mixture from spreading. What if I went back and followed the usual pancake protocol and barely mixed the batter so that lots of lumps remained?

I gently stirred together another batch so that there were still lumpy pockets of flour. I also let the batter rest briefly, another common step that allows the unmixed flour pockets to hydrate slightly. The batter now fell from my whisk in clumps rather than streaming down in thin ribbons. And the pancakes themselves—even when raw in the skillet—were gorgeously tall (see “Leave It Lumpy—but Not for the Reason You Think”).

Lesson learned: If I wanted tall, fluffy pancakes, leaving lumps in the batter was key. I also realized that the amount of oil I added to the skillet and even the method I used to flip the pancakes affected their appearance (see “Troubleshooting Pancakes”).

## Soda versus Powder

A quick baking soda and baking powder refresher: Baking powder reacts and creates carbon dioxide both when it comes into contact with moisture and when it's heated, making it a more reliable and forgiving leavener than baking soda, which reacts only when it comes into contact with acid. Many pancake recipes, including ours, call for both.

## Butter Up

The pancakes now looked and tasted so good that folks were grabbing them off the griddle and eating them plain out of hand. But for the occasions that they did make it to the table, I wanted to jazz them up a bit. Stirring blueberries or chocolate chips directly into the

batter didn't work well because that required mixing the batter more thoroughly—counterproductive to creating a thick batter. Instead, I mixed up some



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/jun18](http://CookIllustrated.com/jun18)



simple flavored butters while the batter rested. I even figured out a way to make them perfectly soft for spreading: Stir cold butter and flavorings—such as citrus zest, honey, grated ginger, or warm spices—into a smaller portion of melted butter. *Voilà*: a spreadable topping with no need to wait for butter to soften on the counter.

I was really happy with where things stood, but I wanted to run one more test, pitting my easy recipe against a more complicated one. Good news: Tasters were unable to distinguish these pancakes from a more traditional buttermilk type. That means you can now make and enjoy a great pancake breakfast even before your morning coffee wakes you up.

### EASY PANCAKES

MAKES SIXTEEN 4-INCH PANCAKES; SERVES 4 TO 6

The pancakes can be cooked on an electric griddle set to 350 degrees. They can be held in a preheated 200-degree oven on a wire rack set in a rimmed baking sheet. Serve with salted butter and maple syrup or with one of our flavored butters (recipes follow). Our recipe for Pumpkin Spice Butter is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/jun18).

- 2 cups (10 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 4 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 large eggs
- ¼ cup plus 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1½ cups milk
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Whisk flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together in large bowl. Whisk eggs and ¼ cup oil in second medium bowl until well combined. Whisk milk and vanilla into egg mixture. Add egg mixture to flour mixture and stir gently until just combined (batter should remain lumpy with few streaks of flour). Let batter sit for 10 minutes before cooking.

2. Heat ½ teaspoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-low heat until shimmering. Using paper towels, carefully wipe out oil, leaving thin film on bottom and sides of skillet. Drop 1 tablespoon batter in center of skillet. If pancake is pale golden brown after 1 minute, skillet is ready. If it is too light or too dark, adjust heat accordingly.

3. Using ¼-cup dry measuring cup, portion batter into skillet in 3 places, leaving 2 inches between portions. If necessary, gently spread batter into 4-inch round. Cook until edges are set, first sides are golden brown, and bubbles on surface are just beginning to break, 2 to 3 minutes. Using thin, wide spatula, flip pancakes and continue to cook until second sides are golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes longer. Serve. Repeat with remaining batter, using remaining ½ teaspoon oil as necessary.

## Leave It Lumpy—but Not for the Reason You Think



WHISKED UNTIL TOTALLY SMOOTH



LEFT LUMPY

Whisking two batters made with the same ingredients to different degrees dramatically impacted their consistencies. With less stirring, the lumpy batter on the right was noticeably thicker because lumps obstructed the flow of free water. The lumpy batter was also better able to hold on to the air bubbles formed during cooking, producing taller, more leavened pancakes.

### GINGER-MOLASSES BUTTER

MAKES ½ CUP

Do not use blackstrap molasses; its intense flavor will overwhelm the other flavors. Our favorite is Brer Rabbit All Natural Unsulphured Molasses Mild Flavor.

- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ¼-inch pieces
- 2 teaspoons molasses
- 1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger
- ⅛ teaspoon salt

Microwave 2 tablespoons butter in medium bowl until melted, about 1 minute. Stir in molasses, ginger, salt, and remaining 6 tablespoons butter. Let mixture stand for 2 minutes. Whisk until smooth. (Butter can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

### ORANGE-ALMOND BUTTER

MAKES ½ CUP

Do not use buckwheat honey; its intense flavor will overwhelm the other flavors.

- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ¼-inch pieces
- 2 teaspoons grated orange zest
- 2 teaspoons honey
- ¼ teaspoon almond extract
- ⅛ teaspoon salt

Microwave 2 tablespoons butter in medium bowl until melted, about 1 minute. Stir in orange zest, honey, almond extract, salt, and remaining 6 tablespoons butter. Let mixture stand for 2 minutes. Whisk until smooth. (Butter can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

## Troubleshooting Pancakes

To produce consistently round, golden-brown pancakes, follow these three tips.

**Problem:** Surface is too pale/too dark

**Solution:** Make tester pancake

**Method:** To determine if the temperature of your skillet is correct, drop 1 tablespoon of batter onto the heated surface. If it is golden brown after 1 minute, you're ready to cook. If not, adjust the heat as necessary.



**Problem:** Spotty browning

**Solution:** Wipe away excess oil

**Method:** After adding oil to the skillet, wipe it out until there is just a bare sheen remaining. (Metal transfers heat better than oil, so places where oil pools under the pancake will cook more slowly and be relatively pale.)



**Problem:** Messy flipping

**Solution:** Flip low and quickly

**Method:** Slide a thin spatula underneath the pancake and flip it in a smooth, quick motion, keeping the spatula close to the cooking surface.



# Better-Than-the-Box Granola Bars

We love the idea of chewy granola bars, but store-bought versions are overly sweet, contain mostly filler, and are soft, not chewy. We took matters into our own hands.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

Every adult I know goes through the same mental checklist before leaving the house in the morning: Keys? Phone? Wallet? Granola bar? Okay, maybe that last one is just me.

But granola bars should be on your must-have list because they're tasty and easy to eat on the go. And because they contain fiber, protein, and healthy fats, they make great snacking alternatives to hastily grabbed cookies or chips. That said, buying granola bars can be disappointing. Many commercial granola bars are so sweet that they're really just undercover candy, and most are pretty light on hearty additions such as nuts, seeds, and dried fruit. Such stinginess is especially annoying because granola bars are pricey, even though most are largely composed of inexpensive oats.

I decided that the best way to be sure the granola bars in my bag were packed with satisfying nuts, seeds, and fruit; had just the right amount of sweetness; and kept costs in check was to make them myself. Mine would be of the chewy variety. Crunchy granola has its place (on top of Greek yogurt), but chewy bars are less likely to fall apart in my hand, and the physical act of chewing them reinforces the feeling that I've eaten something substantial. And I'm not alone: When I polled our readers on Facebook, 72 percent of them preferred chewy bars.

## All Mixed Up

The first recipes I tried followed a similar procedure: I mixed oats, nuts, seeds, and, in some cases, chunks of dried fruit with a combination of sugar and a liquid sweetener—usually honey or maple syrup. Most recipes called for stirring in some oil or butter; many also called for peanut butter or almond butter. I spread the mixtures in pans and baked them. So far, so easy. It was only when I tried to cut the cooled slabs into individual bars that things literally fell apart.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/aug18](http://CookIllustrated.com/aug18)



Use a sharp chef's knife to cut the granola into neat, portable bars.

Most bars were unacceptably sticky to the touch yet, paradoxically, they refused to stick together. These bars were tender all the way through and were too yielding to be called “chewy.” Other bars were drier and left my hands cleaner, but they were too hard and were prone to shattering into messy chunks. I wanted to make cohesive granola bars with varied textures, balanced sweetness, and plenty of chew, ideal for on-the-go snacking.

## For the Birds

I started my own baseline recipe by toasting  $2\frac{1}{2}$  cups of oats, 1 cup of sunflower seeds, and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups of chopped walnuts in the oven to bring out their flavors. I transferred everything to a bowl and stirred in 1 cup of dried cranberries for pops of brightness. One cup of brown sugar and  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup each of peanut butter and honey made up my “glue.” Because it's high in saturated fat, butter seemed antithetical to the granola bar concept, so I mixed in  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of vegetable oil instead. (A bonus:

Using oil instead of butter would allow the bars to keep longer at room temperature.) I pressed the mixture firmly into a foil-lined, greased baking pan and baked it for about 25 minutes. These bars tasted pretty good but, like many in my initial round of testing, were both tacky and crumbly.

Thinking that smaller particles might absorb some of the stickiness and hold together better, I coarsely ground the toasted oats and nuts in the food processor before mixing the next batch. This granola was more cohesive, which made it easier to cut into bars, but they felt grainy and pasty in my mouth and bore an unsettling resemblance to those blocks of compressed seeds you hang out for the birds when the weather turns cold. So the oats would have to stay whole. But having the food processor out reminded me of another technique I had seen: binding the bars with pureed dried fruit.

## The Sticking Point

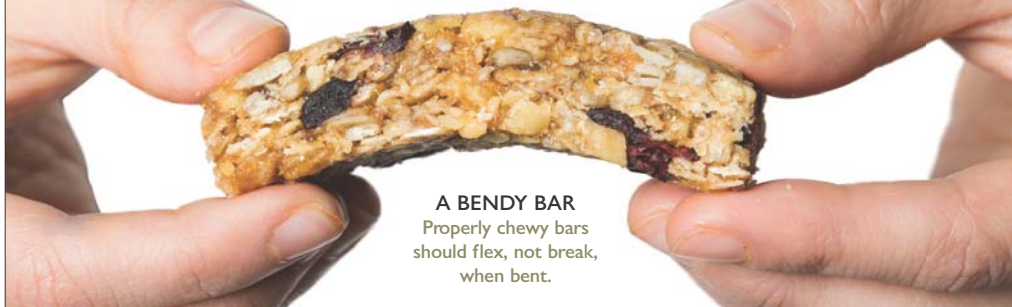
While my next batch of oats, nuts, and seeds toasted, I ground 1 cup of dried apricots with the brown sugar in the food processor. I added peanut butter, honey, and oil as the machine ran, and then I mixed the promisingly viscous mixture with the warm oat mixture and the cranberries. I also added some crisped rice cereal. I suspected that firm compression of the mixture before baking was going to be important for cohesion, so I hoped that the airy cereal would provide tiny pockets of lightness. After baking and cooling, these bars stood up to cutting better than any previous batches, but they were still rather tender and crumbly when I ate them. I was aiming for a bar so resilient that I could bend it into a shallow arc; this bar simply broke in two.

I knew that fat tenderizes baked goods. Was it possible that my formula was simply too high in fat? If so, I had two options: Nix the vegetable oil or nix the peanut butter. I decided to eliminate the latter so I could devise a nut-free variation later on.

Now I was getting somewhere: Without the peanut butter, the granola bars were distinctly chewy and definitely cohesive. They even passed the bend test.

## How We Put the “Chew” in Our Chewy Granola Bars

“Too tender.” “Too soft.” “Too dense.” We obsessed over getting the perfect chewy texture in our granola bars, meaning each bite should meet with repeated resistance as you chew. How did we achieve it? A mix of pureed dried apricots, brown sugar, oil, and water helped the bars’ ingredients cohere. Using just the right amount of moisture was also key: We added enough to make the bars tender and to hold them together when they were bent or bitten—but not so much that they became soft and lost their chew.



**A BENDY BAR**  
Properly chewy bars should flex, not break, when bent.

### Just Add Water

I knew I was getting close, but without peanut butter’s salty richness, the bars were a bit too sweet and the honey flavor was especially obtrusive. Discouragingly, a batch made without honey was too dry and crumbly. I considered using corn syrup, which has very little flavor, in place of the honey because it seemed like some form of syrup was the key to a chewy, moist, cohesive texture. But was it?

Syrups are mostly sugar and water. In some cases, they’re added to recipes, such as caramel, to inhibit crystallization, but that wasn’t important in my granola bars. So maybe it wasn’t a syrup that was the magic ingredient. Maybe it was something I had never seen in a granola bar recipe: water.

The ½ cup of honey had been contributing water, so I added a small amount to the next honey-free

batch, streaming it into the food processor with the oil. Three tablespoons of water worked beautifully, producing bars that were chewy and cohesive without being sticky. The tart cranberries, nutty toasted oats, and crunchy walnuts were balanced by the sweetness of the apricots and brown sugar.

I was so happy with this recipe that I used it as a template for a hazelnut, cherry, and cacao nib bar so sophisticated that a box of them would make a luxurious gift, and a richly seeded, nut-free version.

### CHEWY GRANOLA BARS WITH WALNUTS AND CRANBERRIES

MAKES 24 BARS

We like the sweetness of Mediterranean or Turkish apricots in this recipe. Be sure to use apricots that are soft and moist, or the bars will not hold together well. Avoid using extra-thick rolled oats here. Light and dark brown sugar will work equally well in this recipe.

- 1 ½ cups walnuts
- 2 ½ cups (7 ½ ounces) old-fashioned rolled oats
- 1 cup raw sunflower seeds
- 1 cup dried apricots
- 1 cup packed (7 ounces) brown sugar
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 3 tablespoons water
- 1 ½ cups (1 ½ ounces) Rice Krispies cereal
- 1 cup dried cranberries

1. Adjust oven rack to middle 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. Pulse walnuts in food processor until finely chopped, 8 to 10 pulses. Spread walnuts, oats, and

sunflower seeds on rimmed baking sheet and toast until lightly browned and fragrant, 12 to 15 minutes, stirring halfway through toasting. Reduce oven temperature to 300 degrees.

3. While oat mixture is toasting, process apricots, sugar, and salt in food processor until apricots are very finely ground, about 15 seconds. With processor running, add oil and water. Continue to process until homogeneous paste forms, about 1 minute longer. Transfer paste to large, wide bowl.

4. Add warm oat mixture to bowl and stir with rubber spatula until well coated. Add cereal and cranberries and stir gently until ingredients are evenly mixed. Transfer mixture to prepared pan and spread into even layer. Place 14-inch sheet of parchment or waxed paper on top of granola and press and smooth very firmly with your hands, especially at edges and corners, until granola is level and compact. Remove parchment and bake granola until fragrant and just beginning to brown around edges, about 25 minutes. Transfer pan to wire rack and let cool for 1 hour. Using foil overhang, lift granola out of pan. Return to wire rack and let cool completely, about 1 hour.

5. Discard foil and transfer granola to cutting board. Using chef’s knife, cut granola in half crosswise to create two 6 ½ by 9-inch rectangles. Cut each rectangle in half to make four 3 ¼ by 9-inch strips. Cut each strip crosswise into 6 equal pieces. (Granola bars can be stored at room temperature for up to 3 weeks.)

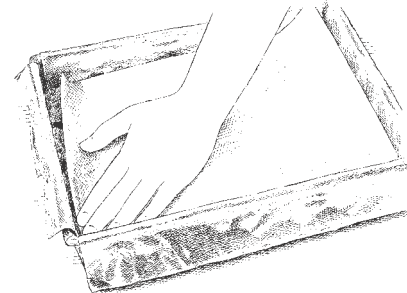
### CHEWY GRANOLA BARS WITH HAZELNUTS, CHERRIES, AND CACAO NIBS

Substitute blanched hazelnuts for walnuts and pulse until finely chopped, 8 to 12 pulses. Substitute chopped dried cherries for cranberries. Stir in ½ cup cacao nibs with cereal in step 4.

### NUT-FREE CHEWY GRANOLA BARS

Omit walnuts and cranberries. Toast 1 cup raw pepitas, ¼ cup sesame seeds, and ¼ cup chia seeds with oats in step 2. Increase cereal to 2 cups.

### TECHNIQUE | PRESSING FOR SUCCESS



Using parchment or waxed paper to firmly press the raw granola mixture into the pan leads to a more cohesive mixture that is easier to slice into bars and, in turn, less messy to eat.

### Staying Power

Stored in an airtight container between sheets of parchment or waxed paper, our granola bars keep for three weeks. As your stock diminishes, transfer the bars to a smaller container to minimize their exposure to air, which can dry them out.



# Creamy French-Style Scrambled Eggs

For incredibly lush and creamy eggs, the key is to take things slow.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

American-style scrambled eggs are the speediest of home-cooked breakfasts: Heat butter or oil in a skillet; add eggs beaten with water or milk; stir, stir, stir; and you're done. The process takes less than 3 minutes and can produce eggs sturdy enough to be tucked inside an English muffin and eaten on the go.

But French cooks, and often British ones, too, employ a more leisurely approach. They cook their eggs slowly over low heat with plenty of butter, stirring constantly until the mixture forms small, delicate curds bound in a velvety sauce. This technique can take five times as long as the American version, but the reward is eggs that are so extravagantly creamy and rich that they linger on the palate, allowing you time to thoroughly appreciate the fullness of their flavor. They're so satisfying that the French often opt to serve them for lunch or dinner.

The American version is undeniably convenient, but a recipe for deluxe slow-cooked scrambled eggs would be ideal for those occasions when I can luxuriate in a laid-back breakfast.

## Haste Makes Waste

Starting with Julia Child's recipe, I smeared a skillet with 2 tablespoons of soft butter; added 6 eggs beaten with salt, pepper, and milk; and placed the skillet over low heat. Then I stirred. And stirred. For a while nothing seemed to be happening, but after 18 minutes, the eggs coalesced into a soft mass of small, tender curds that stopped just short of flowing across the skillet. Following Child's guidance, I took the pan off the heat and stirred in another 2 tablespoons of butter before spooning the eggs onto slices of toast.

These eggs were delectable enough to justify the indulgence of time and calories, but I wondered if both were strictly necessary. In the past we've noted that fat coats egg proteins, which prevents them from bonding tightly. Confident that 4 tablespoons of butter would be sufficient to tenderize eight eggs (I decided to increase the recipe to serve four) even if they were cooked a bit more quickly, I turned up the heat.

But I found that eggs cooked in less than 10 minutes, though tender, lacked the lush viscosity of the slow-cooked version, no matter how much fat I added. The higher heat transformed every bit of the



Save the butter for your toast. These creamy eggs require no added fat.

liquid egg into curds, leaving no sauce. And pulling the skillet off the heat earlier was no solution either. That left me with curds swimming in an unappetizing mixture of thin, raw egg and melted butter.

## Fat Loss

Suspecting that I'd overestimated the importance of fat and underestimated the importance of taking it slow, I ran a series of tests in which I incrementally lowered the cooking temperature (which increased the cooking time) while also decreasing the amount of butter. Success: At the 12-minute mark, the eggs were creamy even when cooked in a single tablespoon of butter. The curds were small and tender, and the lush egg "sauce" that united them registered 160 degrees, an indication that the eggs were fully cooked.

Slow cooking was clearly the key, so did I need any added fat? After all, my nonstick skillet would eliminate any risk of sticking. But that tablespoon of butter was handy because its melting signaled that the pan was hot enough to jump-start the heating of the eggs. With no butter, how would I know when the skillet was the right temperature?

Well, I thought, how about using water as my temperature indicator? I put 2 tablespoons of water in the skillet, and when the water started to steam,

I knew the pan was hot enough. I added the eggs and immediately started stirring to help them heat evenly. The water served a second purpose: It diluted the egg proteins so that they didn't begin to coagulate too soon. After about 8 minutes, tiny curds began to form. I began to stir more energetically at that point, eager to keep the curds small and the eggs loose. After 4 more minutes, the eggs mounded gently but were still soft and saucy, all without a bit of added fat.

In fact, the sauce was so thick that it was verging on gluey. Would I need to finish them with a bit of butter or cream after all? No. It turned out that just one more tablespoon of water smoothed them out nicely. Finally, a sprinkle of fresh minced herbs complemented their richness. Now I can save the butter for my toast and the cream for my coffee.

## CREAMY FRENCH-STYLE SCRAMBLED EGGS

SERVES 4

For the creamiest, richest-tasting result, be sure to cook these eggs slowly, following the visual cues provided. It should take 12 to 14 minutes total. Though the eggs will be rather loose, their extended cooking time ensures that they reach a safe temperature. You can prepare two servings by halving the amounts of all the ingredients and using an 8-inch skillet. Chives or tarragon can be substituted for the parsley, if desired. Serve with buttered toast.

- 8 large eggs
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons water
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh parsley

1. Using fork, beat eggs and salt until blended. Heat 2 tablespoons water in 10-inch nonstick skillet over low heat until steaming. Add egg mixture and immediately stir with rubber spatula. Cook, stirring slowly and constantly, scraping edges and bottom of skillet, for 4 minutes. (If egg mixture is not steaming after 4 minutes, increase heat slightly.)

2. Continue to stir slowly until eggs begin to thicken and small curds begin to form, about 4 minutes longer (if curds have not begun to form, increase heat slightly). If any large curds form, mash with spatula. As curds start to form, stir vigorously, scraping edges and bottom of skillet, until eggs are thick enough to hold their shape when pushed to 1 side of skillet, 4 to 6 minutes. Remove skillet from heat. Add remaining 1 tablespoon water and parsley and stir vigorously until incorporated, about 30 seconds. Serve.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/feb18](https://CookIllustrated.com/feb18)

# Dark Chocolate Fudge Sauce

We wanted a pourable, easily reheated sauce with a dark chocolate soul.

BY STEVE DUNN

I recently questioned my colleagues about the hot fudge sauce they ate as kids, and their recollections were strikingly similar: It was more sweet than chocolaty and was so thick that it fell onto ice cream in globs. There are still plenty of sickly sweet, overly thick, barely chocolaty sauces out there, but our adult palates crave something less sugary, with darker chocolate and a luxurious, pourable consistency. Also, with the wisdom of age, we've learned that devouring an entire batch in one sitting isn't prudent, so an ideal sauce could be refrigerated and reheated multiple times.

Most fudge sauce recipes have a short ingredient list: bar chocolate and/or cocoa powder, sugar, and dairy. I planned on using a blend of cocoa powder and unsweetened chocolate so that I would have complete control over the amount of sugar. The former would add complexity, and the latter would contribute richness from its higher proportion of cocoa butter. I heated milk and sugar, whisked in the cocoa powder, poured this mixture over finely chopped chocolate, and then allowed the chocolate to melt so I could whisk the mixture to a saucy consistency.

It turned out that my starting ratio (½ cup cocoa powder to 2 ounces unsweetened chocolate) was too cocoa-heavy and produced a chalky texture. Dropping the cocoa to ⅓ cup and increasing the chocolate to 3 ounces provided enough additional cocoa butter to smooth the sauce. I evaluated sweeteners next, with confectioners' sugar, brown sugar, and corn syrup auditioning for granulated sugar's spot. Ultimately, I stuck with granulated sugar since we didn't notice a huge difference and it was the simplest choice.

I now had an easy-to-make sauce that delivered deep flavor with just enough sweetness, and it was nicely emulsified. But it wasn't thick enough. Swirling a few knobs of butter into a savory pan sauce thickens it. Would the same principle apply here? Indeed,



Our sauce can be refrigerated for up to one month and reheated whenever a craving strikes.

incorporating 4 tablespoons of cold butter into the fudge sauce gave it body (and added a touch of richness). Here's how it works: Fudge sauce is an emulsion, a combination of two liquids—fat and water—that don't ordinarily mix. (In this instance, the liquids are cocoa butter and the water in milk.) Whisking transforms the melted cocoa butter into tiny droplets of fat, which are dispersed throughout the water to form an emulsion. Emulsifying proteins from the milk help keep it all stable. Butter made the sauce even thicker by dispersing even more fat droplets throughout the sauce. The fat in the butter also added shine: The more liquid fat there is in an emulsion, the glossier its surface will be.

After stirring in vanilla extract and a sprinkling of salt to help the chocolate flavor pop, I spooned the sauce over ice cream. It had just the right amount of flow, thickened slightly as it cooled but didn't seize or harden, and tasted like a molten dark chocolate bar.

Finally—and crucially—I found that the emulsion was sustained when I refrigerated and then gently reheated the sauce. It was important not to exceed 110 degrees, a little above body temperature, lest the sauce break and become greasy on top.

We celebrated the achievement late one afternoon in the test kitchen with a sundae bar to satisfy our adult tastes—and our inner children.

## DARK CHOCOLATE FUDGE SAUCE

MAKES 2 CUPS

We like to serve this sauce over ice cream, but it can also be drizzled over fresh fruit. We prefer to use Dutch-processed cocoa powder here (our favorite is from Droste), but other cocoa powders will work. Our favorite unsweetened chocolate is Hershey's Unsweetened Chocolate Baking Bar. Our recipes for Dark Chocolate–Peanut Butter Fudge Sauce and Mexican Dark Chocolate Fudge Sauce are available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/aug18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/aug18).

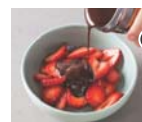
- 1 ¼ cups (8¾ ounces) sugar
- ⅔ cup whole or 2 percent low-fat milk
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅓ cup (1 ounce) unsweetened cocoa powder, sifted
- 3 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped fine
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 8 pieces and chilled
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Heat sugar, milk, and salt in medium saucepan over medium-low heat, whisking gently, until sugar has dissolved and liquid starts to bubble around edges of saucepan, 5 to 6 minutes. Reduce heat to low, add cocoa, and whisk until smooth.

2. Remove saucepan from heat, stir in chocolate, and let stand for 3 minutes. Whisk sauce until smooth and chocolate is fully melted. Add butter and whisk until fully incorporated and sauce thickens slightly. Whisk in vanilla and serve. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 1 month. Gently reheat sauce in microwave [do not let it exceed 110 degrees], stirring every 10 seconds, until just warmed and pourable.)

## DARK CHOCOLATE–ORANGE FUDGE SAUCE

Bring milk and 8 (3-inch) strips orange zest to simmer in medium saucepan over medium heat. Remove saucepan from heat, cover, and let stand for 15 minutes. Strain milk mixture through fine-mesh strainer into bowl, pressing on zest to extract liquid; discard zest. Return milk to saucepan and proceed with recipe, reducing cooking time to 3 to 4 minutes.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/aug18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/aug18)

## Butter Makes It Better

Butter plays three roles in our Dark Chocolate Fudge Sauce:

- Helps emulsify the ingredients
- Thickens the sauce by dispersing fat droplets throughout
- Adds attractive, glossy shine



# No-Fear Caramel

Whether you've been burned by caramel in the past or have questions to sort out before making your first batch, we're here to help.

≧ BY LAN LAM ≦

I've had plenty of trials with fancy layer cakes and macarons—dishes that challenge even the most experienced chefs—but if you ask me, the task with the real intimidation factor is caramel. It's something I've been making for more than 30 years but have only recently mastered, let alone understood.

That's because the process of making caramel is riddled with pitfalls. Sugar can melt unevenly and burn or crystallize, leaving you with a gritty mess in the pan. Many recipes offer tweaks to prevent these mishaps, but there's little agreement on what actually works.

I tested every variable and question I could think of until I had a firm grip on what makes caramel succeed and fail (keep reading—I'll walk you through everything I learned) and a technique that even novice cooks will feel confident about.

## What exactly is caramel?

"Caramelization" is the term used to describe the chain of chemical reactions that occurs when sugar is heated to the point at which its molecules break down and create hundreds of new compounds. Some of these compounds give caramel its rich color while others are aromatic and flavorful. The longer a caramel is cooked, the more sugar breaks down into these compounds, and the less sweet a caramel will taste.

## How does the basic process work?

You melt sugar and cook it until it browns. This action forms a basic caramel.

## Do I need to add water to the sugar?

Definitely. If you cook sugar alone—a "dry caramel"—you run the risk that some will burn before the rest caramelizes. Adding water, which makes a "wet caramel," helps the sugar melt evenly.

## Is a thermometer necessary?

Yes. Judging caramel's doneness by visual cues



Once you've caramelized sugar, you add butter or liquid (cream, broth, or vinegar) to make everything from a fluid sauce to candy to a savory glaze.

such as its color isn't foolproof. The only reliable way to assess its doneness is to take its temperature.

## What about heavy-bottomed cookware?

You do need a heavy-bottomed pot. Lightweight cookware heats unevenly and creates hot spots where the sugar can burn.

## Does burner temperature matter?

It does. The key to caramelizing sugar so that it's flavorful but not burnt is cooking it to a specific temperature (see "When should I stop cooking?"),

which can be tricky. Sugar burns easily over high heat, but the process can be tediously long over low heat. That's why we use two heat levels: We melt the sugar over medium-high heat and then reduce the heat to low when the caramel is straw-colored to provide a wider window for nailing the temperature.

## When should I stop cooking?

It depends on the type of flavor you want. The degree to which you cook the sugar determines the caramel's flavor: the higher the temperature, the more complex and bitter it will taste. For our recipes, we cook the sugar to between 360 and 375 degrees.

## How do I prevent crystallization?

When all the sugar molecules in a pan of melted sugar are identical sucrose molecules, they all fit neatly together side by side like bricks and form crystals. These crystals build up on the sides of the pan or at the surface of the caramel, making it grainy.

The best way to prevent crystallization is to make sure that other shapes of sugar molecules—not only sucrose—are present. The effect is like mixing round rocks into a box full of rectangular bricks: The bricks can no longer fit together neatly. There are two common approaches. The first is to add an acidic ingredient such as lemon juice to the sugar, which causes some of the sucrose molecules to break down into different sugar molecules (fructose and glucose), which interfere with sucrose crystallization. Or there's our preferred method: Replace some of the sucrose with glucose in the form of corn syrup. In addition to diluting the sucrose, corn syrup contains small carbohydrate molecules that slow the movement

## It Will Bubble, but Don't Worry!

Prepare yourself for some drama—a puff of steam and some vigorous bubbling—when you add the liquid to the caramelized sugar. It can look impressive, but it's merely a visual cue that the liquid is absorbing a lot of the heat from the caramel and essentially arresting the cooking process, which prevents the caramel from burning. There is nothing to fear: Once you stir the caramel, the theatrics will quickly die down.

Stirring ensures that no hot pockets of caramel remain.

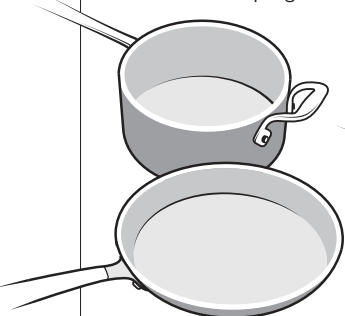


### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/apr18](https://CookIllustrated.com/apr18)

## Caramelizing Sugar the Foolproof Way

Follow these simple guidelines and you'll produce perfect caramel every time.



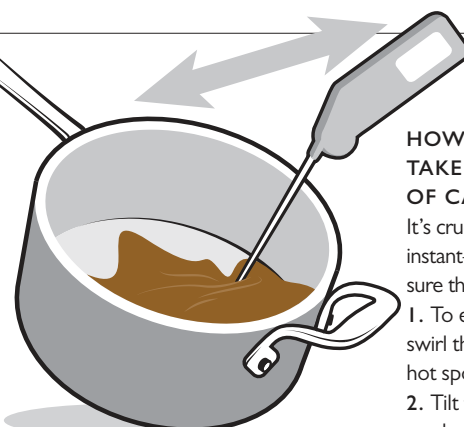
**1. USE HEAVY COOKWARE** to help prevent the sugar from burning.



**2. ADD WATER AND CORN SYRUP** to prevent crystallization.



**3. USE TWO HEAT LEVELS** to cook the caramel carefully but efficiently.



**4. TAKE THE CARAMEL'S TEMPERATURE** to know exactly when it is done.

### HOW TO ACCURATELY TAKE THE TEMPERATURE OF CARAMEL

It's crucial to use a digital instant-read thermometer to measure the caramel's temperature.

1. To ensure an accurate reading, swirl the caramel to even out any hot spots.
2. Tilt the pan so that the caramel pools 1 to 2 inches deep.
3. Move the thermometer back and forth in the caramel for about 5 seconds before taking a reading.

of the sugar molecules, reducing their chances of forming crystals.

### How do I prevent caramel from burning?

Even if you nail the temperature of the caramel, the residual heat of the pan will continue to cook—and can burn—it. The key is to quickly stir in the liquid ingredient(s) or butter, which will rapidly absorb some of the heat and slow the cooking process. Note: The caramel will bubble vigorously when you add the liquid (see “It Will Bubble, but Don’t Worry!”).

### How do I clean up a sticky pan?

*The fastest way:* Fill the pan about one-third full of water and bring it to a simmer over medium heat, stirring frequently. Do not use high heat: Caramel at the bottom of the pan will heat quickly, and any water in contact with it will turn to steam and splatter as it escapes.

*The easiest way:* Fill the pan with water and let it soak overnight. Wipe away sticky bits with a soapy sponge.

### ALL-PURPOSE CARAMEL SAUCE

MAKES 2 CUPS

Serve this sauce over ice cream, cakes, or fresh fruit.

- 1¾ cups (12¼ ounces) granulated sugar
- ½ cup water
- ¼ cup light corn syrup
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¼ teaspoon salt

1. Bring sugar, water, and corn syrup to boil in large heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook, without stirring, until mixture is straw-colored, 6 to 8 minutes. Reduce heat to low and continue to cook, swirling saucepan occasionally, until mixture is amber-colored and registers between 360 and 370 degrees, 2 to 5 minutes longer.

2. Off heat, quickly but carefully stir in cream, vanilla, and salt (mixture will bubble and steam). Continue to stir until sauce is smooth. (Sauce can be

refrigerated for up to 2 weeks. Reheat in microwave, stirring frequently, until warm and smooth.)

### SPICY CARAMEL POPCORN

MAKES ABOUT ¾ QUARTS

If using salted popcorn, decrease the salt to ¼ teaspoon. For spicier popcorn, use the greater amount of cayenne pepper. Salted roasted almonds can be used in place of the smoked almonds, if desired.

- 10 cups popped popcorn
- 1¼ cups granulated sugar
- ½ cup water
- ⅓ cup light corn syrup
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅛–¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ⅔ cup smoked almonds, chopped coarse

1. Lightly spray large bowl and rimmed baking sheet with vegetable oil spray. Place popcorn in prepared bowl. Bring sugar, water, and corn syrup to boil in medium heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook, without stirring, until mixture is straw-colored, 6 to 8 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and continue to cook, swirling saucepan occasionally, until mixture is dark amber and registers between 365 and 375 degrees, 2 to 5 minutes longer.

2. Off heat, quickly but carefully add butter, salt, and cayenne; stir until fully combined (mixture will bubble and steam). Return saucepan to low heat, stir in baking soda, and cook, stirring constantly, until mixture is uniform in color. Pour caramel over popcorn and, working quickly, stir until well coated. (Use towel or oven mitt to hold bowl, and avoid touching hot caramel.) Stir in almonds. Transfer mixture to prepared sheet and spread into even layer. Let cool for 15 minutes. Break cooled popcorn into pieces of desired size. (Popcorn can be stored in airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.)

### CARAMEL-BRAISED SHALLOTS WITH BLACK PEPPER

SERVES 4

For the best results, we recommend buying shallots that measure 1½ to 2 inches long and 1½ inches in diameter for this recipe. Halve large shallots through the root end so that the root keeps each half intact. Serve the braised shallots alongside roasted or grilled meats, or chop them to use as a spread for sandwiches or burgers. Laurent du Clos Red Wine Vinegar is the test kitchen's favorite.

- ½ cup water
- ⅓ cup granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons light corn syrup
- 1½ cups chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1½ pounds small shallots, peeled
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- Salt and pepper
- ⅓ cup red wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

1. Bring water, sugar, and corn syrup to boil in 10-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Cook, without stirring, until sugar at edges of skillet is straw-colored, 5 to 8 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook, swirling skillet occasionally, until mixture is dark amber and registers between 365 and 375 degrees, 1 to 3 minutes.

2. Off heat, quickly but carefully stir in shallots, thyme, 1 teaspoon pepper, and ½ teaspoon salt. (Salt does not need to be fully dissolved.) Return skillet to heat and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium, cover, and cook until shallots are tender, 12 to 14 minutes.

3. Uncover and gently boil until sauce has consistency of maple syrup, 9 to 12 minutes. Add vinegar and continue to cook, swirling occasionally, until sauce has returned to consistency of maple syrup, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Off heat, stir in parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

# Chocolate Semifreddo

Italy's elegant alternative to gelato (and ice cream) is rich and decadently creamy—and requires no special equipment to make.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

I love ice cream, but it isn't the most elegant way to cap off an evening. Serving a scoop (even homemade) at a dinner party always feels a little too casual. Enter *semifreddo*, a classic Italian dessert that's often described as a frozen mousse. (Though it's fully frozen, its name roughly translates as "half-frozen.") There are many styles, but like ice cream (or gelato), semifreddo typically starts with a custard base. However, instead of being churned in an ice cream maker, semifreddo is lightened with whipped cream and/or beaten egg whites. Then it's frozen in a loaf pan until solid, unmolded, and cut into neat slices. But instead of being hard and densely packed, semifreddo is soft enough that it easily caves to the pressure of a spoon. Better yet, unlike ice cream, it can sit out of the freezer for an extended period of time without melting, which makes it ideal for serving to company. An elegant frozen dessert that doesn't require an ice cream maker, doesn't melt easily, and is make-ahead by design? That checks a lot of boxes for me, so I tried a bunch of chocolate versions (my favorite flavor) that looked appealing.

## Soft Serve

I immediately ruled out using whipped egg whites to lighten the custard, as they tended to produce a chewy, marshmallow-like semifreddo. I wanted a version that was lush and rich, so whipped cream would be my aerator of choice.

I started with a particularly rich custard from my research: I heated  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of heavy cream in a saucepan, thoroughly whisked it into five beaten egg yolks mixed with a few tablespoons of sugar, and poured the custard back into the saucepan to cook gently until it reached 160 degrees. I then introduced a nifty trick: I quickly poured the hot custard over 8 ounces of chopped bittersweet chocolate so that the chocolate melted, which saved me the extra step of melting it beforehand. Once the custard cooled, I gently



The *semifreddo*, cherry sauce, and candied nuts can all be prepared well in advance of serving time, making this an ideal dessert for company.

folded in softly whipped cream. Finally, I poured the custard into a plastic wrap-lined loaf pan (that way, it would detach more easily from the pan) and froze it until solid, which took about 6 hours.

But I had gone overboard: While the semifreddo had deep chocolate flavor, it was so rich that I couldn't eat more than a few bites. Also, despite the fact that it had just come out of the freezer, it seemed to lack a certain refreshing coldness. I decided to cut some richness from the next batch of custard by replacing the heavy cream with an equal amount of milk. The dessert tasted lighter for sure—too lean, in fact. And in contrast to the fattier semifreddo, this one seemed overly cold, almost like a popsicle. It also melted a lot faster. (For more information, see "Keeping Semifreddo in Shape.")

I would obviously need to add back some fat, so for my next batch, I used heavy cream cut with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup water (this combo still had more fat than milk alone). This time I nailed it: The semifreddo was lush, sliced neatly, and—interestingly—tasted cold without feeling numbingly so. The only drawback

was the fussy step of separating all those eggs, so I tried again with a combination of heavy cream, water, and three whole eggs instead of five yolks. The results were even better—the perfect balance of decadent and refreshing, thanks to the extra water in the egg whites—and the method was easier and less wasteful.

But I was curious to learn why the dessert had seemed more or less cold, depending on how much fat was in it. After a conversation with our science editor, I understood: When you put a spoonful of frozen dessert on your tongue and you feel its coldness, that's because heat energy is transferring from your tongue into the dessert, making your tongue colder. The extent to which that happens—and hence the amount of coldness you feel—depends not only on the temperature of the dessert but also on its ingredients, such as the amount of fat versus water.

Try this little experiment: Reach into your freezer, pull out an ice cube and a stick of butter, and grasp them for a minute. They're both the same temperature, but the ice cube feels colder. That's because frozen water can take in more heat from your body (and more quickly) than frozen fat, so your hand loses more heat and feels colder. For the same reason, at equal serving temperatures, an ice cream with more fat in it will seem less cold in your mouth than a leaner recipe.

## TECHNIQUE

### SMOOTH THE SIDES AND TOP



Before slicing, use an offset spatula to smooth any wrinkles on the surface of the *semifreddo*.



## WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/jun18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/jun18)



## All Dressed Up

Though some semifreddo recipes call for mixing candied fruit, nuts, or cookies into the custard, I enjoyed my version's smooth, creamy texture and was hesitant to change it. But a garnish would offer textural contrast and make the dessert look more festive.

In my research I'd seen a chocolate semifreddo with a deep red cherry sauce spooned over each slice, so I decided to put together my own version made with frozen sweet cherries, sugar, kirsch (cherry brandy), a little cornstarch for body, and lemon juice for balance. The color and flavor were vivid, and the plump fruit nicely complemented the satiny semifreddo. For a bit of crunch, I made a batch of candied nuts with a pinch of salt to contrast with the dessert's sweetness.

Rich and satiny. Elegant. Deeply chocolaty. Make-ahead (you can even slice off a portion and freeze the rest for later). No ice cream maker required. Time to plan another dinner party.

### CHOCOLATE SEMIFREDDO

SERVES 12

The *semifreddo* needs to be frozen for at least 6 hours before serving. We developed this recipe with our favorite dark chocolate, Ghirardelli 60% Cacao Bittersweet Chocolate Premium Baking Bar. Do not whip the heavy cream until the chocolate mixture has cooled. If the semifreddo is difficult to release from the pan, run a thin offset spatula around the edges of the pan or carefully run the sides of the pan under hot water for 5 to 10 seconds. If frozen overnight, the semifreddo should be tempered before serving for the best texture. To temper, place slices on individual plates or a large tray, and refrigerate for 30 minutes. Serve the semifreddo as is or with our Cherry Sauce (recipe follows). For some crunch, sprinkle each serving with Quick Candied Nuts (page 110).

- 8 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon instant espresso powder
- 3 large eggs
- 5 tablespoons sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups heavy cream, chilled
- ¼ cup water

1. Lightly spray loaf pan with vegetable oil spray and line with plastic wrap, leaving 3-inch overhang on all sides. Place chocolate in large heatproof bowl; set fine-mesh strainer over bowl and set aside. Stir vanilla and espresso powder in small bowl until espresso powder is dissolved.

2. Whisk eggs, sugar, and salt in medium bowl until combined. Heat ½ cup cream (keep remaining 1½ cups chilled) and water in medium saucepan over medium heat until simmering. Slowly whisk hot cream mixture into egg mixture until combined. Return mixture to saucepan and cook over medium-low heat, stirring constantly and scraping bottom of saucepan with rubber spatula, until mixture is very slightly thickened and registers 160 to 165 degrees, about 5 minutes. Do not let mixture simmer.

3. Immediately pour mixture through strainer set over chocolate. Let mixture stand to melt chocolate, about 5 minutes. Whisk until chocolate is melted and smooth, then whisk in vanilla-espresso mixture. Let chocolate mixture cool completely, about 15 minutes.

4. Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, beat remaining 1½ cups cream on low speed until bubbles form, about 30 seconds. Increase speed to medium and beat until whisk leaves trail, about 30 seconds. Increase speed to high and continue to beat until nearly doubled in volume and whipped cream forms soft peaks, 30 to 45 seconds longer.

5. Whisk one-third of whipped cream into chocolate mixture. Using rubber spatula, gently

## You Need Just a Mixer, Not an Ice Cream Maker

Airy whipped cream gives semifreddo its signature light, frozen mousse-like texture, with no churning in an ice cream maker required.



fold remaining whipped cream into chocolate mixture until incorporated and no streaks of whipped cream remain. Transfer mixture to prepared pan and spread evenly with rubber spatula. Fold overhanging plastic over surface. Freeze until firm, at least 6 hours.

6. When ready to serve, remove plastic from surface and invert pan onto serving plate. Remove plastic and smooth surface with spatula as necessary. Dip slicing knife in very hot water and wipe dry. Slice semifreddo ¾ inch thick, transferring slices to individual plates and dipping and wiping knife after each slice. Serve immediately. (Semifreddo can be wrapped tightly in plastic wrap and frozen for up to 2 weeks.)

### CHERRY SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

This recipe was developed with frozen cherries. Do not thaw the cherries before using. Water can be substituted for the kirsch, if desired.

- 12 ounces frozen sweet cherries
- ¼ cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons kirsch
- 1½ teaspoons cornstarch
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice

1. Combine cherries and sugar in bowl and microwave for 1½ minutes. Stir, then continue to microwave until sugar is mostly dissolved, about 1 minute longer. Combine kirsch and cornstarch in small bowl.

2. Drain cherries in fine-mesh strainer set over small saucepan. Return cherries to bowl and set aside.

3. Bring juice in saucepan to simmer over medium-high heat. Stir in kirsch mixture and bring to boil. Boil, stirring occasionally, until mixture has thickened and appears syrupy, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove saucepan from heat and stir in cherries and lemon juice. Let sauce cool completely before serving. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 1 week.)

## Keeping Semifreddo in Shape

Fat and air help *semifreddo* resist melting and keep its shape once it's out of the freezer. Our semifreddo has an abundance of butterfat, and butterfat melts well above room temperature. Even more important, the air from the whipped cream acts as an insulator, slowing the transfer of ambient heat much like the fluffy feathers in a down jacket. It's this latter factor that allows our semifreddo to retain its shape longer than most ice creams, since whipped cream contains more trapped air than what's introduced into ice cream during churning.

To demonstrate how air acts as an insulator, we compared how quickly 1 cup of frozen unwhipped heavy cream would melt versus 1 cup of heavy cream that we whipped before freezing. The frozen unwhipped heavy cream began to slump and soften after about 15 minutes and was ringed by a puddle of liquid after 45 minutes; meanwhile, the frozen whipped cream remained comparatively firm and exhibited little melting.



NO AIR = MORE MELTING

AIR = LESS MELTING

The frozen unwhipped cream (above left) began to melt after about 15 minutes at room temperature. The trapped air in frozen whipped cream (above right) helped it resist melting, even after 45 minutes at room temperature.

# Modern Holiday Showstopper

Pavlova is a drop-dead gorgeous dessert of marshmallowy, crisp-shelled meringue piled with lightly whipped cream and fresh fruit. Ours is as foolproof as it is beautiful.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

**A**nna Pavlova was known as the “incomparable” ballerina, captivating audiences not just in her homeland of Russia but across the entire world at the turn of the 20th century. It’s no wonder, then, that chefs at the time immortalized her in recipes, including frogs’ legs à la Pavlova in France, Pavlova ice cream in the United States, and most famously, the glamorous meringue, whipped cream, and fruit confection that’s simply called pavlova.

Unlike meringue cookies, which are uniformly dry and crunchy throughout, the meringue for pavlova (which can be baked in a single large round or smaller individual disks) offers a range of textures: a crisp outer shell; a tender, marshmallowy interior; and a pleasant chew where the two textures meet. The meringue’s sweetness is balanced by softly whipped cream and tart fresh fruit, which makes for a gorgeous jumble of flavors and textures—and a lightness that is ideal at the end of a rich meal.

Because of its dramatic appearance, you might think that pavlova is a real project. But you’d be wrong: It calls for only a handful of ingredients, and the meringue base can be baked in advance, leaving only cream to be whipped and fruit topping to be prepped before serving. Best of all, pavlova’s unfussiness is part of its allure. More often than not, its shape is rustic and a few cracks are unavoidable, but there’s beauty in these imperfections.

That said, there is one part of the process that can be intimidating: producing just the right texture for the meringue. So that’s where I started my testing.

## Whip It Good

Almost every pavlova recipe starts with a French meringue, which is made by whipping raw egg whites and sugar to stiff peaks and then folding in cornstarch and an acid, usually white vinegar (more on these ingredients later), along with a flavoring



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/dec18](http://CookIllustrated.com/dec18)



The meringue base is sure to crack as it bakes, but don’t fret: Cracks are part of this dessert’s rustic charm.

such as vanilla. The meringue is spread into a disk on a parchment-lined baking sheet and baked in a low oven until the outside is crisp. The oven is then turned off, and the meringue is left to continue drying out until the inside is no longer wet but still soft.

A French meringue is tricky because it requires adding the sugar to egg whites at just the right moment: too soon and the meringue won’t inflate properly; too late and the meringue can be gritty.

To avoid that guesswork, I decided to switch to a style where the sugar is dissolved from the start. My two options were Italian and Swiss. The former requires the unnerving task of drizzling hot sugar syrup into the whites as they are whipped, so I opted for the latter: gently warming the whites and sugar in a bowl set over simmering

water until the sugar is dissolved (many Swiss meringue recipes recommend heating to 140 degrees) and then whipping.

I heated six egg whites and 1 cup of sugar to 140 degrees; whipped the mixture to stiff peaks; added cornstarch, vinegar, and vanilla; and spread the meringue into a round. Unfortunately, it baked up with a pitted, coarse interior.

Our science research editor explained: Egg white proteins start out as separately wound little molecules, like balls of yarn. When heated and whipped, as in a Swiss meringue, the balls uncoil into linear strands (denature) and then slowly start to knit together (coagulate) at about 140 degrees.

As the meringue bakes, the knitted proteins firm and contract, squeezing out water, which then evaporates. The more loosely knit the proteins are, the more they’re pushed apart by the escaping steam, which can result in a coarse-textured dessert. Cooking the whites to a higher temperature—160 degrees—before baking would cause more coagulation. With the proteins knit into a finer, more cohesive mesh, the structure would not be as disrupted by escaping steam and the final product would be smoother.

When I thought about it, it made sense that I needed to alter the standard Swiss meringue. It’s most often used as the base for buttercream frosting, not baked for pavlova. Sure enough, when I brought the whites and sugar to 160 degrees, I was rewarded with a smooth, fine texture. Its exterior was too soft, but I’d address that next.

## RECIPE TESTING

### Pavlovas on Parade

Our process for developing a recipe always starts with the same first step: choosing and preparing at least five published recipes, tasting each one, and noting our likes and dislikes.

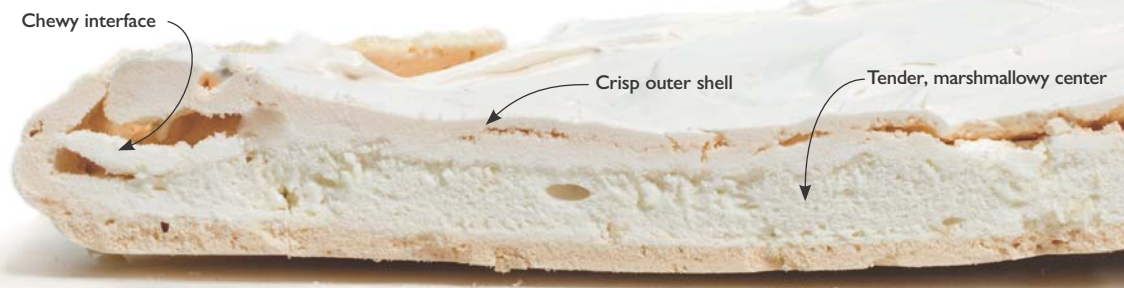


## Pavlova: A Trio of Fun-to-Eat Textures

Whereas a traditional meringue cookie is dry and crunchy throughout, the meringue for pavlova boasts three unique textures that keep things interesting as you eat.



**MERINGUE COOKIE**  
Uniformly dry throughout



**PAVLOVA**  
Crisp, chewy, and tender

### The Sweetest Thing

The exterior of the meringue was soft rather than crisp because it contained too much free water after baking. Adding sugar is the time-tested way to make sure a meringue crisps up: It draws water from the egg whites so they dry out during baking.

For my next set of tests, I made three batches of meringue with increasing amounts of sugar: 1 cup, 1¼ cups, and 1½ cups for six egg whites. The smaller amounts resulted in meringues with soft exteriors (they crisped after hours in the oven, but by then they were brown). I moved forward with 1½ cups of sugar, which resulted in a dry, crisp shell.

### Pavlovian Response

Now, back to the vinegar and cornstarch. Many meringue recipes call for acid to be added to the egg whites. Pavlova meringue is unusual in that cornstarch is also typically mixed in and the vinegar is added after—not before—whipping. Recipes suggest that this combination is responsible for the meringue's tender/chewy texture.

To determine whether the presence of vinegar and cornstarch was dictated by tradition or function, I made five batches of meringue: one with just egg whites and sugar, one with cornstarch, one with vinegar, one with cream of tartar (a powder that's acidic like vinegar), and one with both vinegar and cornstarch. The plain sample seemed wet and slick on the inside. The starch-only interior was all chew, like a nougat, while the vinegar- and cream of tartar-based meringues were superdelicate and tender within. Only the batch made with acid and starch was just right: chewy at the edge and tender

and marshmallowy inside. Since cream of tartar and vinegar performed identically, I chose to stick with tradition and call for vinegar since it's what most cooks keep on hand. I settled on 1½ teaspoons each of vinegar and cornstarch.

### The Sum of Its Parts

I spread a thick layer of lightly sweetened whipped cream onto the cooled meringue disk. For a festive finish, I topped the whipped cream with sliced oranges, tart cranberries soaked in sugar syrup to cut their bitterness (for sparkle, I rolled some in sugar), and fresh mint. Slicing pavlova can be a slightly messy affair, which is part of the fun, but letting the dessert sit for just 5 minutes softened the meringue's crust just enough to make cutting easier.

Finally, to showcase the dessert's versatility, I developed a few topping options, including a mix of kiwi, blueberries, and mango as well as a strawberry version scented with basil.

Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you: the incomparable pavlova!

### PAVLOVA WITH FRUIT AND WHIPPED CREAM

SERVES 10

Because eggs can vary in size, measuring the egg whites by weight or volume is essential to ensure that you are working with the correct ratio of egg whites to sugar (see "Sizing Up Eggs" on page 98). Open the oven door as infrequently as possible while the meringue is inside. Don't worry when the meringue cracks; it is part of the dessert's charm. The inside

of the meringue will remain soft. Our recipe for Strawberry, Lime, and Basil Topping is available to Web subscribers at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/dec18).

### Meringue

- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- ¾ cup (6 ounces) egg whites (5 to 7 large eggs)
- 1½ teaspoons distilled white vinegar
- 1½ teaspoons cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

### Whipped Cream

- 2 cups heavy cream, chilled
- 2 tablespoons sugar

- 1 recipe fruit topping (recipes follow)

**1. FOR THE MERINGUE:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 250 degrees. Using pencil, draw 10-inch circle in center of 18 by 13-inch piece of parchment paper.

**2.** Combine sugar and egg whites in bowl of stand mixer and place bowl over saucepan filled with 1 inch simmering water, making sure that water does not touch bottom of bowl. Whisking gently but constantly, heat until sugar is dissolved and mixture registers 160 to 165 degrees, 5 to 8 minutes.

**3.** Fit stand mixer with whisk attachment and whip mixture on high speed until meringue forms stiff peaks, is smooth and creamy, and is bright white with sheen, about 4 minutes (bowl may still be slightly warm to touch). Stop mixer and scrape down bowl with spatula. Add vinegar, cornstarch, and vanilla and whip on high speed until combined, about 10 seconds.

**4.** Spoon about ¼ teaspoon meringue onto each corner of rimmed baking sheet. Press parchment, marked side down, onto sheet to secure. Pile meringue in center of circle on parchment. Using circle as guide, spread and smooth meringue with back of spoon or spatula from center outward, building 10-inch disk that is slightly higher around edges. Finished disk should measure about 1 inch high with ¼-inch depression in center.

## A Sweet Rivalry

The history of pavlova is storied with an ongoing debate between New Zealand and neighboring Australia: Both countries lay claim to the dessert. As Kiwis have it, a Wellington chef created the dish in the prima ballerina Anna Pavlova's honor, citing her billowy tutu as inspiration. But Australians insist that it was invented at a hotel in Perth and got its name when a diner declared it to be "light as Pavlova." More recently, it's been asserted that pavlova began life as a German torte and eventually traveled to the United States.



## Sizing Up Eggs

We weighed 36 eggs from three separate cartons of eggs labeled “large.” We weighed each egg whole and then separated each egg and weighed the white. The whole eggs ranged from 53 grams to 66 grams, while the whites ranged from 28 grams to 42 grams. For this reason, we recommend measuring the egg whites by weight or volume—not by egg count—to ensure just the right ratio of egg white to sugar in our meringue.



5. Bake meringue until exterior is dry and crisp and meringue releases cleanly from parchment when gently lifted at edge with thin metal spatula, 1 to 1½ hours. Meringue should be quite pale (a hint of creamy color is OK). Turn off oven, prop door open with wooden spoon, and let meringue cool in oven for 1½ hours. Remove from oven and let cool completely before topping, about 15 minutes. (Cooled meringue can be wrapped tightly in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 1 week.)

6. **FOR THE WHIPPED CREAM:** Before serving, whip cream and sugar in chilled bowl of stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment on low speed until small bubbles form, about 30 seconds. Increase speed to medium and whip until whisk leaves trail, about 30 seconds. Increase speed to high and continue to whip until cream is smooth, thick, and nearly doubled in volume, about 20 seconds longer for soft peaks. If necessary, finish whipping by hand to adjust consistency.

7. Carefully peel meringue away from parchment and place on large serving platter. Spoon whipped cream into center of meringue. Top whipped cream with fruit topping. Let stand for at least 5 minutes or up to 1 hour, then slice and serve.

### ORANGE, CRANBERRY, AND MINT TOPPING

MAKES ¾ CUPS

You can substitute tangelos or Cara Cara oranges for the navel oranges, if desired. Valencia or blood oranges can also be used, but since they are smaller, increase the number of fruit to six.

- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- 6 ounces (1½ cups) frozen cranberries
- 5 navel oranges
- ⅓ cup chopped fresh mint, plus 10 small leaves

1. Bring 1 cup sugar and 1 cup water to boil in medium saucepan over medium heat, stirring to dissolve sugar. Off heat, stir in cranberries. Let cranberries and syrup cool completely, about 30 minutes. (Cranberries in syrup can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours.)

2. Place remaining ½ cup sugar in shallow dish. Drain cranberries, discarding syrup. Working in 2 batches, roll ½ cup cranberries in sugar and transfer to large plate or tray. Let stand at room temperature to dry, about 1 hour.

3. Cut away peel and pith from oranges. Cut each orange into quarters from pole to pole, then cut crosswise into ¼-inch-thick pieces (you should have 3 cups). Just before serving, toss oranges with nonsugared cranberries and chopped mint in bowl until combined. Using slotted spoon, spoon fruit in even layer over pavlova. Garnish with sugared cranberries and mint leaves. Before serving, drizzle pavlova slices with any juice from bowl.

### MANGO, KIWI, AND BLUEBERRY TOPPING

MAKES 5 CUPS

Do not use frozen blueberries in this recipe.

- 3 large mangos, peeled, pitted, and cut into ½-inch pieces (3 cups)
- 2 kiwis, peeled, quartered lengthwise, and sliced crosswise ¼ inch thick (about 1 cup)
- 5 ounces (1 cup) blueberries
- 1 tablespoon sugar

Toss all ingredients together in large bowl. Set aside for 30 minutes. Using slotted spoon, spoon fruit in even layer over pavlova. Before serving, drizzle pavlova slices with any juice from bowl.



### INDIVIDUAL PAVLOVAS WITH FRUIT AND WHIPPED CREAM

Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 250 degrees. In step 4, spoon about ¼ teaspoon meringue onto each corner of 2 rimmed baking sheets. Line sheets with parchment paper. Spoon heaping ½ cup meringue into 5 evenly spaced piles on each sheet. Spread each meringue pile with back of spoon to form 3½-inch disk with slight depression in center. Decrease baking time in step 5 to 50 minutes. Top each meringue with ½ cup whipped cream, followed by ½ cup fruit topping.

## KEY STEPS | MAKING A STUNNING DESSERT WITHOUT MUCH EFFORT

The baked, cooled meringue can be stored for up to a week, so all you need to do before serving is prepare the fruit topping and whip the cream.



**WHIP** 160-degree mixture of egg whites and sugar until stiff, glossy, and pure white, then add vinegar, cornstarch, and vanilla.



**SCOOP** meringue onto parchment and spread and smooth into 10-inch disk. Use back of spoon to create rim around edge.



**BAKE** for 1 hour, then turn off oven and prop door for 1½ hours, at which point meringue will be dry and crisp and lift cleanly from parchment.



**TOP** with lightly sweetened whipped cream and fresh fruit. Let pavlova sit for 5 minutes to 1 hour so that meringue softens slightly for neater slicing.



**SLICE** into wedges with serrated knife, using single decisive downward stroke. (Do not use sawing motion.)

# Foolproof All-Butter Pie Dough

Our ultimate pie dough. It uses all butter, it's dead easy to roll, and it bakes up tender, crisp, and shatteringly flaky.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

Outside the kitchen I'm sometimes a bit of a klutz, but give me a rolling pin and a lump of traditional all-butter pie dough—the kind that's dry and brittle and exhibits an alarming tendency to crack—and I'll dazzle you with my proficiency and grace as I roll it into a flawless circle. It's a skill that has taken me decades to acquire, and practicing it makes me feel like some sort of high priestess of pastry. Happily, that feeling of accomplishment became accessible to even the most inexperienced bakers back in 2010 when we developed our Foolproof Pie Dough, which is soft and moist and a dream to roll out and bakes up flaky and tender. But as great as that recipe is, I've never been 100 percent converted from my traditional ways (for reasons that I'll explain).

## Upending Pie Tradition

The 2010 recipe controls the ability of the flour in the dough to absorb water, and that's important because water bonds with protein in flour to form gluten, the elastic network that gives baked goods their structure. If there's too little water, the dough will be crumbly and impossible to roll and the baked crust will fall apart; too much water and the dough will roll out easily enough, but it may shrink when it bakes and will certainly be tough.

To appreciate just how revolutionary the 2010 recipe is, it's helpful to recall the way that pie dough has been made for centuries: You start by combining the dry ingredients—flour, salt, and sugar—and you



With our new dough, a fluted edge won't slump in the oven. It will hold its definition for a pie that always looks sharp.

cut in cold butter until it's broken into pea-size nuggets. Then you add water and mix until the dough comes together in a crumbly mass with visible bits of butter strewn throughout.

But our 2010 dough spurns tradition: Using a food processor, you mix 1½ cups of flour with some sugar and salt before adding 1½ sticks of cold butter

and ½ cup of shortening (often added to pie doughs to increase flakiness); you continue processing until the fat and the dry ingredients form a smooth paste. Next you pulse in the remaining cup of flour until you have a bunch of flour-covered chunks of dough and a small amount of free flour.

Finally, you transfer the dough to a bowl and stir in ¼ cup of water and ¼ cup of vodka to bring it all together. Why vodka? Because it's 60 percent water and 40 percent alcohol, and alcohol doesn't activate gluten. So replacing some of the water with vodka gives you the freedom to add enough liquid to make a moist, supple dough without the risk of forming excess gluten.

## Taking the All-Butter Route

I've made plenty of pies with the 2010 dough, but honestly, I'm not crazy about using vodka and shortening. I don't always have spirits on hand and, purist that I am, I prefer the richer flavor and cleaner mouthfeel of an all-butter pie crust. So I was intrigued when food writer J. Kenji Lopez-Alt, who developed the original recipe while working at *Cook's Illustrated*, went on to create a shortening- and vodka-free version of the dough for the website Serious Eats. How could it work without shortening and vodka?

Quite well, actually. The new recipe called for just 6 tablespoons of water—the ¼ cup (4 tablespoons) called for in the original recipe plus 2 additional tablespoons to replicate the water content in ¼ cup of vodka. Even with less water, I found the dough

## SCIENCE Why the Mixing Method Matters

Many of the pie dough recipes we consulted during the recipe development process call for a range of added water—which can create anxiety, especially in novice bakers, about adding too much and turning the crust tough. Our recipe reduces the potential anxiety by calling for a specific amount. Here's why we don't need a range: "Waterproofing" two-thirds of the flour by thoroughly mixing it with butter in the food processor ensures that the ½ cup of water we call for goes only toward amply hydrating the remaining flour, consistently producing a dough that is moist and workable. When we used the same quantities of ingredients to create a dough mixed in the traditional way—pulsing the butter into the flour until pea-size pieces form and then folding in the water—the result was dry and crumbly.

## SAME INGREDIENTS, DIFFERENT RESULTS



OUR MIXING METHOD  
Moist, workable dough

TRADITIONAL MIXING METHOD  
Dry, crumbly dough

## STEP BY STEP | NOT YOUR TYPICAL PIE DOUGH

Both the flour and the butter in this pie dough are added in two stages. This dough will look wetter than others you may have made, but fear not: As it chills, it will absorb extra moisture and will eventually form a smooth, easy-to-roll dough.



**1. MAKE FLOUR-AND-BUTTER PASTE** Process most of flour (and sugar and salt) and cubed butter until homogeneous paste forms, about 40 seconds.



**2. BREAK IT UP; ADD MORE FLOUR** Separate paste into 2-inch chunks and distribute around processor blade, then pulse in remaining flour.



**3. TOSS IN GRATED BUTTER** Transfer mixture to bowl, add frozen grated butter, and gently toss to coat butter shreds with flour.



**4. ADD WATER** Using rubber spatula, mix in ice water in 2 additions to form wet, sticky dough. Transfer to plastic wrap, press into disk, and refrigerate.

only a little harder to roll out than the original, and it baked up just as tender and flaky.

Turns out that the quirky mixing method was much more important than I'd initially realized. Thoroughly processing a lot of the flour with all the fat effectively waterproofed that portion of the flour, making it difficult for its proteins to hydrate enough to form gluten. Only the remaining cup of flour that was pulsed into the paste was left unprotected and therefore available to be hydrated. The result was a limited gluten network, which produced a very tender crust even without the vodka.

And how did Lopez-Alt's recipe work so well even without shortening? Well, shortening can be valuable in pie dough because it's pliable even when cold, so it flattens into thin sheets under the force of the rolling pin more readily than cold, brittle butter does. But the flour-and-butter paste in this dough also rolls out more easily than butter alone would, so with the paste mixing method there's no shortening required.

### A Grate Solution

There's no denying that the mixing method is a real game changer, but the crust it produces has a couple of faults that offend my perfectionist sensibilities. When I make pie dough the old-fashioned way I always get a nice sharp edge and a shatteringly flaky crust, but the edges of crusts made using the paste method usually slump a bit in the oven, even when I'm hypervigilant about chilling and even freezing the formed crust. And that flakiness, which looks so impressive when you break the crust apart, doesn't hold up when you eat it. The crust is a bit too tender, so the flakes disintegrate too readily on the palate.

Luckily, I thought I might know a way to fix both problems with one solution: I made a dough with a full  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of water. My hope was that it would actually produce a little *more* gluten, thus giving the baked crust more structure and true crispness.

With all that water, the dough was as easy to roll as the vodka crust had been, and the slightly

increased gluten gave the baked crust a more defined edge. But the crust was still a bit too tender for my taste. Perhaps there was simply too much fat in the mix. Maybe the best way to decrease the tenderizing effect of the butter was simply to decrease the butter.

I had been using two-and-a-half sticks of butter to equal the amount of fat in the vodka pie crust. For my next batch I cut back to an even two sticks of butter, but that crust baked up hard and tough, especially at the edge. It felt stale right out of the oven. It was just too lean; I'd have to bring the butter back up to two-and-a-half sticks.

But something was bugging me: Over the years I'd made plenty of traditionally mixed all-butter pie crusts with an equally high proportion of fat, and though these doughs were challenging to roll out, the finished crusts always boasted just the right balance of crispness and tenderness. Why was this one so infuriatingly delicate?

And then I realized: In the traditional method much of the butter is left in discrete pieces that enrich the dough without compromising gluten development, but in my new crust, every bit of the butter was worked in. Perhaps the answer was to use the same amount of butter overall but to use less butter in the paste and to make sure that some of the butter remained in pieces.

Cutting the butter into very small pieces wasn't feasible, but what if I grated it? I gave it a try, shredding 4 tablespoons of butter on a box grater. To ensure that those pieces stayed firm enough not to mix with the flour, I froze them. Meanwhile, I processed the remaining two sticks into the dry ingredients. After breaking up the paste, I pulsed

in the remaining flour, transferred the mixture to a bowl, and tossed in the grated butter. Finally, I folded in  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of ice water, which was absorbed by the dry flour that coated the dough chunks and the grated butter.

After a 2-hour chill, the dough rolled out beautifully, and it looked beautiful, too. The fat-rich paste and the shredded butter-flour mixture swirled together, making a subtly variegated dough overlaid with thin wisps of pure butter. Once baked, the crust held a perfect, crisp edge and was rich-tasting while being both tender and truly flaky.

Now that I have an all-butter pie dough that's a cinch to roll out, I'm ready to adopt a new tradition.

### FOOLPROOF ALL-BUTTER DOUGH FOR DOUBLE-CRUST PIE MAKES ONE 9-INCH DOUBLE CRUST

Be sure to weigh the flour for this recipe. In the mixing stage, this dough will be more moist than most pie doughs, but as it chills it will absorb a lot of excess moisture. Roll the dough on a well-floured counter.

- 20 tablespoons (2½ sticks) unsalted butter, chilled
- 2½ cups (12½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ cup ice water



EARTH



OUR PIE DOUGH

### Pie Dough: A World View

Our rolled-out Foolproof All-Butter Pie Dough looks a lot like an aerial view of the earth: It has wisps of fat and fatty flour strewn across it. A traditionally made dough will be more speckled in appearance.

1. Grate 4 tablespoons butter on large holes of box grater and place in freezer. Cut remaining 16 tablespoons butter into 1/2-inch cubes.

2. Pulse 1 1/2 cups flour, sugar, and salt in food processor until combined, 2 pulses. Add cubed butter and process until homogeneous paste forms, 40 to 50 seconds. Using your hands, carefully break paste into 2-inch chunks and redistribute evenly around processor blade. Add remaining 1 cup flour and pulse until mixture is broken into pieces no larger than 1 inch (most pieces will be much smaller), 4 to 5 pulses. Transfer mixture to medium bowl. Add grated butter and toss until butter pieces are separated and coated with flour.

3. Sprinkle 1/4 cup ice water over mixture. Toss with rubber spatula until mixture is evenly moistened. Sprinkle remaining 1/4 cup ice water over mixture and toss to combine. Press dough with spatula until dough sticks together. Use spatula to divide dough into 2 portions. Transfer each portion to sheet of plastic wrap. Working with 1 portion at a time, draw edges of plastic over dough and press firmly on sides and top to form compact, fissure-free mass. Wrap in plastic and form into 5-inch disk. Repeat with remaining portion; refrigerate dough for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days. Let chilled dough sit on counter to soften slightly, about 10 minutes, before rolling. (Wrapped dough can be frozen for up to 1 month. If frozen, let dough thaw completely on counter before rolling.)

#### FOOLPROOF ALL-BUTTER DOUGH FOR SINGLE-CRUST PIE

MAKES ONE 9-INCH SINGLE CRUST

Be sure to weigh the flour for this recipe. This dough will be more moist than most pie doughs, but as it chills it will absorb a lot of excess moisture. Roll the dough on a well-floured counter.

- 10 tablespoons unsalted butter, chilled
- 1 1/4 cups (6 1/4 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup ice water

1. Grate 2 tablespoons butter on large holes of box grater and place in freezer. Cut remaining 8 tablespoons butter into 1/2-inch cubes.

2. Pulse 3/4 cup flour, sugar, and salt in food processor until combined, 2 pulses. Add cubed butter and process until homogeneous paste forms, about 30 seconds. Using your hands, carefully break paste into 2-inch chunks and redistribute evenly around processor blade. Add remaining 1/2 cup flour and pulse until mixture is broken into pieces no larger than 1 inch (most pieces will be much smaller), 4 to 5 pulses. Transfer mixture to medium bowl. Add grated butter and toss until butter pieces are separated and coated with flour.

3. Sprinkle 2 tablespoons ice water over mixture. Toss with rubber spatula until mixture is

## A Diner-Style Pie

There's no better match for our tender, flaky pie crust than a chocolate cream filling. For a deeply chocolaty mixture that is not too heavy, we make a milk-based cocoa pudding and then whisk in bitter-sweet chocolate, along with vanilla for extra depth. A few tablespoons of butter help the filling set up with a silky consistency once it is poured into the prebaked pie shell and refrigerated. Finally, we finish off the pie with a complementary topping of lightly sweetened whipped cream. —A.G.

### CHOCOLATE CREAM PIE

SERVES 8 TO 10

We developed this recipe with whole milk, but you can substitute 2 percent low-fat milk, if desired. Avoid using 1 percent low-fat or skim milk, as the filling will be too thin. Ghirardelli 60% Cacao Bittersweet Chocolate Premium Baking Bar is our favorite dark chocolate.

- 1 recipe Foolproof All-Butter Dough for Single-Crust Pie

#### Filling

- 1/3 cup (2 1/3 ounces) sugar
- 1/4 cup (1 ounce) cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups whole or 2 percent low-fat milk
- 6 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 3 pieces
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

#### Topping

- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon confectioners' sugar

1. Roll dough into 12-inch circle on well-floured counter. Roll dough loosely around rolling pin and unroll it onto 9-inch pie plate, leaving at least 1-inch overhang around edge. Ease dough into plate by gently lifting edge of dough with your hand while pressing into plate bottom with your other hand.

2. Trim overhang to 1/2 inch beyond lip of plate. Tuck overhang under itself; folded edge should be flush with edge of plate. Crimp dough evenly around edge of plate using your fingers. Refrigerate

evenly moistened. Sprinkle remaining 2 tablespoons ice water over mixture and toss to combine. Press dough with spatula until dough sticks together. Transfer dough to sheet of plastic wrap. Draw edges of plastic over dough and press firmly on sides and top to form compact, fissure-free mass. Wrap in plastic and form into 5-inch disk. Refrigerate dough for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days. Let chilled dough sit on counter to



Our crust stays crisp beneath the creamy filling.

dough-lined plate until firm, about 30 minutes. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees.

3. Line chilled pie shell with aluminum foil, covering edges to prevent burning, and fill with pie weights. Bake until edges are set and just beginning to turn golden, 15 to 20 minutes. Remove foil and weights, rotate plate, and continue to bake until golden brown and crisp, 15 to 20 minutes longer. If crust begins to puff, pierce gently with tip of paring knife. Let crust cool completely in plate on wire rack, about 30 minutes.

4. **FOR THE FILLING:** Whisk sugar, cornstarch, cocoa, and salt together in large saucepan. Whisk in milk until incorporated, making sure to scrape corners of saucepan. Place saucepan over medium heat; cook, whisking constantly, until mixture is thickened and bubbling over entire surface, 8 to 10 minutes. Cook 30 seconds longer; remove from heat. Add chocolate and butter and whisk until melted and fully incorporated. Whisk in vanilla. Pour filling into cooled pie crust. Press lightly greased parchment paper against surface of filling and let cool completely, about 1 hour. Refrigerate until filling is firmly set, at least 2 1/2 hours or up to 24 hours.

5. **FOR THE TOPPING:** Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip cream and sugar on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to high and whip until stiff peaks form, 1 to 2 minutes. Spread whipped cream evenly over chilled pie and serve.

soften slightly, about 10 minutes, before rolling. (Wrapped dough can be frozen for up to 1 month. If frozen, let dough thaw completely on counter before rolling.)



#### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/feb18)

# Peach Tarte Tatin

Yes, you can make a juicy, summery, peach-crowned version of the classic upside-down caramelized apple tart. No, you can't simply substitute peaches for apples.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

If you've got peaches, you should make a peach tarte Tatin. You say your peaches aren't quite ripe? You're allergic to long ingredient lists? You always fret that you've added the wrong amount of thickener to fruit pie filling, and fluting a fancy pie crust edge makes you feel graceless and inept? Excellent: This is the dessert for you.

But first a quick review of how the original apple version of tarte Tatin is made. You start on the stovetop, cooking a skillet full of apple chunks with butter and sugar. There's no thickener required because apples give off just a small amount of moisture when they're cooked, and it evaporates during this step. When the fruit is lacquered with a dark caramel, you place a disk of raw puff pastry or pie dough on top, transfer the skillet to a hot oven, and bake until the pastry is browned and crisp and gently molded around the fruit.

Here comes the plot twist: Rather than scoop the dessert straight from the skillet, you flip the whole thing onto a platter, revealing the apples in all their burnished, buttery splendor. The crust is now on the bottom, offering an intriguing dual personality: flaky and crisp on one side, soft and velvety with caramelized fruit juices on the other.

Despite its numerous charms, apple tarte Tatin isn't really a summer dessert, so I was eager to try a few of the many recipes I found in which peaches were substituted for the apples. They followed the same



For a glossy finish, brush some of the reduced peach juice (enhanced with a touch of bourbon) onto the tart before serving.

procedure: caramelize the peaches, cover with pastry (I opted for convenient store-bought puff), bake, and flip. But each one turned out too sweet, mushy, and/or flooded with watery juice. Simply swapping peaches for apples wasn't going to cut it.

## Juicy Fruit

I had an idea about how to deal with the excess juice, but first I got the caramelization process underway. Most recipes call for melting the butter and sugar in a skillet before arranging the peaches on top—a nasty burn waiting to happen. I kept things safe by smearing a cold skillet with 3 tablespoons of softened butter and then sprinkling it with  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of sugar (and a pinch of salt). Next, hoping that a thickener might bind up the extra liquid, I tossed 2 pounds of peeled, pitted, and quartered peaches with cornstarch. I spiraled the chunks snugly on top of the sugar and placed the skillet over high heat. Ten minutes later, the butter, sugar, and peach juice had combined to make a rich caramel. I popped the puff pastry disk on top and placed the skillet in

a 400-degree oven. Sadly, the cornstarch produced a gelled texture instead of the lightly sticky peaches I envisioned.

But without a thickener, the watery failures continued. Steam vents cut into the puff pastry proved ineffective. Withholding the pastry until later in the baking process allowed for some evaporation—but not enough. As each tart emerged from the oven, I quantified my failure by placing an inverted plate on top of the pastry and tilting the skillet over a liquid measuring cup. Each time almost a full cup of liquid poured out.

Instead of thickening the liquid, how about getting rid of it before the peaches went into the oven? I tossed the peaches with 1 cup of sugar and let them sit while the sugar pulled juice out via osmosis. It seemed promising: After 45 minutes, the peaches released  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of liquid, which I reserved. I proceeded with the caramelizing and baking, and while the tart was in the oven, I reduced the juice to a syrup, which I planned to brush onto the baked tart.

To my dismay, the postbake “tilt and drain” test still yielded almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of juice. Belatedly, I realized that much of what I had drained off before baking had been liquefied sugar, and indeed, after I brushed the syrupy reduction onto the tart, it was far too sweet. I considered halving the macerating sugar, but that would mean halving the osmotic force exerted on the peaches, so even less liquid would be released. It didn't seem worthwhile.

## Full Tilt

It occurred to me that my tilting and draining move might be good for something beyond measuring my failures: I decided to skip macerating and simply bake the tart, drain off the accumulated juice, and then reduce the liquid and brush it onto the peaches.

Having taken no preemptive measures to decrease the excess liquid, I knew this tart would be a real slosh-fest when it came out of the oven. So, with safety in mind, I transferred it to a wire rack to cool for 20 minutes before draining the juice.

After I'd drained the juice, the tart, for once, was not drowning. And when brushed with the reduced juice, the peaches were pretty much perfect: soft but not too soft, with a lovely balance of sweetness and caramel-y bitterness.

## Firm Peaches Are Preferable

This tart is the rare instance where perfectly ripe fruit isn't a must. In fact, we prefer firm, barely ripe peaches for the recipe because they don't require blanching to peel, and they taste just as good in the tart.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/aug18](https://CookIllustrated.com/aug18)



## SCIENCE Why Peaches Shed More Juice Than Apples

Peaches contain a bit more water than apples (88 percent and 84 percent, respectively), but that's not why peaches shed so much more juice during cooking. It's because peaches have very little pectin, while apples have it in abundance. When apples are cooked, they release water, but the pectin in their cell walls absorbs most of it instead of allowing it to leak out. Because peaches have far less pectin, they don't retain their juice nearly as well.



**APPLE PECTIN**

Abundant pectin traps juice to form a gel that makes it hard for juice to leak out.



**PEACH PECTIN**

Less pectin means that more juice can leak out.

### Earning My Crust

Now that I had sorted out the juice problem, I could no longer ignore the fact that, except at the very edges, the underside of the puff pastry was kind of raw. So for my next test, I parbaked the pastry on a baking sheet while I caramelized the peaches and then married the two for a final bake.

But they remained very separate. The crust stayed awkwardly flat instead of molding itself around the peaches, and I never got that velvety interface where the fruit and crust met. And though the puff pastry expanded majestically in the oven, it collapsed under the fruit when I inverted the tart, so even though it was fully baked, it seemed dense and tough.

Given the special requirements of a peach Tatin, pie dough was a better option. I simply rolled out a disk of dough, folded the edge underneath itself to form a bit of a rim to contain the peaches, cut a few vents, and placed the pastry on top of the caramelized fruit. I brushed the dough with water and sprinkled it with sugar, so it would become extra crunchy when baked. As the tart baked, the pie crust absorbed more steam than the less-porous puff pastry had and did it without getting soggy, so there was a little less juice to drain.



### Put Your Peach Juice to Work

Because peaches throw off so much liquid during cooking, we had to find ways to make sure our tart didn't end up awash in it (as in the failed test above). At the same time, we put that excess juice to good use.

Sensing that I was nearing the end of my quest, I celebrated by adding a bit of bourbon—for a little more complexity—to the reducing juice before brushing the mixture over the peaches. Finally, I whipped some lightly sweetened cream to serve alongside. Now that I have a summery peach version, I can make tarte Tatin all year round.

### PEACH TARTE TATIN

SERVES 8

We recommend using our Foolproof All-Butter Dough for Single-Crust Pie for this recipe (page 101). Chill the dough for at least 1 hour before rolling it. We like using firm peaches in this recipe because they are easier to peel and retain their shape when cooked; yellow peaches are also preferable to white peaches. When pouring off the liquid in step 4, the peaches may shift in the skillet; shaking the skillet will help redistribute them. Serve the tart with lightly sweetened whipped cream, if desired.

- 1 recipe single-crust pie dough, chilled
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- ½ cup (3½ ounces) plus 2 tablespoons sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 pounds ripe but firm peaches, peeled, pitted, and quartered
- 1 tablespoon bourbon (optional)

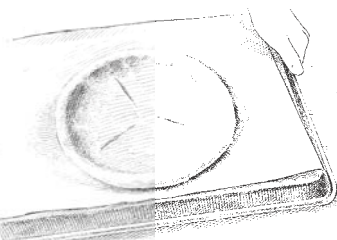
1. Invert rimmed baking sheet and place sheet of parchment paper or waxed paper on top. Roll dough into 10-inch circle on lightly floured counter. Loosely roll dough around rolling pin and gently unroll it onto prepared sheet. Working around circumference, fold ½ inch of dough under itself and pinch to create 9-inch round with raised rim. Cut three 2-inch slits in center of dough and refrigerate until needed.

2. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Smear butter over bottom of 10-inch oven-safe skillet. Sprinkle ½ cup sugar over butter and shake skillet to distribute sugar in even layer. Sprinkle salt over sugar. Arrange peaches in circular pattern around edge of skillet, nestling fruit snugly. Tuck remaining peaches into center, squeezing in as much fruit as possible (it is not necessary to maintain circular pattern in center).

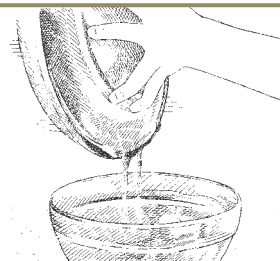
3. Place skillet over high heat and cook, without stirring fruit, until juice is released and turns from pink to deep amber, 8 to 12 minutes. (If necessary, adjust skillet's placement on burner to even out hot spots and encourage even browning.) Remove skillet from heat. Carefully slide prepared dough over fruit, making sure dough is centered and does not touch edge of skillet. Brush dough lightly with water and sprinkle with remaining 2 tablespoons sugar. Bake until crust is very well browned, 30 to 35 minutes. Transfer skillet to wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet and let cool for 20 minutes.

4. Place inverted plate on top of crust. With 1 hand firmly securing plate, carefully tip skillet over bowl to drain juice (skillet handle may still be hot). When all juice has been transferred to bowl, return skillet to wire rack, remove plate, and shake skillet firmly to redistribute peaches. Carefully invert tart onto plate, then slide tart onto wire rack. (If peaches have shifted during unmolding, gently nudge them back into place with spoon.)

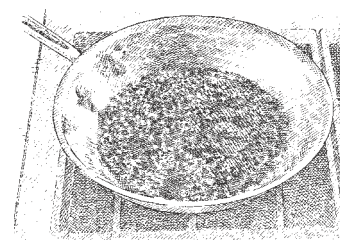
5. Pour juice into now-empty skillet (handle may be hot). Stir in bourbon, if using, and cook over high heat, stirring constantly, until mixture is dark and thick and starting to smoke, 2 to 3 minutes. Return mixture to bowl and let cool until mixture is consistency of honey, 2 to 3 minutes. Brush mixture over peaches. Let tart cool for at least 20 minutes. Cut into wedges and serve.



**1. USE PIE DOUGH, NOT PUFF PASTRY** Pie dough absorbs more steam than less-porous puff pastry, so the juice ends up a bit thicker.



**2. DRAIN AND RESERVE JUICE** Once the tart is baked, get rid of excess liquid by placing an inverted plate on the crust and draining off juice.



**3. REDUCE JUICE INTO GLAZE** Combine the peach juice with bourbon and reduce the mixture into a thick, flavorful glaze to brush onto the peaches.

# Italian Chocolate-Almond Cake

Flourless chocolate cake often trades on cloying fudge-like density and one-note chocolate flavor. Leave it to the Italians to whip up a version that's lighter and more nuanced.

BY STEVE DUNN

Italian chocolate-almond cake (*torta caprese*) has a storied past—though it's not clear which (if any) story is true. One legend has it that the cake came to be when an Austrian princess visiting the island of Capri longed for the Sachertorte of her homeland. Not knowing how to make the dense Viennese chocolate layer cake, a local pastry chef added chocolate to his popular almond torte and hoped for the best. According to another tale, it was the accidental invention of an absent-minded baker who forgot to add flour to a chocolate-almond cake he made for a trio of Italian mobsters. And a third story tells of a sleep-deprived cook who confused cocoa powder for flour when he was mixing up almond cake batter.

What is certain: This torte, a classic dessert along the Amalfi Coast, can be a simple, elegant showstopper. When done well, it packs all the richness and depth of flourless chocolate cake, but it features finely ground almonds in the batter that subtly break up the fudgy crumb, making it lighter and less cloying to eat. It's also easy to make: Mix melted butter and chocolate with the ground almonds, lighten the batter with whipped eggs and sugar, pour it into a greased springform pan, and bake it for about an hour. There are no layers to assemble and no frosting to pipe and smooth. All it needs is a dusting of confectioners' sugar and maybe a dollop of whipped cream.

Simple ingredients, simple method. But making a great one takes a precise formula. The recipes I tried yielded a motley crew of cakes—some dry and dull like dilute cocoa, others as wet and dense as fudge—which made clear how important it would be to nail down just the right ingredient ratios and mixing method.

## Batter Up

Butter and chocolate are typically the foundation of flourless chocolate cakes, and this one is no different. I melted 12 tablespoons of butter and 6 ounces of bittersweet chocolate in the microwave (easier and just as foolproof as melting chocolate over a traditional



The top of the cake forms a thin, dry shell during baking, so it's OK to dust the surface with confectioners' sugar several hours before serving.

water bath). Next came the eggs: Some recipes call for whipping just the whites with sugar, others for whipping the whites and yolks separately (both with sugar), and still others for whipping whole eggs with the sugar until the mixture is thick and pale. I tried the last, simplest route first. Finally, I blitzed sliced almonds to a fine meal in the food processor, blended them with the chocolate mixture, gently folded in the whipped eggs, poured the batter into the prepared pan, and baked it in a 325-degree oven.

The chocolate flavor was flat, but that was an easy fix with additions such as vanilla, salt, and cocoa powder to boost complexity. The bigger issue was the cake's consistency, which was downright dense.

## Heavy Lifting

The tricky thing about flourless chocolate cakes is that they don't contain chemical leaveners. That's because the air created by a chemical leavener is useless unless it is trapped within the pastry's structure, typically by the flour. With no flour in the torta, the task of aerating my butter-, chocolate-, and nut-laden

batter fell entirely to the eggs. The whipped whole eggs weren't providing enough lift or structure, so I made a couple more cakes in which I varied how I incorporated the eggs.

Whipping just the whites with sugar and folding them into the batter after I had whisked in the yolks didn't cut it either; the cake exited the oven proud and puffed but collapsed as it cooled. Only when I beat the whites and yolks separately in the stand mixer, each with half the sugar, were the two components able to aerate the heavy batter. Mixed this way, the center of the cake was moist, tender, and just a tad dense. And though the cake sank slightly as it cooled, it held its stature. (For more information, see "Whip the Entire Egg—in Two Parts.")

The other good news: The whipped yolks were so thick and stable that I discovered I could pour the chocolate-butter-almond mixture directly over them and mix everything in the stand mixer rather than by hand in a separate bowl as I had been doing. Even better, mixing the batter mechanically allowed me to incorporate a small portion of the whipped egg whites, which had been difficult to do with a spatula because of the batter's heft. But with the mixer's help, I was able to lighten the stiff batter just enough that I could then very gently fold in the rest of the whipped whites, preserving as much of their aerating effect as possible.

## Make It a Meal

To make the cake's crumb just a tad tighter, I tried cutting back on the almond meal by 25 percent, which did the trick without noticeably affecting the flavor of the cake. While I was at it, I also discovered that commercial almond meal worked just as well as nuts I had ground myself—and it saved me the trouble of hauling out the food processor (see "Almond Flour versus Almond Meal").

Dusted with confectioners' sugar, the torta looked festive and elegant—a dessert fit for a princess, a mobster, or your favorite dinner guest. Serving it with infused whipped cream (I made one with Amaretto and another with orange liqueur and orange zest) brought it a step closer to its Italian roots and gave it further distinction from a typical flourless chocolate cake. And if you happen to have leftovers, you're in luck: It tastes great the next day.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/dec18)

**TORTA CAPRESE**  
SERVES 12 TO 14

For the best results, use a good-quality bittersweet chocolate and Dutch-processed cocoa here. We developed this recipe using our favorite bittersweet chocolate, Ghirardelli 60% Cacao Bittersweet Chocolate Premium Baking Bar, and our favorite Dutch-processed cocoa, Droste Cacao. Either almond flour or almond meal will work in this recipe; we used Bob's Red Mill. Serve with lightly sweetened whipped cream or with Amaretto Whipped Cream or Orange Whipped Cream (recipes follow).



**SHOPPING Almond Flour versus Almond Meal**

There are no official labeling standards for these products, but almond flour is typically made from skinless blanched nuts, while almond meal is most often ground from skin-on nuts. Luckily, both work equally well in our *torta*.



- 12 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 12 pieces
- 6 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 4 large eggs, separated
- 1 cup (7 ounces) granulated sugar
- 2 cups (7 ounces) almond flour
- 2 tablespoons Dutch-processed cocoa powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- Confectioners' sugar (optional)

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Lightly spray 9-inch springform pan with vegetable oil spray.

2. Microwave butter and chocolate in medium bowl at 50 percent power, stirring often, until melted, 1½ to 2 minutes. Stir in vanilla and set aside.

3. Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip egg whites on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and continue to whip, slowly adding ½ cup granulated sugar, until whites are glossy and

**Made to Be Made Ahead**

This cake is so moist and tender that it still tastes great a few days after baking. Simply wrap it in plastic wrap and store it at room temperature.

thick and hold stiff peaks, about 4 minutes longer. Transfer whites to large bowl.

4. Add egg yolks and remaining ½ cup granulated sugar to now-empty mixer bowl and whip on medium-high speed until thick and pale yellow, about 3 minutes, scraping down bowl as necessary. Add chocolate mixture and mix on medium speed until incorporated, about 15 seconds. Add almond flour, cocoa, and salt and mix until incorporated, about 30 seconds.

5. Remove bowl from mixer and stir few times with large rubber spatula, scraping bottom of bowl to ensure almond flour is fully incorporated. Add one-third of whipped whites to bowl, return bowl to mixer, and mix on medium speed until no streaks of white remain, about 30 seconds, scraping down

bowl halfway through mixing. Transfer batter to bowl with remaining whites. Using large rubber spatula, gently fold whites into batter until no streaks of white remain. Pour batter into prepared pan, smooth top with spatula, and place pan on rimmed baking sheet.

6. Bake until toothpick inserted in center comes out with few moist crumbs attached, about 50 minutes, rotating pan halfway through baking. Let cake cool in pan on wire rack for 20 minutes. Remove side of pan and let cake cool completely, about 2 hours. (Cake can be wrapped in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

7. Dust top of cake with confectioners' sugar, if using. Using offset spatula, transfer cake to serving platter. Cut into wedges and serve.

**AMARETTO WHIPPED CREAM**  
MAKES 2 CUPS

For the best results, chill the bowl and the whisk attachment before whipping the cream.

- 1 cup heavy cream, chilled
- 2 tablespoons Amaretto
- 1 tablespoon confectioners' sugar

Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip cream, Amaretto, and sugar on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to high and whip until soft peaks form, 1 to 3 minutes.

**ORANGE WHIPPED CREAM**  
MAKES 2 CUPS

You can substitute Grand Marnier for the Cointreau, if desired.

- 1 cup heavy cream, chilled
- 2 tablespoons Cointreau
- 1 tablespoon confectioners' sugar
- ¼ teaspoon grated orange zest

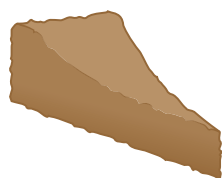
Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip all ingredients on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to high and whip until soft peaks form, 1 to 3 minutes.

**RECIPE TESTING Whip the Entire Egg—in Two Parts**

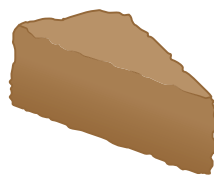
The eggs have a lot of heavy lifting to do in a flourless chocolate cake since they are the dessert's sole source of leavening and structure. Whipping them to incorporate air is thus essential. Whipping also causes the egg white proteins to unfurl and form a network that helps stabilize the air bubbles; the result is called an egg foam. But would we get the most leavening and structure by whipping whole eggs, just the whites, or the whites and yolks separately? Here's what we found.



**Test:** Whip whole eggs  
**Result:** Dense, heavy cake  
**Explanation:** The fat in the yolks inhibits the formation of the protein network in whites that traps air, so there's little foaming to help lighten the cake.



**Test:** Whip whites only  
**Result:** Cake puffs, then collapses  
**Explanation:** Even though the whites trap a lot of air to help the cake rise, they ultimately don't have enough structure to support the weight of the heavy batter.



**Test:** Whip whites; whip yolks  
**Result:** Airy, sturdy cake  
**Explanation:** Whipping the yolks with sugar traps more air and allows the sugar to draw in moisture, so the mixture becomes sturdier. The yolk mixture gets dispersed throughout the batter, giving the cake a more tender texture and strengthening the egg white foam.

# The Lemoniest Lemon Bars

What's the secret to bars with bold, multifaceted citrus flavor?  
Cut back on the lemon juice.

BY LAN LAM

If tart, citrusy flavors are the rays of sunshine that brighten lemon bars, then thickeners are the storm clouds that cover them up. And therein lies a culinary catch-22: For bars with lots of lemon zing, you need lots of lemon juice. But the more juice you use, the more flavor-dulling binders—such as eggs and starch—are required to keep the filling firm and sliceable. My task was to find a way around this problem.

## Laying the Foundation

With lemon bars, it's easy to overlook the crust and focus on the wobbly, creamy, lemony layer. And that's exactly what most recipes do. But not mine. Instead of a non-descript platform for the filling, I wanted a crisp crumb with buttery sweetness.

The typical crust is modeled on a British shortbread cookie. I made a classic version, using the food processor to cut cold butter into a mixture of flour, confectioners' sugar, and salt. To ensure that every bite would have the same ratio of crust to filling, I did my best to evenly press the crumbly mixture into an aluminum foil-lined 8-inch square pan. (The foil would facilitate removing the baked bars from the pan.) I had to work carefully because, once compressed, the mixture stayed put, and it became difficult to fill in thinner areas or level out thicker spots. I popped the pan into a 350-degree oven and let the crust bake for 25 minutes. This is longer than most recipes specify, but I hoped that deeper browning would produce an especially crisp, full-flavored crust.

When a buttery scent filled the kitchen, the crust was dark brown, so I pulled the pan from the oven. I topped the baked crust with a placeholder filling made by whisking lemon juice and eggs together with sugar and salt before returning the pan to the oven for 30 more minutes.

The longer baking time had indeed helped develop a rich taste. Unfortunately, it didn't make the crust any crispier. After brainstorming with my colleagues, I realized why: The powdery sugar was



For a silky-smooth texture, we parcook the filling on the stovetop, pour it onto a parbaked crust, and then bake the bars for just 10 minutes.

producing a fine, delicate crumb that melted on my tongue. For a coarser, crunchier consistency, I needed coarser, crunchier granulated sugar. A side-by-side comparison of crusts made with both types of sugar confirmed it.

Finally, to make the dough easier to work with, I melted the butter in the microwave and stirred it into the flour. This created a pliable mass that was much easier to distribute evenly—with no adverse effect on the finished product. As a bonus, I no longer needed a food processor.

## What Is Cream of Tartar, Anyway?

The white, odorless powder known as cream of tartar is a product of grape fermentation. It is said to have been first isolated from the bottom of wine barrels by the Persian alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan around 800 AD. Today, we know that tartaric acid, the acid component of cream of tartar, is found in the greatest concentration in grapes but is also present in bananas and tamarind. To make cream of tartar, the grape sediment, called lees, is scraped from wine barrels, purified, and ground. Using cream of tartar to boost acidic flavor as we do in our Best Lemon Bars is novel; it is most often incorporated into beaten egg whites for stability or into sugar syrup to help prevent crystallization.

## Flawless Filling

I now had a good base on which to showcase a bright, sweet-tart lemon filling. After my initial tests, I concluded that a filling that was twice as deep as the crust was most pleasant to eat (see “A Question of Proportions”); now I just needed to perfect the filling itself. I'd already fiddled with the simplest approach: whisking together lemon juice, sugar, salt, and a thickener—some combination of eggs, flour, and/or cornstarch—and baking until set. Unfortunately, by the time this filling was cooked at the center, its edges were curdled, as evidenced by pockmarks. A liberal dusting of confectioners' sugar, the baker's Band-Aid, disguised the unevenness, but nothing could camouflage the lumpy consistency. No matter how I tweaked the ingredients, oven temperature, and baking time, I couldn't fix this style of filling.

A more promising method required only marginally more work—the filling is precooked, poured over the crust, and baked until set. I gave it a try, cooking  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup of lemon juice, six eggs, 1 cup of sugar, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of salt over medium heat. As soon as it reached a pudding-like consistency, I stirred in 4 tablespoons of butter for richness. I poured the filling over my baked crust and returned the pan to the oven. After 10 minutes, the curd barely jiggled when I shook the pan.

Less time in the oven had solved the textural issues since the edges and center of the filling now finished cooking at the same time: These bars boasted an incredibly smooth surface. However, their flavor was marred by egginess, and they lacked the requisite lemony punch. The former problem was relatively easy to solve. While developing Greek Chicken and Rice Soup with Egg and Lemon (March/April 2017), I learned that the sulfur compounds in egg whites are

**SOUR NOTE**  
Cream of tartar enhances the tart taste of lemon bars.



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/apr18](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/apr18)

## TECHNIQUE

### PAT-IN-THE-PAN CRUST



Most lemon bar crust recipes call for using a food processor to cut cold butter into flour. Our stripped-down approach calls for simply stirring melted butter into a mixture of flour, sugar, and salt. The upshot: a no-fuss, pliable dough that's easy to press into an even layer.

the source of eggy flavor. Reducing the number of whites by three took care of any egginess, but it also left the filling runny. That's because the proteins in the egg whites were providing structure when they set. After some experimentation, I found that I could replace that protein with the starch in 2 tablespoons of flour. This would dull the lemon flavor, but I'd get to that next.

### Leaving a Sour Taste

As I'd known from the start, the flavor issue would be a challenge. Increasing the lemon juice was out of the question—I'd have to add even more flavor-dulling thickeners, which would defeat the purpose.

I took a step back to consider how flavor in lemon juice (and all foods) works: When you take a bite, you encounter taste with your tongue and aroma through a channel in the back of your mouth that leads directly to your nose. With lemon juice specifically, you taste only the tartness of its citric and malic acids on the tongue, while all the fruity, lemony flavors come from volatile compounds that shoot into that back door to your nasal passage when you exhale. So to add more lemon flavor without more lemon juice, I'd have to consider both taste and aroma.

### A Question of Proportions

After sampling unbalanced bars like the ones below, we experimented to find the ideal filling-to-crust ratio.



#### EQUAL—BUT BETTER?

In a 1:1 ratio, the buttery crust overwhelmed the lemony filling.

#### TOP-HEAVY

A superthick filling made the dessert seem more like a tart than a bar.



#### PROPER PROPORTIONS

The filling for our bars is twice as thick as the crust.

Incorporating lemony aroma would be easy: I could add lemon zest. Zest has even more volatile flavor chemicals than the juice, which is why it is so often added to foods to enhance lemony flavor. I found that 2 teaspoons of grated zest cooked into the filling (and later strained out) boosted its fruity flavor significantly. The trickier task was increasing that acidic punch in the filling without adding more liquid. What ingredient would help with that?

I flirted with the idea of purchasing powdered citric acid or grinding up vitamin C tablets (ascorbic acid). But then I realized I already had a truly sour-tasting powder in my pantry: cream of tartar. I whipped up two more batches of bars, one of which contained 2 teaspoons of cream of tartar. This was the magic ingredient: Tasters loved the bold sharpness of the bars containing cream of tartar, claiming they were unlike any others they'd tasted. And when they raved about the interplay of the tart, silky filling and the crisp, buttery crust, I knew I had a winner.

### BEST LEMON BARS

MAKES 12 BARS

Do not substitute bottled lemon juice for fresh here.

#### Crust

- 1 cup (5 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup (1 3/4 ounces) granulated sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

#### Filling

- 1 cup (7 ounces) granulated sugar
  - 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
  - 2 teaspoons cream of tartar
  - 1/4 teaspoon salt
  - 3 large eggs plus 3 large yolks
  - 2 teaspoons grated lemon zest plus 2/3 cup juice (4 lemons)
  - 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 8 pieces
- Confectioners' sugar (optional)

1. **FOR THE CRUST:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Make foil sling for 8-inch square baking pan by folding

## SCIENCE

### Lemon Flavor That Lingers

To make our bars more lemony without adding more liquid, which would require a flavor-muting thickener, we turned to the science of flavor.

When we chew, our brains register the five tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami) on the tongue and potentially a trillion aromas through a pathway in the back of the mouth that leads to the nasal passages. The dominant taste chemical in lemon juice, citric acid, is nonvolatile and registers only on the tongue. But lemon juice also contains a small amount of volatile compounds that give it subtle fruity-floral flavors as well.

With that in mind, we looked to lemon zest, which is full of the aromatic oils limonene, pinene, citral, neral, geranial, and linalool and would enhance the experience of lemon flavor in the nose. For a tangy boost from a nonliquid ingredient that would register on the tongue, we incorporated cream of tartar.

Together, these ingredients gave our lemon bars a complex lemony punch that was even better than if we'd added plain lemon juice.



THREE TART FLAVORS  
TASTE BETTER THAN ONE

2 long sheets of aluminum foil so each is 8 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.

2. Whisk flour, sugar, and salt together in bowl. Add melted butter and stir until combined. Transfer mixture to prepared pan and press into even layer over entire bottom of pan (do not wash bowl). Bake crust until dark golden brown, 19 to 24 minutes, rotating pan halfway through baking.

3. **FOR THE FILLING:** While crust bakes, whisk sugar, flour, cream of tartar, and salt together in now-empty bowl. Whisk in eggs and yolks until no streaks of egg remain. Whisk in lemon zest and juice. Transfer mixture to saucepan and cook over medium-low heat, stirring constantly, until mixture thickens and registers 160 degrees, 5 to 8 minutes. Off heat, stir in butter. Strain filling through fine-mesh strainer set over bowl.

4. Pour filling over hot crust and tilt pan to spread evenly. Bake until filling is set and barely jiggles when pan is shaken, 8 to 12 minutes. (Filling around perimeter of pan may be slightly raised.) Let bars cool completely, at least 1 1/2 hours. Using foil overhang, lift bars out of pan and transfer to cutting board. Cut into bars, wiping knife clean between cuts as necessary. Before serving, dust bars with confectioners' sugar, if using.

# Belgian Spice Cookies (Speculoos)

Passengers can't get enough of Delta Air Lines' in-flight snack of Biscoff, the commercial version of this Belgian confection. We took it to even greater heights.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

There is a story floating around the internet about a grandmother who gobbled up her grandson's cookies as he slept beside her during a long flight. The motive for the 30,000-foot crime? Biscoff, the signature onboard snack of Delta Air Lines. The tempting cookie dates to 1932, when a Belgian bakery started selling *speculoos*. Fifty years later, the bakery began manufacturing speculoos for Americans under the name "Biscoff" and its popularity soared (see "How Biscoff Took Off").

The enthusiasm is understandable: Speculoos boast warm spice notes, nuanced caramel flavor, and a crisp, open texture that crumbles easily (the term of art here is "friable"). Imagine something between a delicate graham cracker and a hard gingersnap that nearly melts in your mouth.

I wanted to use the one-of-a-kind texture of Biscoff as a model for homemade speculoos. I also intended to mimic their caramel taste and improve the spice flavor—one place I found the packaged version lacking.

## Speculoos Speculations

Speculoos recipes don't typically call for unusual ingredients or techniques: Simply cream sugar and softened butter in a stand mixer, add an egg (or not), and then mix in flour, spices, baking soda, and salt. Traditional recipes call for pressing the dough into shallow molds that serve the dual purpose of leaving a decorative imprint on the cookies and keeping them from spreading. I'd definitely be taking the more streamlined, modern route of simply rolling the dough thin so

### Get a Decorative Edge

The fluted pastry wheel that we use to give our *speculoos* a scalloped edge can also be used to cut fresh pasta or ravioli dough, lattice strips for pie, cracker dough, or dough for turnovers, empanadas, or other filled pastries.



FLUTED PASTRY WHEEL



Small amounts of cardamom and cloves boost the sweet spiciness of the 5 teaspoons of cinnamon in our *speculoos*.

the cookies could bake up dry and crisp.

None of the recipes I tried produced the right texture, so I set out to establish my own. Since the dough would be rolled thin, I wouldn't need a lot of volume, so I started with just 1½ cups of flour. Most speculoos recipes call for roughly half as much butter as flour by weight, and sure enough, this made the cookies appropriately crumbly; any more butter made them too fragile. I kept the sugar in check so as to avoid the slight oversweetness of packaged Biscoff, and this also got me closer to a friable texture. That's because sugar is hygroscopic, meaning that it holds on to water, which creates chewiness in cookies. In the end, I landed on 1½ cups of flour, 8 tablespoons of butter, just ¾ cup of brown sugar, and 1 egg, which bound the dough without adding a lot of extra moisture.

As for the leavener, I started with ¼ teaspoon of baking soda, which didn't do much to enhance the

crisp, open texture since it requires acid to react—and these cookies had only the slight acidity of brown sugar. Switching to baking powder successfully opened the internal structure (see "Producing the Distinctive Texture [and Taste] of Speculoos"). However, without the baking soda, the cookies lacked a certain savoriness, so I added it back in.

With the crumb of my speculoos just right, I investigated the sugar flavor. Most American speculoos recipes call for brown sugar, which is made by combining refined white sugar with molasses. But authentic speculoos are sweetened with Belgian brown sugar, which is made by adding caramelized sugar to refined white sugar, so it has a cleaner taste, with none of the bitterness of molasses. The one American speculoos recipe I found that acknowledged this difference was from Stella Parks, author of *BraveTart* (2017). She calls for toasting white sugar in the oven for 5 hours, which produced appealing, mild flavor but effort-wise was (quite literally) beyond the pale.

Turbinado sugar was a more efficient solution since it has the appropriate caramel-like notes (see "Sourcing Clean Caramel Flavor") straight from the bag. But turbinado crystals are larger than those of other sugars, so it gave the speculoos an underlying grittiness. My fix was to grind the turbinado in the food processor. With that, the cookies had the right honeycomb texture along with caramel undertones.

Now, how to nail the spice flavor? Speculoos recipes vary widely in their spice choices, but Biscoff contain only cinnamon. I followed that model, landing on a sizable 5 teaspoons. But something was missing. After some experimenting, I found

that 1 teaspoon of cardamom and ¼ teaspoon of cloves made the cinnamon sing with warmth and sweetness without calling attention to themselves.

## The Final Approach

To finish, I used a technique from our Easy Holiday Sugar Cookies recipe (November/December 2017): I rolled the just-mixed dough between sheets of parchment and then chilled it before cutting and baking. This was easier than having to either roll and cut a

Try *speculoos* crumbled onto yogurt, ice cream, or pudding or ground to make a cookie-crust pie crust.

## Producing the Distinctive Texture (and Taste) of Speculoos

In baking, the term “crumb” is used to describe the internal structure of bread or cake. But cookies have a crumb, too. To achieve the proper friable (crisp, airy) crumb in our *speculoos*, we roll the dough thin so it can dry and crisp in the oven. And since sugar is hygroscopic (meaning that it holds on to water and makes cookies chewy), we use only enough to lightly sweeten the dough. Finally, we add both baking powder and baking soda. Baking powder reacts first when it gets wet and again when it is heated: just ¼ teaspoon effectively puffed the dough, creating numerous big holes. Baking soda, on the other hand, provides lift when it reacts with acid. Our *speculoos* dough contains only a tiny bit of acid in the sugar, but it still made sense to include soda: It raised the dough’s pH to promote browning reactions and gave the cookies a subtle toasty/savory quality that we missed when we left it out.



CRISP, AIRY,  
CRUMBLY

soft dough straightaway or wait for a disk of dough to chill to a workable consistency. After rolling the dough thin— $\frac{3}{8}$  inch was just right—I copied Biscoff’s scalloped edges by using a fluted pastry wheel to cut it into rectangles. Finally, I gently baked the cookies in a 300-degree oven, which gave them ample time to thoroughly dry and crisp.

I had one more thought: Since I already had the food processor out to grind the turbinado, could I also use it to prepare the dough? Doing so would mean I wouldn’t need to wait for the butter to soften since the processor’s sharp blades can handle cold butter. To find out, I prepared the recipe in a stand mixer and in a food processor. Happily, the resulting cookies were identical; I would stick with the food processor.

With that, there was just one thing left to do: Step across the border to Holland, where *speculoos* are stamped with windmills and have almonds baked into the underside. I wasn’t about to carve miniature windmills, but it was easy to roll sliced almonds into the bottom of my dough. With or without nuts, one thing was for certain: These *speculoos* were top-flight.

### BELGIAN SPICE COOKIES (SPECULOOS)

MAKES 32 COOKIES

For the proper flavor, we strongly recommend using turbinado sugar (commonly sold as Sugar in the Raw). If you can’t find it, use  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup plus 2 tablespoons (6 ounces) of packed light brown sugar and skip the

## How Biscoff Took Off

In 1986, Lotus, a Belgian bakery, began selling *speculoos* under the name Biscoff (so-called because the biscuits, or cookies, pair well with coffee) to Delta Air Lines to offer to their passengers on flights. Today, Delta serves roughly 80 million individual packages of the cookies annually on domestic routes.



sugar grinding in step 2. In step 3, use a rolling pin and a combination of rolling and a smearing motion to form the rectangle. If the dough spreads beyond the rectangle, trim it and use the scraps to fill in the corners; then, replace the parchment and continue to roll. Do not use cookie molds or an embossed rolling pin for the *speculoos*; they will not hold decorations.

- 1½ cups (7½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 5 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- ¼ teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup (6 ounces) turbinado sugar
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled
- 1 large egg

1. Whisk flour, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together in bowl. Using pencil and ruler, draw 10 by 12-inch rectangle in center of each of 2 large sheets of parchment paper, crisscrossing lines at corners. (Use crisscrosses to help line up top and bottom sheets as dough is rolled.)

2. Process sugar in food processor for 30 seconds (some grains will be smaller than granulated sugar; others will be larger). Add butter and process until uniform mass forms and no large pieces of butter are visible, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add egg and process until smooth and paste-like, about 10 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add flour mixture and process until no dry flour remains but mixture remains crumbly, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

3. Transfer dough to bowl and knead gently with spatula until uniform and smooth, about 10 seconds. Place 1 piece of parchment on counter with pencil side facing down (you should be able to see rectangle through paper). Place dough in center of marked rectangle and press into 6 by 9-inch rectangle. Place second sheet of parchment over dough, with pencil side facing up, so dough is in center of marked rectangle. Using pencil marks as guide, use rolling pin and bench scraper to shape dough into 10 by 12-inch

rectangle of even  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch thickness. Transfer dough with parchment to rimmed baking sheet. Refrigerate until dough is firm, at least 1½ hours (or freeze for 30 minutes). (Rolled dough can be wrapped in plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 5 days.)

4. Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 300 degrees. Line 2 rimless baking sheets with parchment. Transfer chilled dough to counter. Gently peel off top layer of parchment from dough. Using fluted pastry wheel (or sharp knife or pizza cutter) and ruler, trim off rounded edges of dough that extend over marked edges of 10 by 12-inch rectangle. Cut dough lengthwise into 8 equal strips about 1¼ inches wide. Cut each strip crosswise into 4 equal pieces about 3 inches long. Transfer cookies to prepared sheets, spacing them at least ½ inch apart. Bake until cookies are lightly and evenly browned, 30 to 32 minutes, switching and rotating sheets halfway through baking. Let cookies cool completely on sheets, about 20 minutes. (Cookies can be stored at room temperature for up to 3 weeks.)

### BELGIAN SPICE COOKIES (SPECULOOS) WITH ALMONDS

Once dough has been rolled into rectangle in step 3, gently peel off top layer of parchment. Sprinkle ½ cup sliced almonds evenly over dough. Using rolling pin, gently press almonds into dough. Return parchment to dough, flip dough over, and transfer with parchment to sheet. Proceed with recipe as directed.

## Sourcing Clean Caramel Flavor

Authentic *speculoos* are made from Belgian brown sugar, a blend of refined white sugar and caramelized sugar. American brown sugar, which is typically made by mixing refined white sugar with molasses (the syrup left over when cane juice is boiled down to make sugar), is the usual substitute. The amount of molasses in brown sugar isn’t appropriate for *speculoos*. Instead, we call for turbinado sugar. It’s produced by evaporating sugar cane juice to leave behind sugar crystals containing a very small amount of molasses residue, which results in a clean, light caramel flavor.



BELGIAN BROWN SUGAR

TURBINADO SUGAR



### WATCH THE VIDEO

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/oct18](http://CooksIllustrated.com/oct18)

# DIY RECIPES

## Quick Pickled Turnips and Carrots with Lemon and Coriander

Crunchy, tangy pickled vegetables are a classic accompaniment to many Middle Eastern dishes, such as Falafel (page 49), hummus, and baba ghanoush, and make a great addition to a salad or cheese plate. Quickly toasting the spices to bring out their flavor and adding strips of lemon zest to the brine infuses these bright, crisp pickles with nuanced flavors. —Steve Dunn

### QUICK PICKLED TURNIPS AND CARROTS WITH LEMON AND CORIANDER

MAKES ABOUT 4 CUPS

To ensure that the turnips are tender, peel them thoroughly to remove not only the tough outer skin but also the fibrous layer of flesh just beneath.

- 1 teaspoon coriander seeds
- 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
- 1½ cups cider vinegar
- ¾ cup water
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 pound turnips, peeled and cut into ½ by ½ by 2-inch batons
- 1 red onion, halved and sliced thin
- 2 carrots, peeled and sliced thin on bias
- 4 (3-inch) strips lemon zest



1. Toast coriander seeds and mustard seeds in medium saucepan over medium heat, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add vinegar, water, sugar, pepper flakes, and salt and bring to boil, stirring to dissolve sugar and salt.
2. Remove saucepan from heat and add turnips, onion, carrots, and lemon zest, pressing to submerge vegetables. Cover and let cool completely, 30 minutes. (Cooled vegetables can be refrigerated for up to 1 week.)

## Quick Candied Nuts

This sweet-salty treat is great for gifts; as a crunchy topping for our Chocolate Semifreddo (page 95), ice cream, yogurt, or salad; as a coating for truffles; as an accompaniment to a cheese plate; or even just eaten out of hand. We toast the nuts, which brings out their flavor and aroma, and then toss them in a mixture of sugar and salt that's been dissolved in hot water. Baking the nuts until they are crisp and dry to the touch (no longer tacky) ensures that they'll be crunchy once completely cooled. —Annie Petito

### QUICK CANDIED NUTS

MAKES ½ CUP

We like this recipe prepared with shelled pistachios, walnuts, pecans, roasted cashews, salted or unsalted peanuts, and sliced almonds. If you want to make a mixed batch, cook the nuts individually and then toss to combine once you've chopped them.

- ½ cup nuts
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon hot water
- ⅛ teaspoon salt

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Spread nuts in single layer on rimmed baking sheet and toast until fragrant and slightly darkened, 8 to 12 minutes, shaking sheet halfway through toasting. Transfer nuts to plate and let cool for 10 to 15 minutes.



2. Line now-empty sheet with parchment paper. Whisk sugar, hot water, and salt in large bowl until sugar is mostly dissolved. Add nuts and stir to coat. Spread nuts on prepared sheet in single layer and bake until nuts are crisp and dry, 10 to 12 minutes.
3. Transfer sheet to wire rack and let nuts cool completely, about 20 minutes. Transfer nuts to cutting board and chop as desired. (Nuts can be stored at room temperature for up to 1 week.)

## Harissa

Harissa is a potent paste used both as an ingredient and as a condiment in North African cooking. The backbone of harissa—chiles—can vary greatly from recipe to recipe. For a condiment that we could make on the fly, we chose a mix of ground dried chiles. Paprika gave the paste a mild, sweet flavor, and Aleppo pepper added a complex fruity flavor with a more slowly building heat than that of ordinary red pepper flakes. To the ground chiles we added plenty of garlic and olive oil as well as aromatic spices including coriander, cumin, and anise-like caraway seeds. A dollop of this bright, spicy paste can enliven vegetables, eggs, lamb, and soups such as our Moroccan Lentil and Chickpea Soup (Harira) (page 53). —Anne Wolf

### HARISSA

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

If you can't find Aleppo pepper, you can substitute ¾ teaspoon of paprika and ¾ teaspoon of finely chopped red pepper flakes.

- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 1 tablespoon ground coriander
- 1 tablespoon ground dried Aleppo pepper
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ¾ teaspoon caraway seeds
- ½ teaspoon salt

Combine all ingredients in bowl and microwave until bubbling and very fragrant, about 1 minute, stirring halfway through microwaving; let cool completely. (Harissa can be refrigerated for up to 4 days.)





## Cultured Butter

With the help of friendly bacteria, you can make rich, tangy butter that's a lot more interesting than store-bought sticks. All it takes is cream, starter culture, and time. You'll also get buttermilk to add to your biscuits and pancakes.

—Paul Adams

### CULTURED BUTTER

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS BUTTER  
AND ABOUT 2 CUPS BUTTERMILK

We prefer the flavor of butter made with pasteurized cream as opposed to ultrapasteurized cream. The ideal temperature range for churning butter is 55 to 60 degrees; colder and the fat is too firm and will stick to the sides of the food processor bowl; warmer and the fat is liquid instead of solid, leading to greasy butter. In step 2, chill the cream in the refrigerator or over an ice bath. For the most complex tangy flavor, we recommend aging the cream for a week. At that point the cream may smell quite pungent, but most of what you smell resides in the liquid that gets separated out, leaving the butter surprisingly mellow. This recipe requires cheesecloth.

- 4 cups heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons buttermilk
- ¼ teaspoon salt (optional)

1. Combine cream and buttermilk in clean lidded container. Cover container and let sit at room temperature until mixture smells tangy and buttery and thickens to sour cream–like consistency, at least 24 hours or up to 1 week.

2. Chill cream mixture to 55 to 60 degrees.

3. Process cream mixture in food processor until mixture turns from grainy whipped cream to lumps of butter splashing in liquid, 1 to 3 minutes. Stop processor immediately.

4. Fill medium bowl halfway with ice and water. Line fine-mesh strainer with triple layer of cheesecloth, leaving few inches of cloth hanging over sides of strainer, and set over a large bowl. Drain butter mixture in prepared strainer (buttermilk will collect in bowl). Lift cheesecloth by edges and twist and squeeze tightly over strainer to press out more buttermilk (stop when butter starts to squeeze through cheesecloth). Transfer cheesecloth-wrapped butter to ice bath until firm around exterior, about 2 minutes. Transfer buttermilk to airtight container.

5. Remove butter from cheesecloth and transfer to now-empty bowl. Stir and press with wooden spoon (metal utensil will conduct heat from your hands and make butter soft) to force out additional buttermilk from butter, 1 to 2 minutes. Drain buttermilk from bowl, add to buttermilk container, and refrigerate until ready to use. Knead salt, if using, into butter with wooden spoon. Transfer butter to second airtight container and refrigerate until ready to use. (Butter can be refrigerated for up to 2 months.)

## Tart Pomegranate Molasses

Pomegranate molasses is a pantry staple throughout the eastern portion of the Mediterranean region. Made by reducing pomegranate juice, this sticky syrup layers astringent, floral, and faintly bitter notes over a sweet-tart, fruity flavor profile. Pomegranate molasses can be whisked into vinaigrettes, drizzled over vegetables, brushed onto roasted meats, or pureed into dips. Many recipes call for boiling pomegranate juice and a generous amount of sugar (and sometimes lemon juice) in a saucepan. We found that syrups prepared that way tasted too jam-like

and required at least 20 minutes of cooking. We use only a small amount of sugar and no lemon juice for our version. To speed up evaporation, we use a 12-inch skillet, which offers more surface area.

—Lan Lam

### TART POMEGRANATE MOLASSES

MAKES ½ CUP

Reducing the pomegranate juice at a simmer, rather than at a boil, drives off fewer flavor compounds and results in fresher, more complex flavor.

- 2 cups pomegranate juice
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- Pinch salt

1. Bring pomegranate juice, sugar, and salt to simmer in 12-inch skillet over high heat. Reduce heat to low and simmer, stirring and scraping thickened juice from sides of skillet occasionally, until mixture is thick and syrupy and measures ½ cup, 12 to 15 minutes.

2. Let mixture cool slightly before transferring to container. (Pomegranate molasses can be refrigerated in airtight container for up to 1 month.)

## Plantain Chips

Plantain chips are expensive and are not always easy to find in supermarkets, but they are a snap to make at home using our method. Slicing the plantains thinly and evenly ensures that they cook up crispy without burning, so we highly recommend using a mandoline for this recipe. Frying the plantains at a relatively gentle 325 degrees lets the interiors of the chips cook through before the exteriors begin to brown, so they are crispy inside and out. Enjoy these plantain chips out of hand or serve them alongside salsas or guacamole. We also suggest serving them alongside our Peruvian Fish Ceviche with Radishes and Orange (page 43), along with popcorn and corn nuts.

—Andrew Janjigian

### PLANTAIN CHIPS

SERVES 4

Be sure to use plantains that are as unripe as possible. (Unripe plantains are dark green.) To peel plantains, trim ½ inch from each end to expose the flesh and then use a paring knife to cut lengthwise through the skin. Use a spoon to peel back the skin along the cut and remove it. We prefer to slice the plantains using a mandoline, but they can be sliced using a sharp knife; just be sure to slice them precisely and evenly. Add the plantain slices to the oil a few at a time to prevent them from sticking together.



- 4 cups vegetable oil
- 3 unripe plantains, peeled and sliced on bias 1/16 inch thick
- Kosher salt

1. Line rimmed baking sheet with double layer of paper towels. Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat to 325 degrees.

2. Carefully add one-third of plantains and cook, stirring with slotted spoon or spider skimmer, until light golden brown, 5 to 7 minutes, adjusting burner, if necessary, to maintain oil temperature between 300 and 325 degrees. Using slotted spoon or spider skimmer, transfer chips to prepared sheet and season lightly with salt.

3. Return oil to 325 degrees and repeat with remaining plantains in 2 batches. (Cooled chips can be stored at room temperature for up to 1 week.)

# INDEX

## Cook's Illustrated 2018 Annual

### BEEF AND PORK

Beef Top Loin Roast with Potatoes 3  
Beijing-Style Meat Sauce and Noodles (Zha Jiang Mian) 23  
Braised New Mexico-Style Pork in Red Chile Sauce (Carne Adovada) 21  
Chinese-Style Barbecued Spareribs 13  
Crispy Tacos (Tacos Dorados) 9  
Deviled Pork Chops 17  
Grilled Mojo-Marinaded Skirt Steak 7  
Ground Beef and Cheese Enchiladas 5  
Japanese Grilled Steak and Scallion Rolls (Negimaki) 11  
Perfect Pan-Seared Pork Tenderloin Steaks 14  
Sous Vide Pork Tenderloin Steaks 15  
Vietnamese Grilled Pork Patties with Rice Noodles and Salad (Bun Cha) 19

### POULTRY

Best Grilled Chicken Thighs 29  
Chicken Caesar Salad 37  
Chicken Piccata 22  
Chicken Vesuvio 35  
Indoor Pulled Chicken 31  
Kung Pao Chicken 33  
Perfect Poached Chicken for Salad 37  
Roast Chicken with Warm Bread Salad 27  
Sichuan-Style Chicken Salad (Bang Bang Ji Si) 37  
Thai-Style Chicken Salad with Mango 37  
Three-Cup Chicken 25  
Turkey and Gravy for a Crowd 38

### SEAFOOD

Pan-Seared Swordfish Steaks 45  
Peruvian Fish Ceviche with Radishes and Orange 43  
Roasted Whole Side of Salmon 41

### VEGETARIAN ENTRÉES

Falafel 49  
White Bean and Mushroom Gratin 50

### PIZZA, PASTA, AND RICE

One-Hour Pizza 47  
Pasta alla Gricia (Rigatoni with Pancetta and Pecorino Romano) 52  
Red Wine Risotto with Beans (Paniscia) 51

### SOUPS AND STEW

Brazilian Shrimp and Fish Stew (Moqueca) 55  
Grilled Tomato Gazpacho 61  
Moroccan Lentil and Chickpea Soup (Harira) 53

### SIDE DISHES

Barley with Lemon and Herbs 62  
with Celery and Miso Dressing 62  
with Fennel, Dried Apricots, and Orange 62  
Buttery Spring Vegetables 58  
Caramel-Braised Shallots with Black Pepper 93  
Chinese Restaurant-Style Rice 25  
Chopped Carrot Salad with Mint, Pistachios, and Pomegranate Seeds 67  
with Celery and Raisins 67  
with Fennel, Orange, and Hazelnuts 67  
with Radishes and Sesame Seeds 67  
Grilled Tomatoes 61  
Italian Pasta Salad 63  
Marinated Grilled Tomatoes with Fresh Mozzarella 61  
Mexican Corn Salad (Esquites) 64  
Pan-Steamed Broccoli with Shallot 59  
with Ginger 59  
Roasted Delicata Squash 66  
Skillet-Charred Green Beans 65  
with Crispy Bread-Crumb Topping 65  
Thick-Cut Oven Fries 57

### BREAKFAST AND BREAD

Chewy Granola Bars with Walnuts and Cranberries 89  
Nut-Free 89  
with Hazelnuts, Cherries, and Cacao Nibs 89  
Coffee Cake with Pecan-Cinnamon Streusel 85  
Creamy French-Style Scrambled Eggs 90  
Easy Pancakes 87  
Gougères 83  
with Aged Gouda and Smoked Paprika 83  
with Manchego and Black Pepper 83  
Irish Brown Soda Bread 79  
Pita Bread 81

### DESSERTS

All-Purpose Caramel Sauce 93  
Amaretto Whipped Cream 105  
Belgian Spice Cookies (Speculoos) 109  
with Almonds 109  
Best Lemon Bars 107  
Cherry Sauce 95  
Chocolate Cream Pie 101  
Chocolate Semifreddo 95  
Dark Chocolate Fudge Sauce 91  
—Orange 91  
Foolproof All-Butter Dough for Double-Crust Pie 100  
Foolproof All-Butter Dough for Single-Crust Pie 101  
Mango, Kiwi, and Blueberry Topping 98  
Orange, Cranberry, and Mint Topping 98  
Orange Whipped Cream 105

Pavlova with Fruit and Whipped Cream 97  
Individual 98  
Peach Tarte Tatin 103  
Spicy Caramel Popcorn 93  
Torta Caprese 105

### BEVERAGE

Michelada (Mexican Beer and Lime Cocktail) 9

### SAUCES, DRESSINGS, AND ACCOMPANIMENTS

Amatriciana 71  
Applesauce 77  
Dessert-Worthy, with Brown Sugar and Rum 77  
Savory, with Beets and Horseradish 77  
Arugula and Almond Pesto 41  
Basque-Style Herb Sauce (Tximitxurri) 66  
Caper-Currant Relish 45  
Classic Basil Pesto 70  
Creamless Creamy Herb Dressing 73  
Ginger-Miso 73  
Green Goddess 73  
Roasted Red Pepper and Tahini 73  
Russian 73  
Cucumber-Ginger Relish 41  
Cultured Butter 111  
Fresh Tomato Sauce 69  
Garlic and Oil Sauce (Aglio e Olio) 71  
Ginger-Molasses Butter 87  
Gochujang Paste 29  
Grilled Tomato Salsa 61  
Harissa 110  
Lexington Vinegar Barbecue Sauce 31  
Mustard-Tarragon Paste 29  
Orange-Almond Butter 87  
Our Favorite Turkey Gravy 75  
Alcohol-Free 75  
Gluten-Free 75  
Plantain Chips 111  
Puttanesca 70  
Quick Candied Nuts 110  
Quick Pickled Turnips and Carrots with Lemon and Coriander 110  
Quick Tomato Sauce 70  
Scallion-Ginger Relish 14  
Simple Italian-Style Meat Sauce 71  
South Carolina Mustard Barbecue Sauce 31  
Spicy Dried Mint-Garlic Sauce 45  
Spicy Honey 66  
Sweet and Tangy Barbecue Sauce 31  
Tart Pomegranate Molasses 111  
Tomato-Chile Sauce 49

## Chocolate

Inside the football-shaped **CACAO POD** harvested from the tropical evergreen tree (*Theobroma cacao*) sit **CACAO BEANS**, which are fermented, dried, roasted, and cracked to produce **CACAO NIBS**, a crunchy addition to baked goods or granola. When ground and pressed, the nibs are transformed into a paste of chocolate liquor. This paste is further processed to separate the fat, **COCOA BUTTER**, from the solids, which are dried and ground into **COCOA POWDER**. Chocolate liquor and cocoa solids are the building blocks of **BAR CHOCOLATE**, which is sold either unsweetened or sweetened. **CHOCOLATE CHIPS** can be shaped like disks or morsels. Manufactured specifically as coating chocolate, **COUVERTURE WAFERS** contain extra cocoa butter; when melted and set, they produce a particularly shiny, snappy layer. **MEXICAN DRINKING CHOCOLATE**, with rich traditions dating back to Mesoamerica, is often stone-ground and gritty.



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  - Videos for recipes, techniques, and more
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One-Hour Pizza, 47



Roasted Delicata Squash, 66



Chocolate Semifreddo, 95



Vietnamese Grilled Pork Patties with Rice Noodles and Salad (Bun Cha), 19



Peruvian Fish Ceviche with Radishes and Orange, 43



Japanese Grilled Steak and Scallion Rolls (Negimaki), 11



Beef Top Loin Roast with Potatoes, 3



Creamless Creamy Green Goddess Dressing, 73



Chicken Piccata, 22



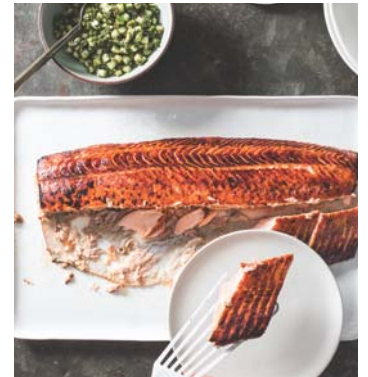
Chocolate Cream Pie, 101

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Roasted Whole Side of Salmon, 41



Gougères, 83

Cocoa Butter



Chocolate Chips



Cocoa Powder



Cacao Pod



Couverture Wafers



Bar Chocolate



Cacao Beans



Mexican Drinking Chocolate



Cacao Nibs

# CHOCOLATE