SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

COOK'S ILLUSTRATED

2017 ANNUAL

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

PLUS
THE YEAR'S BEST
PRODUCTS
AND **TOOLS**

Olive Oil Cake

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Cook's Illustrated 2017 Annual

AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN
RECIPES THAT WORK®

America's Test Kitchen is a very real kitchen located in Boston. It is the home of *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country* magazines and is the workday destination of more than 60 test cooks, editors, and cookware specialists. Our mission is to test recipes over and over again until we understand how and why they work and until we arrive at the best version. We also test kitchen equipment and supermarket ingredients in search of products that offer the best value and performance. You can watch us work by tuning in to *America's Test Kitchen* (AmericasTestKitchen.com) on public television.

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COOK WITH CONFIDENCE: ALL OUR RECIPES FROM 2017

This limited edition of *Cook's Illustrated* showcases all the recipes published in the magazine throughout this year—more than 100 in all—in one convenient issue. Every recipe is accompanied by its background story, a record of the months of extensive trial and error behind its development. This is what sets *Cook's Illustrated* apart from other cooking magazines: We focus on every detail of how and why recipes work, and then we share what we've learned with you so you can become a better, more confident cook.

In 2017 we discovered new and better ways to prepare your favorite foods, such as breaded chicken cutlets, macaroni and cheese, and guacamole. For our Crispy Pan-Fried Chicken Cutlets (page 19), we swapped out the usual homemade bread crumbs in favor of drier, crunchier panko, and we streamlined the breading process by ditching the flour. Our Simple Stovetop Macaroni and Cheese (page 43) takes only 20 minutes from start to finish. To avoid the extra step of draining the macaroni, we cook the pasta directly in the liquid that will become the base of the sauce. In place of a béchamel, we rely on American cheese to emulsify the sauce and keep it smooth, and we add extra-sharp cheddar for flavor. For our Classic Guacamole (page 75), we skipped the traditional *molcajete*, which not all cooks have on hand, for crushing the aromatics and instead used kosher salt and a cutting board for similar results. Then we turned to a whisk to mix and mash the avocado into the aromatics, creating a creamy but still chunky dip.

As we look back over the year's work in the test kitchen, some recipes inevitably stand out because of a particular problem they solved or because the end result just tasted so good. Take our Beef Short Rib Ragu (page 3). In search of a sauce as satisfying as Sunday gravy but without the time commitment, we turned to boneless beef short ribs and paired them with porcini mushrooms, tomato paste, and anchovies for a relatively quick sauce that tasted as though it had taken all day to make. And while we already have a reliable weeknight roast chicken recipe in our repertoire, we wanted to see if we could speed things up even more and get a whole chicken on the table in 1 hour. After much experimentation, we found that starting a butterflied chicken in a cold skillet and cranking up the broiler were the keys to our One-Hour Broiled Chicken and Pan Sauce (page 21).

These are only a handful of the foolproof, kitchen-tested recipes included in the *Cook's Illustrated 2017 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.

Our best to you,
The Editors of *Cook's Illustrated*

Welcome to America's Test Kitchen

This magazine has been created by the folks at America's Test Kitchen, a very real kitchen located in Boston. It is the home of *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country* magazines and is the Monday-through-Friday destination of more than 60 test cooks, editors, food scientists, tasters, and cookware specialists. Our mission is to test recipes over and over again until we understand how and why they work and until we arrive at the best version. As we like to say in the test kitchen, "We make the mistakes so you don't have to."

None of this would be possible without a belief that good cooking, much like good music, is indeed based on a foundation of objective technique. Some people like spicy foods and others don't, but there is a right way to sauté, and there are measurable scientific principles involved in producing perfectly beaten, stable egg whites. This is our ultimate goal: to investigate the fundamental principles of cooking so that you become a better cook. It is as simple as that.

You can watch us work (in our actual test kitchen) by tuning in to *America's Test Kitchen* (AmericasTestKitchen.com) on public television.

You can subscribe to *Cook's Illustrated* magazine at CooksIllustrated.com and *Cook's Country* magazine at CooksCountry.com.

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Simple Beef Ragu

A typical Sunday gravy is an all-day affair and calls for multiple meats. We wanted a rich sauce using one cut of beef—in about 2 hours.

BY STEVE DUNN

I have fond memories of my Italian *nonna*'s hearty meat ragu, or Sunday gravy. Made with sausages, meatballs, and braciole and served over a heaping pile of pasta, it was the backbone of a feast that fed a crowd—and it took her all day to prepare. With fall's cool, crisp arrival, I usually look forward to making a big batch, but this year I wondered if there wasn't an easier alternative. There are numerous versions of ragu from all over Italy, and some research turned up a particularly interesting version relying on just one type of meat: beef short ribs. Certainly they're a great cut, well marbled and flavorful, but I wondered if they alone could make a sauce as satisfyingly meaty as a traditional Sunday gravy.

Many of the recipes called for browning the short ribs and then braising them for 3 to 5 hours (relatively quick, compared with the all-day approach). The most involved recipe was indeed delicious, but it took even more work than my nonna's, so I left it behind. Simpler versions were mostly thin in body and flavor. However, a subset of this category, *ragù di manzo e funghi porcini* (beef ragu with porcini mushrooms), caught my attention and eventually became my point of departure. The version I tried was a bit lackluster and tasted more of woodsy porcini than of short ribs, but I felt that with a little work I could transform it into a luscious, rich, and deeply beefy sauce in just a couple of hours.

Our favorite way to serve this hearty ragu is over creamy polenta, but it also makes a great sauce for pasta.

Meat of the Matter

Although some recipes called for bone-in short ribs, I quickly settled on boneless short ribs, which are less expensive and have more meat. Confusingly, they are not actually bone-in ribs without the bone (for more information, see "When a Rib Is Not a Rib"). I browned the meat and set it aside, sautéed an array of aromatics, and then returned the short ribs to the pot along with a can of whole tomatoes I had chopped (canned diced tomatoes were too firm and didn't break down during cooking), a sprig of fresh rosemary, and some dried porcini mushrooms I'd rehydrated in beef broth. I set the pot to braise over a low flame and checked the meat periodically for doneness. The good news: The beef became silky and tender enough for me to shred and stir back into the sauce in just 2 hours. However, the ragu wasn't without problems. Despite my having turned down the flame here and there, the sauce at the bottom of the pot scorched over the direct heat. But, I thought, switching to oven braising would easily fix that.

> "... we did a side-by-side taste test of ragus prepared with and without anchovies and found that the minced fillets made a marked difference in the dish's savoriness ..."

The other problem presented more of a challenge: The sauce seemed to struggle to highlight the beef's savory quality. This lack of depth was probably at least partly due to the relatively short cooking time. Having too many competing flavors in the pot surely wasn't helping either, so I eliminated ingredients: Carrots, celery, and rosemary all got the ax. After browning the beef, I simply sautéed onion and garlic and then added the mushrooms, their rehydrating liquid, and the tomatoes, along with some dry red wine for acidity. Sure enough, as the sauce became focused on a few key ingredients, more beefiness came to the fore.

But the dish tasted a little too earthy from the porcini. I was hesitant to cut back on the mushrooms since I wanted their presence to be noticeable; I just needed the beef flavor to be equally prominent. To balance things out, I turned to two powerhouses: tomato paste and minced anchovies. Just 1 tablespoon of the former and 3 fillets of the latter did the trick, bringing deep meaty flavor to the ragu. That's because both ingredients are rich in umami-boosting glutamates. For the skeptics in the group, we did a side-by-side taste test of ragus prepared with and without anchovies and found that the minced fillets made a marked difference in the dish's savoriness—they added roundness and depth of flavor with nary a trace of fishiness.

As planned, I also switched to braising the ragu in the oven, covered, rather than on the stovetop, which eliminated the scorching issue. The sauce wasn't getting as thick as I wanted, though, so I removed the lid halfway through braising to allow it to thicken via evaporation. This move also prompted the meat sitting above the surface of the liquid to brown, enhancing its beefy taste. In fact, it worked so well that I eliminated the step of browning the meat prior to braising. I saved about 20 minutes of cooking time and my stovetop was splatter-free—a win-win scenario.

Spice Trade

Finally, many of the ragu di manzo recipes I found called for a touch of warm spices, a nod to the importance of the spice route that passed through Italy from the 15th to the 17th century and introduced Europe to Asian flavors. I wanted to maintain this tradition in my dish, so as a final tweak I played with sprinkling in various amounts of cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg. The spices worked beautifully, adding subtle background notes that underscored the taste

View the Ragu
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/oct17

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

TECHNIQUE

SHREDDING SHORT RIBS

The ultratender meat is easy to shred so that it can be fully coated with sauce. Using two forks, pull the beef into bite-size pieces, discarding any large pieces of fat or connective tissue.

of the beef and mushrooms. It occurred to me that I could trade in the separate spices for a single blend: five-spice powder. Just ½ teaspoon of this mix of cinnamon, cloves, fennel, white pepper, and star anise contributed sweet and warm flavors without being identifiably Asian. My colleagues applauded the deeply beefy flavor and velvety texture of my ragu. And I think that my nonna would also approve.

BEEF SHORT RIB RAGU

MAKES 5 CUPS; ENOUGH FOR 1 POUND PASTA

If you can't find boneless short ribs, don't substitute bone-in short ribs. Instead, use a 2½-pound chuck-eye roast, trimmed and cut into 1-inch chunks. This recipe yields enough to sauce 1 pound of pasta or a batch of Creamy Parmesan Polenta (our favorite way to serve it). This recipe can be doubled, and the sauce can be frozen. Better Than Bouillon Roasted Beef Base is our taste test winner.

- 1½ cups beef broth
- ½ ounce dried porcini mushrooms, rinsed
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 3 anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- ½ teaspoon five-spice powder
- ½ cup dry red wine
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained with juice reserved, chopped fine
- 2 pounds boneless beef short ribs, trimmed
- Salt and pepper

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Microwave ½ cup broth and mushrooms in covered bowl until steaming, about 1 minute. Let sit until softened, about 5 minutes. Drain mushrooms in fine-mesh strainer lined with coffee filter, pressing to extract all liquid; reserve liquid and chop mushrooms fine.

SHOPPING

When a Rib Is Not a Rib

Flavorful, easy-to-prep boneless short ribs aren't actually cut from the rib section of the cow, as their name implies. They are cut from the chuck, or shoulder, of the animal. For that reason, chuck roast is the best substitute when boneless short ribs are unavailable. Purveyors can get away with this nomenclature because, as Boston-area butcher Joe Kinnealey explained, a boneless short rib "is actually the same muscle (*serratus ventralis*) as a true short rib . . . [however,] the muscle changes in texture as it gets up into the shoulder."

Why not just buy a less expensive chuck roast and cut it into chunks? When we purchased near-equal weights of boneless short ribs and chuck roast and then trimmed both, the former took half as much time to trim and the difference in cost of edible trimmed meat per pound didn't even add up to $0.50. We'll spend the extra pocket change and save time.

And what about bone-in short ribs? We don't recommend them as a substitute for boneless short ribs. They are cut from a different part of the cow—the plate, or front belly—and they cost significantly more per edible pound.

BONELESS SHORT RIBS
Cut from the chuck, or shoulder, these "ribs" are basically butchered and trimmed chuck roast.

NEXT BEST CHOICE
Chuck roast provides the same flavor and texture but requires more prep.

ENTIRELY DIFFERENT
Bone-in short ribs come from the plate, or front belly, and are much fattier.

2. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add tomato paste, anchovies, and five-spice powder and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture has darkened and fond forms on pot bottom, 3 to 4 minutes. Add wine, increase heat to medium-high, and bring to simmer, scraping up any browned bits. Continue to cook, stirring frequently, until wine is reduced and pot is almost dry, 2 to 4 minutes. Add tomatoes and reserved juice, remaining 1 cup broth, reserved mushroom soaking liquid, and mushrooms and bring to simmer.

3. Toss beef with ¾ teaspoon salt and season with pepper. Add beef to pot, cover, and transfer to oven. Cook for 1 hour.

4. Uncover and continue to cook until beef is tender, 1 to 1¼ hours longer.

5. Remove pot from oven; using slotted spoon, transfer beef to cutting board and let cool for 5 minutes. Using 2 forks, shred beef into bite-size pieces, discarding any large pieces of fat or connective tissue. Using large spoon, skim off any excess fat that has risen to surface of sauce. Return beef to sauce and season with salt and pepper to taste. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 3 days or frozen for up to 2 months.)

CREAMY PARMESAN POLENTA

SERVES 6 TO 8

Coarse-ground degerminated cornmeal such as yellow grits (with grains the size of couscous) works best in this recipe. Avoid instant and quick-cooking products, as well as whole-grain, stone-ground, and regular cornmeal. Do not omit the baking soda—it reduces the cooking time and makes for a creamier polenta. The polenta should do little more than release wisps of steam. If it bubbles or sputters even slightly after the first 10 minutes, the heat is too high and you may need a flame tamer, available at most kitchen supply stores.

- 7½ cups water
- Salt and pepper
- Pinch baking soda
- 1½ cups coarse-ground cornmeal
- 4 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (2 cups), plus extra for serving
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1. Bring water to boil in heavy-bottomed large saucepan over medium-high heat. Stir in 1½ teaspoons salt and baking soda. Slowly pour cornmeal into water in steady stream while stirring back and forth with wooden spoon or rubber spatula. Bring mixture to boil, stirring constantly, about 1 minute. Reduce heat to lowest possible setting and cover saucepan.

2. After 5 minutes, whisk polenta to smooth out any lumps that may have formed, about 15 seconds. (Make sure to scrape down sides and bottom of saucepan.) Cover and continue to cook, without stirring, until grains of polenta are tender but slightly al dente, about 25 minutes longer. (Polenta should be loose and barely hold its shape but will continue to thicken as it cools.)

3. Off heat, stir in Parmesan and butter and season with pepper to taste. Let polenta stand, covered, for 5 minutes. Serve, passing extra Parmesan separately.

Smoked Steak

Adding a packet of wood chips to the grill can take an inexpensive steak to the next level. But there's a fine line between perfection and going up in smoke.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

I've always wondered why there isn't a tradition of smoking more cuts of beef. We smoke chicken, turkey, pork, and many kinds of fish, but when it comes to beef, not so much. Sure, there are some notable exceptions, such as Texas-style barbecued ribs and brisket. But why don't we smoke quicker-cooking cuts; for example, steak?

It turns out I'm not the only one to have this thought, as I was able to rustle up a few recipes for smoked steaks. While most called for rib eye or porterhouse, I was more intrigued by those calling for flat-iron steak, a cut we haven't used much in the test kitchen. It's a beefy-tasting steak from the shoulder that's decently marbled and tender and also has the advantage of being relatively inexpensive. Its only drawback is that it can have a slightly mineral flavor. To my mind, that made it a perfect candidate for smoking, as the smoke would camouflage any overly metallic notes and give the steak even more dimension. Since blade steaks are cut from the same part of the cow (see "Two Great—and Inexpensive—Steaks to Try"), I'd make sure my recipe also worked with them for those who can't find flat iron.

A little smoke, an herb-spice rub, and lemons grilled and served alongside add impressive flavor to these inexpensive steaks.

Most recipes I found for smoked steak, no matter the cut, took a similar approach, essentially treating the steaks like slow-cooked barbecue. They called for setting up the grill with a hotter and a cooler side by arranging the coals over half the grill and putting an aluminum foil packet of soaked wood chips on the coals. They cooked the steak covered (to trap smoke and direct its flow over the meat) on the cooler side of the grill until it neared its target temperature and then moved it to the hotter side, directly over the coals, to give it a good char on the exterior.

I gave this approach a try and immediately hit two snags: First, cooked to the typical medium-rare, the steak was still chewy. It turns out that flat-iron steak needs to be cooked to medium for the muscle fibers to shrink and loosen enough to be tender. Second, tasters were unanimous that the smoke flavor was overwhelming. I realized that while collagen-rich barbecue cuts (such as brisket) that are cooked far beyond well-done benefit from lots of smoke flavor to give them more complexity, steaks cooked to medium-rare or even medium have a more nuanced flavor that is easily lost with too much smoke.

Over the next few tests, I dialed back the smoke, eventually cutting the amount of wood chips to just 1 cup. Since we've found that wood chips can pack very differently depending on their shape and size, I switched to using a set weight (2½ ounces) to better control the amount of smoke. I also raised the grill's temperature by adding more coals so that the steaks would cook through more quickly, thus lessening their exposure to the smoke; they cooked in about 12 minutes per side. And yet, even with these changes, they were too smoky.

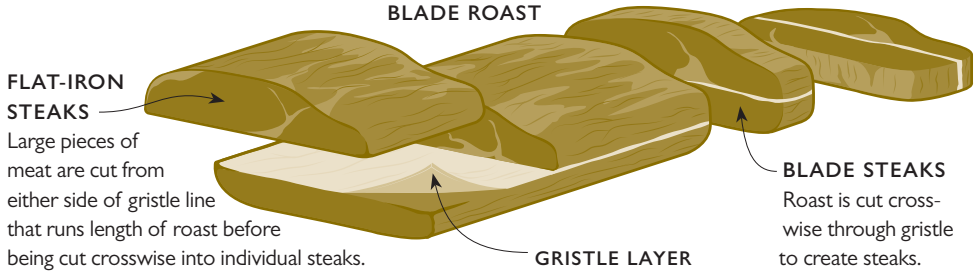
Suddenly, the answer seemed obvious. I shouldn't be following the lead of all those recipes by cooking the steaks over indirect heat like barbecue. I should be cooking them how we normally cook steaks—quickly, over direct heat—but with smoke.

With that in mind, I dusted another batch of steaks with salt and let them sit for an hour to ensure that the seasoning penetrated below the surface. In the meantime, I set up the grill. I used a full chimney of charcoal, spreading the coals evenly across half the grill as before. But this time, I topped them off with a packet of wood chips I hadn't soaked. Soaking the chips

See Andrew Smoke
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/aug17

Two Great—and Inexpensive—Steaks to Try

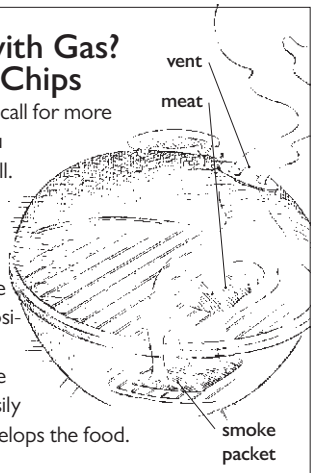
Named for their anvil-like shape, flat-iron steaks are cut from the blade roast at the top of the cow's shoulder. Once available mainly in restaurants, they have become more popular and thus more widely available in supermarkets. Flat iron is an affordable cut with a beefy flavor and tenderness comparable to that of steaks cut from the prime rib roast. If you can't find flat iron, blade steak is a great alternative. It comes from the same larger cut, the blade roast. Its only downside is a line of gristle down the middle, which flat iron is cut to avoid.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Smoking with Gas? Use More Chips

In this recipe, we call for more wood chips if you are using a gas grill. Here's why.



Charcoal Grill: Because the single lid vent can be positioned directly over the food, the smoke can be easily directed so it envelops the food.

Gas Grill: Because the vent is positioned at the back of the grill, smoke doesn't fully surround the food. Also, the cookboxes on most gas grills aren't tight-fitting, so drafts can interfere with smoke flow. This makes a big difference since the steaks' cooking time is so brief. Adding more chips to the packet ensures that the steaks are exposed to enough smoke.

serves only to delay the onset of smoking; now that I would be grilling for such a short period, I needed the chips to begin smoking right away. I dropped the steaks onto the grate and cooked them directly over the coals, covered, until they reached the 130-degree target for medium (our preferred doneness for flat-iron steaks), which took just 5 minutes per side.

These steaks were just what I wanted: juicy and kissed with a hint of smoke that enhanced rather than overwhelmed. To complement the smoke flavor, I put together a dry rub featuring thyme, rosemary, fennel seeds, black peppercorns, and red pepper flakes to apply to the steaks just before grilling. For some tempered brightness, I grilled lemon wedges alongside the steaks to serve with them. When I tried swapping in blade steaks, they worked perfectly (folks just had to cut around the line of gristle that runs down the middle).

Now my recipe was perfect on a charcoal grill, but what about gas? Gas grills are less efficient at smoking foods than charcoal grills since they aren't as tightly sealed and don't have vents that can be positioned and adjusted to help draw smoke over the meat. In order to give the steaks comparable exposure to smoke in such a short amount of time, I found that it was necessary to increase the amount of chips to 1½ cups.

Whether I used flat-iron or blade steak, I knew I'd deliver an impressive steak dinner.

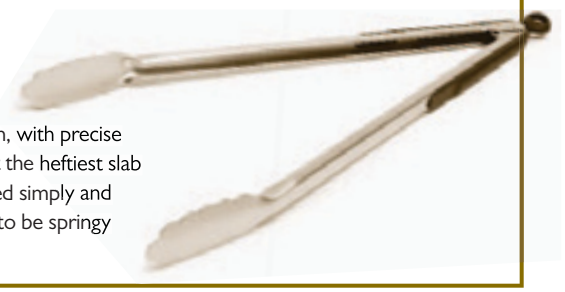
ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

TESTING Grill Tongs

Good grill tongs let you deftly grab, lift, and turn food without piercing it, and their long handles keep your hands far from the heat. We tested six models, including our longtime favorite, the OXO Good Grips 16" Locking Tongs, using each to turn asparagus spears, chicken parts, and full slabs of ribs. We also used them to open and close hot hinged grill grates and vents and to arrange glowing coals into a banked fire.

Three models were less than impressive, including one with misaligned pincers that made precision work a struggle. Another set was so heavy (almost 2 pounds!) that it took two hands to press it closed. Two performed moderately well once we'd adjusted to their slightly ungainly handles and pincers. But the final two pairs felt so comfortable that they were like an extension of our fingers on every task.

What did these great grill tongs have in common? First, they were the lightest pairs we tested, at 8 and 9 ounces, which made them more agile and less fatiguing to use. Second, at 16 inches long, they were the shortest in our lineup, providing better control than longer models while still keeping us safe from the heat. And third, they boasted shallow, scalloped pincers with narrow tips that securely grasped both large and small items. Finally, both had locking mechanisms that could be opened with one hand. Our winner, our prior favorite from OXO, performed well in every task and was, simply, a dream to use. For the complete testing results, go to CooksIllustrated.com/aug17. –Lisa McManus



HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

OXO Good Grips 16" Locking Tongs

MODEL: 39681V2 PRICE: $14.93

COMMENTS: Our former winner took top marks again, with precise pincers that could pluck the tiniest toothpick or hoist the heftiest slab of ribs and an easy locking tab that opened and closed simply and smoothly. The tension of the arms is well calibrated to be springy but not hand-straining.

GRILL-SMOKED HERB-RUBBED FLAT-IRON STEAKS

SERVES 4 TO 6

This recipe requires rubbing the steaks with salt and letting them sit at room temperature for 1 hour before cooking. You can substitute blade steaks for the flat-iron steaks, if desired. We like both cuts cooked to medium (130 to 135 degrees). We like hickory chips in this recipe, but other kinds of wood chips will work. Gas grills are not as efficient at smoking meat as charcoal grills, so we recommend using 1½ cups of wood chips if using a gas grill.

- 2 teaspoons dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon dried rosemary
- ¾ teaspoon fennel seeds
- ½ teaspoon black peppercorns
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) flat-iron steaks, ¾ to 1 inch thick, trimmed
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1–1½ cups (2½–3¾ ounces) wood chips
- Vegetable oil spray
- 2 lemons, quartered lengthwise

1. Grind thyme, rosemary, fennel seeds, peppercorns, and pepper flakes in spice grinder or with mortar and pestle until coarsely ground. Transfer to small bowl. Pat steaks dry with paper towels. Rub steaks evenly on both sides with salt and place on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Let stand at room temperature for 1 hour. (After 30 minutes, prepare grill.)

2. Using large piece of heavy-duty aluminum foil, wrap wood chips (1 cup if using charcoal; 1½ cups if using gas) in 8 by 4½-inch foil packet. (Make sure chips do not poke holes in sides or bottom of packet.) Cut 2 evenly spaced 2-inch slits in top of packet.

3A. 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. Place wood chip packet on coals. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot and wood chips are smoking, about 5 minutes.

3B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Remove cooking grate and place wood chip packet directly on primary burner. Set grate in place, turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot and wood chips are smoking, about 15 minutes. Leave primary burner on high and turn other burner(s) to medium.

4. Clean and oil cooking grate. Sprinkle half of herb rub evenly over 1 side of steaks and press to adhere. Lightly spray herb-rubbed side of steaks with oil spray, about 3 seconds. Flip steaks and repeat process of sprinkling and pressing steaks with remaining herb rub and coating with oil spray on second side.

5. Place lemons and steaks on hotter side of grill, cover (position lid vent over steaks if using charcoal), and cook until lemons and steaks are well browned on both sides and meat registers 130 to 135 degrees (for medium), 4 to 6 minutes per side. (If steaks are fully charred before reaching desired temperature, move to cooler side of grill, cover, and continue to cook.) Transfer lemons and steaks to clean wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet, tent with foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Slice steaks thin against grain and serve, passing lemons separately.

British Steak and Ale Pie

There's a place for marrying meat and vegetables under a pastry crust. This intensely savory pub favorite featuring tender beef napped in rich, glossy gravy is not that place.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Steak pie in Britain isn't made with what Americans would call "steak" (British cooks use the word "steak" broadly, so it encompasses cuts like chuck and shank), and it often lacks a bottom crust. Some might argue that it's not a pie. But if you get hung up on what steak pie isn't, you'll miss out on what it is: a powerful, delicious antidote to spring's last chilly days.

Here's how most versions come together: Brown the meat, usually with onion and maybe bacon or mushrooms. Braise it in stock and perhaps beer for several hours, and then thicken the liquid to a gravy consistency. Transfer the filling to a pie plate and let it cool before topping it with pastry and baking it until the crust is crisp.

You'll notice I didn't mention vegetables. An authentic steak pie doesn't have them, and as a vegetable enthusiast, I think that's really smart. Why settle for a skimpy serving of long-cooked carrots and peas when you could enjoy a bright, perfectly cooked vegetable or a crisp salad alongside instead?

About that optional bottom crust: There's no denying the heft of a meat-only pie, so I endorse skipping it. That also means a bit of time saved, though even without it most of the steak pie recipes I saw seemed too involved. Surely I could do something about that.

With mushrooms as the only vegetable in the filling, our steak pie puts savory, meaty flavor first.

A Slow Start

My first timesaving move was to opt for boneless short ribs. They offer good beefy flavor, cook relatively quickly, and require little trimming. After cutting 3 pounds of short ribs into ¾-inch chunks, I realized that searing them would be problematic. Even after dividing the meat into three batches, there wasn't enough room in the pot for proper browning; the meat steamed. I pressed on. I sautéed an onion and 4 ounces of mushrooms until they were tender before returning the beef to the pot and adding 4 cups of broth. This was less than I'd seen in other recipes, but adding less liquid to begin with would mean less time spent reducing it on the back end; eventually I hoped to eliminate that tiresome step altogether. When it all came to a simmer, I covered the pot and transferred it to a 350-degree oven. While the filling cooked, I mixed up a half batch of the pie dough I use for fruit pies and put it in the fridge.

In less than 1½ hours, the beef was tender. I fished it out with a slotted spoon and transferred it to a pie plate; I then reduced the cooking liquid to 2 cups. It was still too thin, so I whisked in a *beurre manié*, a paste of raw flour and butter, to thicken it. I poured the hot gravy over the meat and rolled out the dough.

Most recipes recommend letting the filling cool before topping it with the dough, but since I was trying to streamline, I went for it. Not a good idea. The buttery, moist dough melted as I fluted the edges of the pie, and it turned to mush in the oven.

It was a modest first attempt. The beef was meltingly tender, but the gravy was pale and tasted flat. I identified the lack of fond and the smaller portion of beef stock as the culprits, and that second problem was especially worrisome: I'd have to decrease the liquid even further if I wanted to skip the reducing and thickening steps, but how could I do that without losing even more flavor? And clearly the crust needed work.

Beefing Up

I decided to skip the fussy searing step and boost meaty flavor with a couple of slices of bacon and a full pound of glutamate-rich mushrooms. When the mushrooms had released most of their juices, I added the onion along with garlic and thyme. The heady aroma was encouraging, considering I hadn't added the beef, but even more encouraging was the fond that began to form. I let it get really brown, and then I added flour, which I hoped would sufficiently thicken the gravy as the meat cooked, allowing me to skip both the beurre manié and the reducing step at the end.

Next I deglazed the pan with ¼ cup of beef stock, and when the fond lifted, I added ¾ cup of beer for more complexity. I opted for a straightforward ale (I grabbed a Newcastle), which would boost flavor without being obtrusive. Then I added the rest of the beef stock, a mere 1½ cups this time.

Before adding the beef, I decided to use the test kitchen's trick of tossing it with a little baking soda (diluted with water). We typically

Andrea Makes the Pie
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/apr17

KEYS TO A FASTER, BETTER PIE

Here's how we streamlined the recipe without sacrificing any flavor.

- **MEATINESS WITHOUT BROWNING MEAT:** It's faster to brown mushrooms, onion, garlic, and flour until a really dark fond develops. Beer and bacon deepen the flavor even more.
- **NO BEURRE MANIÉ:** Adding flour early on means no need for a flour-and-butter paste to thicken the sauce later.
- **NO REDUCTION:** We skip a lengthy sauce reduction by adding less liquid from the get-go and allowing for evaporation partway through cooking.
- **THE RIGHT PIE DOUGH:** Standard pie dough is too delicate to put on a hot filling, which must be cooled. With help from an egg and sour cream, our dough can stand up to the heat.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Which Ale?

You might assume Guinness is the go-to for this recipe, but we found that for the broadest appeal, English pale and brown ales were best. Bitter, hoppy, or floral beers were too pronounced, while American lagers were barely noticeable.

OPT FOR MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

do this because baking soda changes the meat's pH and makes it more tender. The meat in my previous pie was plenty tender, but the higher pH would also boost browning, deepening the color and flavor of my gravy.

Worried that some of the limited moisture would evaporate before the meat cooked, I covered the Dutch oven with foil before putting on the lid and moving the pot to the oven. After 1 hour, I stirred the meat. It was almost tender, but the cooking liquid was still a little thin, so I replaced the lid but not the foil and returned the pot to the oven for 30 minutes more. After a total of 1½ hours of oven time, the meat was beautifully tender and the gravy was a deep, glossy brown, thick enough to coat the meat generously—no reducing or thickening required. And the fond, extra mushrooms, beer, thyme, and garlic had done wonders for the flavor. It was time for the crust.

The test kitchen's Foolproof Pie Dough (September/October 2010) is my go-to for fruit pie, but its high moisture and fat content made it too soft to place on a warm filling. For a dough that was sturdy yet flaky, I chose a dough we've used for chicken pot pie that includes an egg for strength; it also substitutes sour cream for some of the fat. Less butter meant less fat that would melt with heat, so I was able to place this dough on the warm filling with no problems. And how did it bake? Beautifully. The edge held its attractive crispness, and the crust was flaky but substantial. Now that I've got this recipe in my back pocket, I'm looking forward to the next chilly day.

PUB-STYLE STEAK AND ALE PIE

SERVES 6

Don't substitute bone-in short ribs; their yield is too variable. Instead, use a 4-pound chuck-eye roast, well trimmed of fat. Use a good-quality beef broth for this recipe; the test kitchen's favorite is Better Than Bouillon Roasted Beef Base. If you don't have a deep-dish pie plate, use an 8 by 8-inch baking dish and roll the pie dough into a 10-inch square. We prefer pale and brown ales for this recipe.

Filling

- 3 tablespoons water
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 3 pounds boneless beef short ribs, trimmed and cut into ¾-inch chunks
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 2 slices bacon, chopped
- 1 pound cremini mushrooms, trimmed and halved if medium or quartered if large
- 1½ cups beef broth
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup beer

Crust

- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- ¼ cup sour cream, chilled
- 1¼ cups (6¼ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled

1. FOR THE FILLING: Combine water and baking soda in large bowl. Add beef, salt, and pepper and toss to combine. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees.

2. Cook bacon in large Dutch oven over high heat, stirring occasionally, until partially rendered but not browned, about 3 minutes. Add mushrooms and ¼ cup broth and stir to coat. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until mushrooms are reduced to about half their original volume, about 5 minutes. Add onion, garlic, and thyme and cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened and fond begins to form on bottom of pot, 3 to 5 minutes. Sprinkle flour over mushroom mixture and stir until all flour is moistened. Cook, stirring occasionally, until fond is deep brown, 2 to 4 minutes. Stir in beer and remaining 1¼ cups broth, scraping up any browned bits. Stir in beef and bring to simmer, pressing as much beef as possible below surface of liquid. Cover pot tightly with aluminum foil, then lid; transfer to oven. Cook for 1 hour.

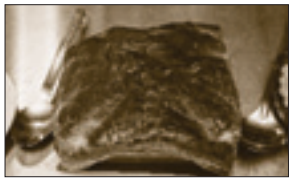
3. Remove lid and discard foil. Stir filling, cover, return to oven, and continue to cook until beef is tender and liquid is thick enough to coat beef, 15 to 30 minutes longer. Transfer filling to deep-dish pie plate. (Once cool, filling can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days.) Increase oven temperature to 400 degrees.

4. FOR THE CRUST: While filling is cooking, measure out 2 tablespoons beaten egg and set aside. Whisk remaining egg and sour cream together in bowl. Process flour and salt in food processor until combined, about 3 seconds. Add butter and pulse until only pea-size pieces remain, about 10 pulses. Add half of sour cream mixture and pulse until combined, about 5 pulses. Add remaining sour cream mixture and pulse until dough begins to form, about 10 pulses. Transfer mixture to lightly floured counter and knead briefly until dough comes together. Form into 4-inch disk, wrap in plastic, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 2 days.

5. Roll dough into 11-inch round on lightly floured counter. Using knife or 1-inch round biscuit cutter, cut round from center of dough. Drape dough over filling (it's OK if filling is hot). Trim overhang to ½ 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 or press with tines of fork to seal. Brush crust with reserved egg. Place pie on rimmed baking sheet. Bake until filling is bubbling and crust is deep golden brown and crisp, 25 to 30 minutes. (If filling has been refrigerated, increase baking time by 15 minutes and cover with foil for last 15 minutes to prevent overbrowning.) Let cool for 10 minutes before serving.

RECIPE TESTING Four Not-So-Humble Pies

The roots of meat pies run as far back as medieval times. While eating a pie's crust in those days was questionable (its primary purpose was serving as a baking vessel), the crusts for four more modern versions we tried were most certainly edible. However, the quality of both crust and filling ran the gamut, and all fell short of our ideal.



SCORCHED

The puff pastry topping burned and turned soggy while the gravy was thin and the meat dry.

ALL LOOKS

This impressive-looking crust was tough to eat. Too many onions made the filling sweet.

BONE TO PICK

The decorative bone was striking, but marrow added to the crust turned it "overwhelmingly rich."

SLOW GOING

Our favorite of the group, this pie was flavorful (if a bit salty) and took hours to prepare.

Panang Beef Curry

With a few tweaks to jarred curry paste, this rich, savory-sweet, deeply fragrant Thai classic can be as easy to make as a stir-fry.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Savory Thai curries are often categorized by the color of the spice paste used to flavor and thicken them. Green is hot and pungent, mild yellow is sweet-spiced, orange is pleasantly sour, and salty-sweet red features a lingering burn. And then there is *panang*—a sweeter, more unctuous derivative of red curry that's enriched with ground peanuts and seasoned with sugar, fish sauce, deeply fragrant kaffir lime leaves, and a touch of fiery Thai chile. Panang curries are often made with beef—usually a flavorful but tough cut, such as chuck roast, shank, or brisket, that needs to cook for a long time to turn tender. And unlike those other more familiar curries, which are typically brothy, panang is a drier style curry that contains a judicious amount of coconut milk, giving it a thick, velvety consistency that steadfastly clings to the pieces of meat.

For a cook who has time, making panang curry from scratch can be a labor of love: toasting and pounding spices and aromatics to make the paste; frying the paste in a little coconut cream skimmed from the can; adding the coconut milk, seasonings, and beef; and, finally, simmering it all to meld the flavors. But even in Thailand, many cooks start with store-bought paste, which can make this dish easier to pull together than a typical stir-fry.

More like a thick sauce than a stew, panang curry is richer than other Thai curries and should be served with plenty of rice and vegetables.

Tender at Heart

Most traditional panang curry recipes call for a tough, collagen-rich cut of beef for the same reason that Western stews do: The abundant collagen breaks down during the prolonged cooking time, so the beef turns silky and fall-apart tender. I came across a few modern panang curry recipes calling for quick-cooking cuts such as sirloin or flank steak, but they weren't nearly as nice to eat; cooked briefly, these cuts have a steak-like chew that's not right in Thai curry, while a lengthy simmer toughens them. I'd stick with traditional collagen-rich cuts.

Annie Makes the Curry
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/june17

However, unlike Western beef stews, which cook the meat directly in the braising liquid to maximize beefy flavor, most traditional panang curry recipes I found called for cutting the beef into chunks or slices and simmering them in plain water until tender, which takes 1 to 2 hours, depending on the cut. The water is then discarded, and the meat is combined with the sauce for the last few minutes of cooking to purposely limit the amount of beefy flavor so that it won't muddy the flavors of the spice paste. I proceeded with simmering the meat separately, but I planned to double back at the end of testing and try cooking the meat in the sauce.

But first: Which cut of beef should I use? For my early tests, I defaulted to chuck roast for three reasons: good flavor, availability, and affordability. The downsides were that trimming fat and gristle from the roast was time-consuming and generated a lot of waste, and even when cut into thin slices, it needed 2 hours of simmering to turn tender. Looking for other options, I considered cuts such as shank and brisket, but these would require some trimming as well as a long simmering time. Ultimately, I ditched them all in favor of a cut we often turn to for braising: boneless short ribs. They're flavorful and well-marbled, so they'd be sure to cook up moist. And even though they're a bit pricier than chuck, there'd be much less waste and knife work—a worthwhile trade-off. Sliced ¼ inch thick, the short ribs cooked up tender after just about an hour of simmering. On to the paste.

Nut Like the Rest

I usually wouldn't be so quick to endorse a prefab ingredient, but most commercial Thai curry pastes are nothing more than purees of the same herbs and spices I would have to seek out and grind myself—in this case dried red chiles, shallots, garlic, galangal, lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves, cilantro root, white pepper, and salt. Plus, pastes are inexpensive and keep well in the refrigerator for about a month.

Unfortunately, panang curry paste isn't widely available in American markets, so I'd have to start with the more common red variety and doctor its flavor. That wouldn't be hard, though, since all I needed to do was add some form of peanut and work in plenty of kaffir lime leaves so that their bright, citrusy fragrance would stand out in the rich sauce.

Once I had another batch of beef ready to go, I sizzled a few tablespoons of red curry paste in a little vegetable oil to intensify its flavor and then added a can of coconut milk. Traditional recipes often call for frying the paste in coconut cream that has been "cracked"—that is, simmered until its oil

When Beefier Is Not Better

Boiling the beef in water and combining it with the curry during the last few minutes of cooking doesn't infuse the dish with deeply meaty flavor—and that's the point. Unlike Western beef stews, which are meant to taste ultrabeefy, traditional versions of panang curry cook the beef separately so as not to muddy the flavors of the spice paste. We tried cooking the dish both ways and preferred the more assertive curry flavor produced by the traditional Thai approach.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Short Ribs: Perfect Texture, Minimal Knife Work

Panang curry is quick to make if you start with jarred paste, but don't try to shortcut it further by using a quick-cooking cut of beef such as sirloin or flank steak. We tried, and the results were like steak with sauce, not the fall-apart-tender texture you get by braising a collagen-rich cut. Chuck roast is a popular choice, but it requires lots of trimming and takes 2 hours to cook, so we use boneless short ribs instead. They become at least as silky as chuck does after just 1 hour, and they require almost no knife work.

separates out, but we've found that coconut milks from different brands yield varying amounts of cream and that vegetable oil works just as well. To that mixture I added a few teaspoons of fish sauce and a touch of sugar for salty-sweet balance, followed by the cooked short ribs. I then simmered the curry until the liquid was reduced by roughly half and was thick enough to coat the meat. Finally, I stirred in a few tablespoons of peanut butter, an ingredient I'd seen called for in several recipes. Its flavor and texture overwhelmed and overthickened the curry, so I reduced the amount of peanut butter in subsequent batches, but it never tasted quite right. The better option was to scatter finely chopped roasted peanuts over the top before serving, which lent the dish subtle nuttiness as well as a nice crunch.

Some recipes instruct you to simmer whole kaffir lime leaves in the sauce and remove them just before serving, as you would bay leaves in a soup or stew. Others called for slicing the stiff, shiny leaves into very thin slivers and adding them to the pot just before serving or even sprinkling them over the top as a garnish. After trying both approaches, I found that the latter delivered brighter, more vibrant citrus flavor in every bite. I also came up with an acceptable substitute: a 50/50 combination of lime and lemon zest strips.

I doubled back to the question of whether to cook the beef in water or in the sauce: A side-by-side test confirmed that tasters unanimously preferred the water method; the sauce in the other batch was not only muddy-tasting but also much too rich after reducing for such a long time.

With savory-sweet heat; lush, creamy body; nutty richness; and floral, citrusy tang, my version of panang curry was satisfying in a way that belied the ease of making it.

PANANG BEEF CURRY

SERVES 6

Red curry pastes from different brands vary in spiciness, so start by adding 2 tablespoons and then taste the sauce and add up to 2 tablespoons more. Kaffir lime leaves are well worth seeking out. If you can't find them, substitute three 3-inch strips each of lemon zest and lime zest, adding them to the sauce with the beef in step 2 (remove the zest strips before serving). Do not substitute light coconut milk. Serve this rich dish with rice and vegetables.

- **2 pounds boneless beef short ribs, trimmed**
- **2 tablespoons vegetable oil**
- **2–4 tablespoons Thai red curry paste**
- **1 (14-ounce) can unsweetened coconut milk**
- **4 teaspoons fish sauce**
- **2 teaspoons sugar**
- **1 Thai red chile, halved lengthwise (optional)**
- **6 kaffir lime leaves, middle vein removed, sliced thin**
- **⅓ cup unsalted dry-roasted peanuts, chopped fine**

1. Cut each rib crosswise with grain into 3 equal pieces. Slice each piece against grain ¼ inch thick. Place beef in large saucepan and add water to cover. Bring to boil over high heat. Cover, reduce heat to low, and cook until beef is fork-tender, 1 to 1¼ hours. Using slotted spoon, transfer beef to bowl; discard water. (Beef can refrigerated for up to 24 hours; when ready to use, add it to curry as directed in step 2.)

2. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add 2 tablespoons curry paste and cook, stirring frequently, until paste is fragrant and darkens in color to brick red, 5 to 8 minutes. Add coconut milk, fish sauce, sugar, and chile, if using; stir to combine and dissolve sugar. Taste sauce and add up to 2 tablespoons more curry paste to achieve desired spiciness. Add beef, stir to coat with sauce, and bring to simmer.

3. Rapidly simmer, stirring occasionally, until sauce is thickened and reduced by half and coats beef, 12 to 15 minutes. (Sauce should be quite thick, and streaks of oil will appear. Sauce will continue to thicken as it cools.) Add kaffir lime leaves and simmer until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to serving platter, sprinkle with peanuts, and serve.

INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT

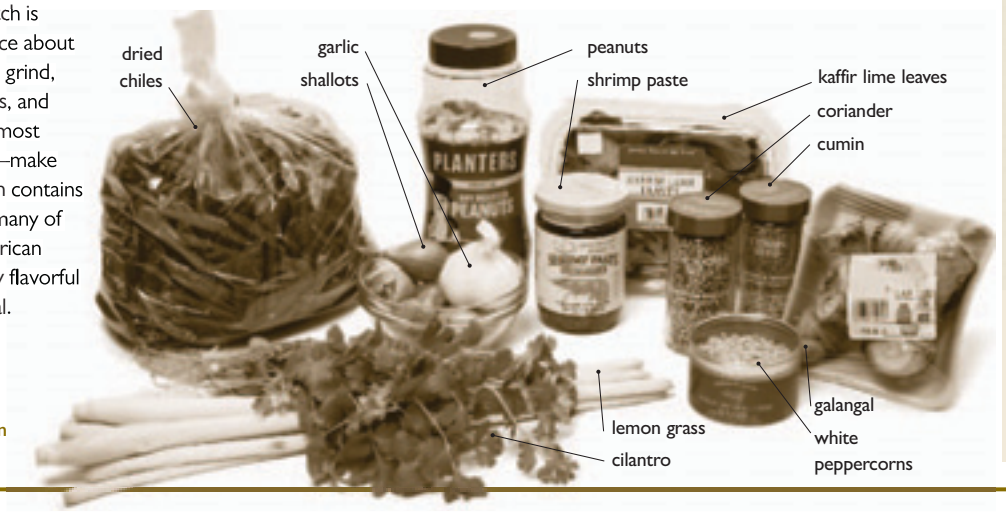
Kaffir Lime Leaves

Shiny kaffir lime leaves boast a tangy, floral aroma that perfumes many Southeast Asian dishes. They're available in Asian markets and freeze well. If you can't find them, a combination of lemon zest and lime zest will approximate their flavor. Note: These leaves are also called "makrut lime leaves," as "kaffir" is an offensive term in some cultures.

PUTS THE TANG IN PANANG

Curry in a Hurry? Even Thai Cooks Do It

Making curry paste from scratch is great if you have time to source about a dozen ingredients and toast, grind, and pound all the spices, herbs, and aromatics. For a casual meal, most cooks—Thai cooks included—make curry using jarred paste, which contains all the ingredients you need (many of which are hard to find in American markets) and turns this deeply flavorful dish into a fast weeknight meal.



LABOR OF LOVE

Making a curry paste requires about a dozen ingredients and at least an hour's work.

FAST ALTERNATIVE

Using jarred paste, you can have the whole dish on the table in about half an hour (if you cook the beef ahead).

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Mapo Tofu

Think tofu is bland and boring? This braise of custardy curds cloaked in a garlicky, spicy meat sauce—the signature dish of the Sichuan province—will change your mind.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Spicy, rich, and savory, *mapo* tofu is the most renowned dish from China's Sichuan province and serves as comfort food for chili fans everywhere. But even die-hard fans tend to order it in restaurants rather than make it at home. Perhaps they imagine that making something so deeply flavorful would take a long time and many steps. But in fact, mapo tofu—soft cubes of tofu and a modest amount of ground beef or pork swimming in a glossy red sauce with loads of garlic and ginger, multiple fermented bean seasonings, numbing Sichuan peppercorns, and fiery Sichuan chili powder—is fast and easy to make. And despite its potential cacophony of flavors, a good version somehow manages to blend them all into a harmonious whole that is spicy but never overwhelming and entirely satisfying when ladled over heaps of steamed white rice.

Traditionally, the first step is to simmer or steep cubes of tofu in hot salted water or broth. Odd as this sounds, experts say that this step firms the tofu so it holds its shape during braising. Meanwhile, ground beef or pork (recipes use either, though beef is traditional and is what I chose) is cooked in a pot or wok until it begins to brown and is then set aside. Next, minced garlic, ginger, Asian broad bean chili paste, Sichuan peppercorns, Sichuan chili powder, and fermented black beans (more on these ingredients later) are sizzled in oil. Some recipes also call for drizzling in Sichuan chili oil for yet another layer of fiery flavor; others add sweetness via hoisin sauce or sugar. Once the oil has taken on a deep red color from the chili powder, the browned meat is returned to the pot along with the tofu and its simmering liquid and scallions (or leeks). The mixture braises for a few minutes until the tofu starts to absorb the flavor of the sauce. Finally, a cornstarch slurry is stirred in to add body before the tofu is served with a garnish of toasted, ground Sichuan peppercorns for a final layer of floral, citrusy, buzzing crunch.

Watch Andrew Make Mapo
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/oct17

Mapo tofu combines all the best qualities of familiar dishes such as chili or ragu—meaty, unctuous, spicy, rich—but is much faster to make.

Tofu Time

My first task was figuring out what kind of tofu to use. Styles differ mainly in how thoroughly the soybean curds have been drained and pressed to remove moisture and firm up their structure. The best texture for mapo tofu, I found, is one that holds its shape when cubed yet is still soft and custard-like.

After buying out the tofu section at the supermarket, I found two styles to avoid. Undrained "silken" tofu is usually so fragile that it falls apart with the slightest disturbance, producing a gloppy dish, while "extra-firm" tofu typically has a dense, bouncy texture and doesn't absorb the flavors of the sauce. I got the best results with the kind of tofu typically labeled "soft." (However, I learned that there are no industry standards for classifying tofu, so I used "soft" as a general guideline and sought out tofu with 5 to 7 grams of protein.)

As for how to prepare the tofu, simmering or steeping it in hot salted water turned out to be essential to getting its texture right. Heat shrinks the proteins in the outer layers of the cubes, tightening them and helping them stay intact during cooking while still allowing for a yielding, custardy texture (see "Parcook Your Tofu"). To simplify the process, I microwaved the tofu and water until the water was steaming. I also used this as an opportunity to gently wilt the scallions. Chicken broth and salted water worked equally well to set the tofu, but ultimately I liked the depth that broth contributed.

Sourcing Bold Flavor

As a contrast to the neutral, clean-tasting tofu, the sauce should be deeply savory, spicy, and rich. That meant using plenty of garlic (nine cloves) and ginger (a 3-inch knob), along with four Chinese pantry staples: Asian broad bean chili paste, Sichuan peppercorns, Sichuan chili powder, and fermented black beans. The broad bean chili paste (*doubanjiang*) lends the dish tremendous savory depth for which there is no substitute. Since some chili bean pastes are a little too coarse to use straight from the jar, and because I needed to mince lots of garlic and ginger, I whizzed everything with the oil in a food processor to form a smooth paste.

Sichuan peppercorns are nutty, floral, and citrusy and deliver a pleasant (and temporary), mild tingling sensation. There's no substitute for them either, and I found that toasting them in the microwave drew out their robust personality. Sichuan chili powder packs heat and subtle fruitiness, and fermented black beans provide salty umami flavor. Though we like the dish better with these two ingredients, there are adequate substitutions (see "The Sichuan Pantry").

Finally, I liked how a bit of sugar helped round out the flavors of the dish, but I preferred hoisin sauce—yet another fermented bean product, this one made from soybeans—because it contributed another layer of complexity in addition to sweetness.

Meat as a Flavoring, Not the Main Event

Unlike Western sauces such as ragu, in which meat is the primary component, *mapo* tofu uses only a small amount of meat as a seasoning. Ground beef provides savory background flavor and appealing texture to contrast with the neutral, delicate tofu.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Lastly, mapo tofu should contain a good amount of oil—that's why it's rich and always served with plenty of rice. But instead of buying chili oil, which is traditionally prepared by steeping dried red chiles and Sichuan peppercorns in very hot oil, straining them out, and adding a little toasted sesame oil, I realized I could re-create its flavor and red glow by simply increasing the amounts of Sichuan chili powder, Sichuan peppercorns, and vegetable oil in my recipe and incorporating a few teaspoons of sesame oil.

And there I had it: a version of mapo tofu that was bold, intricately seasoned, and as fiery as it was satisfying. Plus, now that I had all the Sichuan staples on hand, I could quickly throw this dish together any night of the week—instead of pulling out the takeout menu.

SICHUAN BRAISED TOFU WITH BEEF (MAPO TOFU)

SERVES 4 TO 6

Ground pork can be used in place of beef, if desired. Asian broad bean chili paste (or sauce) is also known as *doubanjiang* or *toban djan*; our favorite, Pixian, is available online. Lee Kum Kee Chili Bean Sauce is a good supermarket option. If you can't find Sichuan chili powder, an equal amount of Korean red pepper flakes (*gochugaru*) is a good substitute. In a pinch, use 2½ teaspoons of ancho chile powder and ½ teaspoon of cayenne pepper. If you can't find fermented black beans, you can use an equal amount of fermented black bean paste or sauce or 2 additional teaspoons of Asian broad bean chili paste. Serve with steamed white rice.

- 1 tablespoon Sichuan peppercorns
- 12 scallions
- 28 ounces soft tofu, cut into ½-inch cubes
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 9 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 (3-inch) piece ginger, peeled and cut into ¼-inch rounds
- ⅓ cup Asian broad bean chili paste
- 1 tablespoon fermented black beans
- 6 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon Sichuan chili powder
- 8 ounces 85 percent lean ground beef
- 2 tablespoons hoisin sauce
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch

1. Place peppercorns in small bowl and microwave until fragrant, 15 to 30 seconds. Let cool completely. Once cool, grind in spice grinder or mortar and pestle (you should have 1½ teaspoons).

2. Using side of chef's knife, lightly crush white parts of scallions, then cut scallions into 1-inch pieces. Place tofu, broth, and scallions in large bowl and microwave, covered, until steaming, 5 to 7 minutes. Let stand while preparing remaining ingredients.

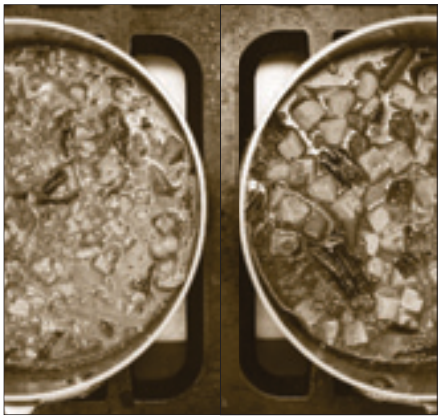
3. Process garlic, ginger, chili paste, and black beans in food processor until coarse paste forms, 1 to 2 minutes, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add ¼ cup vegetable oil, chili powder, and 1 teaspoon peppercorns and continue to process until smooth paste forms, 1 to 2 minutes longer. Transfer spice paste to bowl.

4. Heat 1 tablespoon vegetable oil and beef in large saucepan over medium heat; cook, breaking up meat with wooden spoon, until meat just begins to brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer beef to bowl.

5. Add remaining 1 tablespoon vegetable oil and spice paste to now-empty saucepan and cook, stirring frequently, until paste darkens and oil begins to separate from paste, 2 to 3 minutes. Gently pour tofu with broth into saucepan, followed by hoisin, sesame oil, and beef. Cook, stirring gently and frequently, until dish comes to simmer, 2 to 3 minutes. Whisk water and cornstarch together in small bowl. Add cornstarch mixture to saucepan and continue to cook, stirring frequently, until thickened, 2 to 3 minutes longer. Transfer to serving dish, sprinkle with remaining peppercorns, and serve. (Mapo tofu can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours.)

TECHNIQUE

PARCOOK YOUR TOFU



The tofu on the left wasn't simmered in broth prior to being incorporated into the sauce; the tofu on the right was. Heat shrinks the proteins in the outer layers of the tofu, which tightens them and helps the pieces stay intact in the sauce.

THE SICHUAN PANTRY

These robustly flavored ingredients are featured in *mapo* tofu and many other Sichuan and Chinese dishes. They are readily available online and in Asian markets and are increasingly available in American supermarkets. They keep indefinitely and are worth seeking out to produce authentic flavors.

Sichuan peppercorns: These reddish-brown husks are neither peppercorns nor are they related to chiles. They're the dried fruit rinds of the Chinese prickly ash tree. Sichuan peppercorns have a lemony tartness and a piney aroma, but they are best known for the unique tingling sensation they produce on the lips and tongue, thanks to a compound called hydroxy-alpha-sanshool, which acts on receptors that usually respond to touch. The peppercorns don't actually vibrate our skin, but they send signals to the brain that we interpret as vibration; some people also mistakenly perceive these signals as heat.
Substitute: None

Sichuan chili powder: This product is made from the dried, crushed pods of "Facing Heaven" chile peppers (so named for their habit of pointing upward on plants as they grow, rather than hanging down the way most chile peppers do). It is similar in appearance to Western red pepper flakes but is milder and more aromatic.
Substitute: Korean red pepper flakes (*gochugaru*) or use ½ teaspoon of cayenne pepper and 2½ teaspoons of ancho chile powder per tablespoon of Sichuan chili powder.

Asian broad bean chili paste (also labeled *doubanjiang* or *toban djan*): This deep reddish-brown paste, which is made from a combination of red chiles, broad (fava) beans, salt, and wheat flour, is fermented for up to eight years. It is an essential flavoring in many Sichuan dishes, lending them a funky, meaty depth along with heat from the chiles. The best ones come from the Chinese city of Pixian and will typically contain no other ingredients. Pixian broad bean chili paste can be ordered online. Lee Kum Kee Chili Bean Sauce is widely available in supermarkets and is another good option.
Substitute: None

Fermented black beans: Also known as salted black beans, these are small black soybeans that are fermented with salt. In the process the beans soften, shrivel, and dry out, resembling raisins. They are very salty and are used sparingly to provide umami depth and savoriness to many Chinese dishes.
Substitute: Fermented black bean paste or sauce. Use about one-third less since these products are concentrated.

How to Braise Brisket

Beefy in flavor and size, brisket has the potential to be the ultimate braised dish for company. The trick is turning this notoriously tough cut both moist and tender.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

When brisket is done right, there is perhaps no better cut of beef to braise, especially when serving a crowd. It's beefy, velvety, and moist, and it slices beautifully. The braising liquid can be seasoned with any aromatic vegetable, herb, or spice, and during the long cooking time, it reduces to a rich-tasting jus or full-bodied gravy. The final product is ideal as a Sunday dinner for family or for company.

Most recipes follow more or less the same script. Brown the meat, usually in a Dutch oven; set it aside; and then cook aromatics (usually including loads of onions) until softened and browned. Return the brisket to the pot, add enough liquid (wine, beer, water, stock, tomatoes, etc.) to partially submerge it, and braise it, covered, in the oven until the meat is fork-tender and easily sliced. Many recipes, particularly classic Jewish versions, call for adding vegetables or fruits late in the process to be served alongside the meat.

Anyone who's made brisket knows that producing fork-tender meat takes a long time—upwards of 5 hours, according to the recipes I've tried. But more problematic is the fact that by the time the meat is tender, it's usually dry, too. That's because brisket is loaded with collagen, the main structural protein in meat that makes it tough. Collagen requires long, steady heat exposure to break down, but in that time the meat's muscle fibers are also contracting and squeezing out moisture. So in a sense, braising meat is a balancing act: using enough heat to break down collagen while still keeping the heat low enough to retain moisture.

Tangy pomegranate balances the meat's richness, and its bright color and sweetness make this dish more festive.

I was determined to produce brisket that was both tender and moist. And while I was at it, I'd see how I could dress up the flavors so the dish would feel special enough to serve at the holidays.

High and Dry

Butchers typically divide whole briskets into two cuts, the point and the flat. I would go with the flat cut, which is available in most supermarkets and, as its name suggests, is flatter and more uniform and thus easier to slice (for more information, see "Buying Brisket").

When we want meat to retain moisture, our first move is almost always to apply salt, which not only seasons the meat but also, if left on long enough before cooking, changes the protein structure so that the meat better holds on to moisture. Brisket is particularly dense, so to help the salt penetrate, I halved the brisket lengthwise to create two slabs (doing so would also speed cooking and make for more-manageable slices) and poked each slab all over on both sides with a skewer. Even so, after a series of tests, I determined that the meat tasted juicier and better seasoned when the salt had at least 16—or up to 48—hours to work its magic.

On to the cooking. For the time being, I skipped searing the meat, which is messy and time-consuming, and focused on enlivening the braising liquid instead. I started by sautéing onions and garlic in a Dutch oven, and I made an unconventional choice for the braising liquid: pomegranate juice. Its acidity would balance the unctuous meat, and its fruity flavor would be a nod to traditional Jewish versions. I added some chicken stock and bay leaves along with the juice and brought the liquid to a simmer. I then added the brisket with the fat cap facing up so that the bulk of the meat would be submerged and the exposed part would be protected by the fat. I covered the pot and placed it in a 325-degree oven. After about 5 hours, it was tender but—despite having salted it for 48 hours—still too dry.

I reasoned that reducing the oven temperature would prevent the meat from drying out as much, even though I knew that it would add to the cooking time. I dropped the temperature from 325 degrees to 250 degrees—but now the brisket took far longer to cook than I would ever have expected. In fact, after 6 hours, the brisket still wasn't even remotely tender, and when I took its temperature, I was surprised to see that it never exceeded 165 degrees. That wasn't hot enough for significant collagen breakdown, which happens most rapidly above 180 degrees, so the meat never tenderized.

Puzzled as to why the meat's temperature had plateaued, I did some research and discovered that this issue is familiar to anyone who has barbecued large pieces of meat. As meat gets hot enough for moisture to be driven off, its surface cools, preventing the interior of the meat from getting any hotter. Known as evaporative cooling, it's the same process

Brisket Goes Well With . . .

Brisket pairs well with a variety of braising liquids, including dry red wine, pomegranate juice, or beer (preferably a light-bodied American lager). When reduced, each of these liquids also produces a well-balanced sauce.

WINE | POMEGRANATE JUICE | BEER

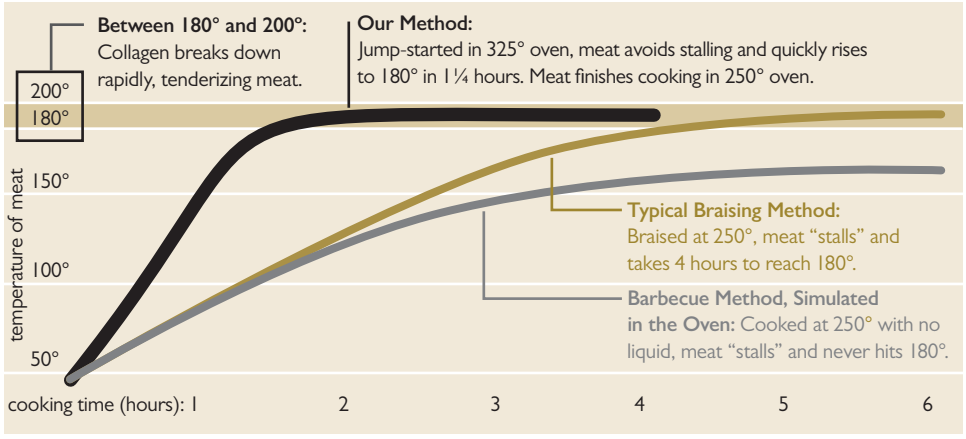
PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

SCIENCE Don't Let Your Brisket Stall Out

The collagen in brisket tenderizes faster at higher temperatures. Unfortunately, brisket also loses more moisture at higher temperatures. To achieve tender and juicy brisket in a reasonable amount of time (about 4 hours), the key is to hold the meat between 180 and 200 degrees. In this optimal temperature zone, collagen breaks down at a rapid pace, but the meat stays well below the boiling point of water (212 degrees), helping minimize moisture loss.

We assumed that the best method would be low-and-slow braising, but we discovered that if the heat is too low, the cooking can actually slow to a crawl. The cause of the slowdown is a phenomenon known as evaporative cooling, which works just like perspiration: Once the meat gets hot enough for moisture to be driven off, its surface cools, which in turn slows the rate at which its interior temperature rises. It's a common—and more extreme—problem when barbecuing, where the temperature of the meat often stalls dramatically in the dry heat; in fact, "stalling" is a recognized term in barbecue circles. To demonstrate the effects of evaporative cooling and how we overcame it, we cooked three briskets three different ways in the oven.

COMPARING COOKING METHODS: ONE WINNER AND TWO THAT STALL



Buying Brisket

Butchers typically divide whole briskets into two cuts, the point and the flat. Though the point cut cooks nicely because it contains more intramuscular fat, it's hard to find and irregularly shaped. We prefer the flat cut because it is available in most markets and, as its name suggests, is flatter and more uniform and thus easier to slice.

POINT CUT

Knobby shape, good marbling, but hard to find

FLAT CUT

More uniform shape, thick fat cap that adds flavor and protection, widely available

Give It a Trim

TRIM FAT CAP TO ¼ INCH

Leaving some fat on the surface protects the exposed top of the meat from drying out.

that happens when you perspire: As water on your skin evaporates, your skin's temperature decreases, which in turn keeps your internal body temperature stable.

There are only two ways to overcome evaporative cooling in meat: Prevent moisture from being driven off by wrapping it tightly in foil, as is often done when barbecuing large cuts (not an option when braising), or limit how much the meat can cool by turning up the heat. If the meat can't cool too much on the outside, it can continue to heat up on the inside.

Since evaporative cooling starts to kick in at about 160 degrees and collagen breakdown happens fastest above 180 degrees, my charge was clear: I needed to hurry the meat into that rapid collagen breakdown zone (180 to 200 degrees) and hold it there long enough for the collagen to completely break down.

The Sweet Spot

I started my next braise in a 325-degree oven, as I had before, but this time I waited until the meat's temperature hit 180 degrees, about 1½ hours into cooking, and then lowered the oven to 250 degrees. At this point, any evaporative cooling on the exterior of the meat wasn't enough to lower the meat's internal temperature, and it continued to climb slowly. After another 2 full hours, the brisket's temperature hit 200 degrees, at which point the meat was both fork-tender and still wonderfully moist.

Things were looking good: Instead of producing a dry brisket in 5-plus hours, I now had a method that cooked it perfectly in about 4 hours. All I needed to do was polish the sauce.

The Rest Is Gravy

The curious thing was that the sauce was thin, not velvety and full-bodied. At first I didn't understand why, since all that collagen in the brisket was supposedly breaking down and converting to gelatin, which typically gives the braising liquid a luscious, silky body. But then I did some more research on the collagen in brisket and made a surprising discovery: Most of the collagen in brisket doesn't actually break down and convert to gelatin; it merely softens enough to make the brisket tender.

That being the case, I needed to find other ways to add body to the sauce. I started with the onions, some of which had practically dissolved during the long cooking time. To coax more of them into breaking down and thickening the sauce, I sautéed them from the start with a small amount of baking soda, which helps break down their cell walls. Then I strained the liquid to get a smooth consistency. I also stirred in some flour when I sautéed the onions and some powdered gelatin when I added the liquid to the pot, just to give the sauce more body.

The combination produced a velvety sauce, but I wanted the liquid to taste even more meaty. I could get that by browning the meat, but I wanted to avoid this splattery step if possible and had a couple of ideas that would be less labor-intensive. First, I moved the braise from a Dutch oven to a large roasting pan, figuring that the broader surface would allow the braising liquid to reduce further and create more flavor-packed fond. To mimic the pot's tight-fitting lid, I covered the roasting pan with aluminum foil. Next, I removed the foil cover partway through cooking so that the braising liquid at the edges of the pan and the portion of the meat that wasn't submerged were able to brown. That worked, but it also slowed the cooking.

I fully cooked the meat without worrying about the sauce. I then set aside the meat, strained and defatted the sauce, and returned the sauce alone to a 400-degree oven. After 30 minutes or so, the sauce had reduced nicely and a dark ring of fond had formed on the sides of the pan. Once I'd stirred it into the sauce, this fond contributed the flavor of a well-seared brisket with none of the hassle. To polish those flavors, I added cumin, cardamom, and cayenne and black peppers, plus glutamate-rich tomato paste and anchovies; the anchovies don't turn the sauce the least bit fishy if minced finely.

The results were my brisket ideal: tender and moist meat and a lush but well-balanced gravy. A handful of pomegranate seeds and chopped cilantro scattered across the top added tangy, fresh bursts and jewel-like color, turning this typically humble braise into a holiday-worthy centerpiece. I also created two variations, one in which I braised the meat in beer and paired it with prunes (which are often seen in classic Jewish versions), ginger, and Dijon mustard, and another, more classic version with red wine and thyme. Whether for company or family, this is a foolproof brisket recipe I'll return to again and again.

BRAISED BRISKET WITH POMEGRANATE, CUMIN, AND CILANTRO

SERVES 6 TO 8

This recipe requires salting the brisket for at least 16 hours; if you have time, you can salt it for up to 48 hours. We recommend using a remote probe thermometer to monitor the temperature of the brisket. Serve with boiled or mashed potatoes or buttered noodles.

- 1 (4- to 5-pound) beef brisket, flat cut, fat trimmed to ¼ inch
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 large onions, chopped
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced to paste
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 1½ teaspoons ground cardamom
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 cups pomegranate juice
- 1½ cups chicken broth
- 3 bay leaves
- 2 tablespoons unflavored gelatin
- 1 cup pomegranate seeds
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro

Watch It All Happen
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17

1. Place brisket, fat side down, on cutting board and cut in half lengthwise with grain. Using paring knife or metal skewer, poke each roast 20 times, pushing all the way through roast. Flip roasts and repeat on second side.

2. Sprinkle each roast evenly on all sides with 2½ teaspoons salt (5 teaspoons salt total). Wrap each roast in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 16 hours or up to 48 hours.

3. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Heat oil in large roasting pan over medium heat until shimmering. Add onions and baking soda and cook, stirring frequently, until onions have started to soften and break down, 4 to 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in anchovies, tomato paste, cumin, cardamom, cayenne, and ½ teaspoon pepper. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, until onions are evenly coated and flour begins to stick to pan, about 2 minutes. Stir in pomegranate juice, broth, and bay leaves, scraping up any browned bits. Stir in gelatin. Increase heat to medium-high and bring to boil.

4. Unwrap roasts and place in pan. Cover pan tightly with aluminum foil, transfer to oven, and cook until meat registers 180 to 185 degrees at center, about 1½ hours. Reduce oven temperature to 250 degrees and continue to cook until fork slips easily in and out of meat, 2 to 2½ hours longer. Transfer roasts to baking sheet and wrap sheet tightly in foil.

5. Strain braising liquid through fine-mesh strainer set over large bowl, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible; discard solids. Let liquid settle for 10 minutes. Using wide, shallow spoon, skim fat from surface and discard. Wipe roasting pan clean with paper towels and return defatted liquid to pan.

6. Increase oven temperature to 400 degrees. Return pan to oven and cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid is reduced by about one-third, 30 to 40 minutes. Remove pan from oven and use wooden spoon to draw liquid up sides of pan and scrape browned bits around edges of pan into liquid.

7. Transfer roasts to carving board and slice against grain ¼ inch thick; transfer to wide serving platter. Season sauce with salt and pepper to taste and pour over brisket. Tent platter with foil and let stand for 5 to 10 minutes to warm brisket through. Sprinkle with pomegranate seeds and cilantro and serve.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Follow recipe through step 6 and let sauce and brisket cool completely. Cover and refrigerate sauce and roasts separately for up to 2 days. To serve, slice each roast against grain ¼ inch thick and transfer to 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Heat sauce in small saucepan over medium heat until just simmering. Pour sauce over brisket, cover dish with aluminum foil, and cook in 325-degree oven until meat is heated through, about 20 minutes.

THE SLICE IS RIGHT

If you have a carving knife (also called a slicing knife), now's the time to use it. Its thinner blade will cut the brisket more gently than a thicker chef's knife would.

Browned Flavor, No Browning

Instead of messily searing the brisket to produce deep savory flavor, we reduce the sauce in the roasting pan in the oven, creating a ring of richly flavored fond on the sides of the pan, which we stir into the sauce.

BEER-BRAISED BRISKET WITH PRUNES AND GINGER

Omit ground cumin and ground cardamom. Stir in 1 teaspoon five-spice powder with anchovies in step 3. Substitute 1½ cups beer for pomegranate juice and increase chicken broth to 2 cups. Stir in 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard and 1 (3-inch) piece ginger, peeled and sliced thin, with chicken broth in step 3. Stir 1½ cups pitted prunes into braising liquid before returning roasting pan to oven in step 6. Omit pomegranate seeds and substitute parsley for cilantro.

BRAISED BRISKET WITH RED WINE AND THYME

Omit ground cumin and ground cardamom. Increase chicken broth to 2 cups and substitute 1 cup red wine for pomegranate juice. Add 6 thyme sprigs with bay leaves in step 3. Omit pomegranate seeds and cilantro.

Chorizo and Potato Tacos

Mexican chorizo can be hard to find. Luckily, making your own is quick and easy.

BY ANDREA GEARY

The Mexican tradition of pairing chorizo with potatoes as a taco filling may sound odd to the uninitiated, but it's pretty ingenious. When fried, Mexican chorizo falls into crumbles, producing fragrant red juices that bathe the meat in spice, fat, and vinegar. The potatoes tidily absorb the chorizo drippings, perfectly dispersing and diffusing the flavor, so the effect is pleasantly piquant rather than overpowering.

Mexican chorizo is a rare commodity in my neighborhood, but that didn't mean I couldn't make my own chorizo and potato tacos. It simply meant that I'd have to start by making my own chorizo.

Since I needed only 8 ounces of sausage, I started with ground pork instead of the pork butt often used for big batches. For my small batch, store-bought ancho chile powder seemed more sensible than the traditional whole dried chiles. I also added paprika for color, a bit of sugar and salt, garlic, coriander, dried oregano, cinnamon, allspice, and cayenne. Lastly, I mixed in cider vinegar for tartness. The result was almost overwhelming—spicy, salty, and pleasantly sour—just as it's supposed to be.

In anticipation of this moment, I had already parboiled a pound of peeled, diced Yukon Gold potatoes. I mixed them into the chorizo until they were stained red and then let the mixture finish cooking while I focused on the accompaniments.

It was a perfect opportunity to try my hand at *guacamole taquero*, the simple creamy, tangy taco-shop "green sauce." I simply pureed raw tomatillos, avocado, jalapeños, cilantro, lime juice, garlic, and salt. I scooped some of the potato and chorizo mixture into a warmed tortilla, spooned on some sauce, and took a bite. One-third of the filling landed on my shoe.

Undeterred, I mashed some of the potatoes in the skillet and stirred them into the mixture, which made it more cohesive. Problem solved. With tacos this good, I was determined not to sacrifice a bit.

A creamy, tangy avocado-tomatillo sauce is a cooling counterpoint to the spicy meat filling.

Tip: Make a Double Batch

Our recipe calls for 8 ounces of ground pork. But since ground pork is often sold in 1-pound packages, we like to make a double batch of chorizo and freeze half for a later batch of tacos. Simply double all the ingredients and let the spice mixture cool fully before stirring it into the pork. The uncooked chorizo can be frozen for up to 6 months.

Watch the Process
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

CHORIZO AND POTATO TACOS

SERVES 4

If you can purchase a good-quality Mexican-style chorizo, skip step 2 and cook the chorizo as directed in step 3. The raw onion complements the soft, rich taco filling, so we do not recommend omitting it. For a spicier sauce, use two jalapeño chiles.

Filling

- 1 pound Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-inch chunks
- Salt and pepper
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon ancho chile powder
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1½ teaspoons ground coriander
- 1½ teaspoons dried oregano
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- Pinch ground allspice
- 3 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 1½ teaspoons sugar
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 8 ounces ground pork

Sauce

- 8 ounces tomatillos, husks and stems removed, rinsed well, dried, and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 avocado, halved, pitted, and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1–2 jalapeño chiles, stemmed, seeded, and chopped
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves and stems
- 1 tablespoon lime juice
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¾ teaspoon salt

Tacos

- 12 (6-inch) corn tortillas, warmed
- Finely chopped white onion
- Fresh cilantro leaves
- Lime wedges

1. FOR THE FILLING: Bring 4 cups water to boil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat. Add potatoes and 1 teaspoon salt. Reduce heat to medium, cover, and cook until potatoes are just tender, 3 to 5 minutes. Drain potatoes and set aside. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels.

2. Combine oil, chile powder, paprika, coriander, oregano, cinnamon, cayenne, allspice, ¾ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper in now-empty skillet. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until mixture is bubbling and fragrant. Off heat, carefully stir in vinegar, sugar, and garlic (mixture will sputter). Let stand until steam subsides and skillet cools slightly, about 5 minutes. Add pork to skillet. Mash and mix with rubber spatula until spice mixture is evenly incorporated into pork.

3. Return skillet to medium-high heat and cook, mashing and stirring until pork has broken into fine crumbles and juices are bubbling, about 3 minutes.

4. Stir in potatoes, cover, and reduce heat to low. Cook until potatoes are fully softened and have soaked up most of pork juices, 6 to 8 minutes, stirring halfway through cooking. Off heat, using spatula, mash approximately one-eighth of potatoes. Stir mixture until mashed potatoes are evenly distributed. Cover and keep warm.

5. FOR THE SAUCE: Process all ingredients in food processor until smooth, about 1 minute, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Transfer to serving bowl.

6. FOR THE TACOS: Spoon filling into center of each tortilla and serve, passing sauce, onion, cilantro, and lime wedges separately.

Pan-Seared Thick-Cut Pork Chops

We always knew that the key to chops with a deep sear is a screaming-hot pan. What we didn't know is that it's also the trick to producing a juicy, tender interior.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Pork chops seem like a good candidate for a weeknight meal: They're quick to cook and, when given a nice crusty sear, are flavorful. But since most pork is pretty lean, chops are easy to overcook, resulting in leathery, dried-out meat. Thicker chops—which require more time to cook through—give you a wider window of time to build up a solid sear before the interiors are overdone. But after looking for thick-cut (1½ inches or thicker) chops at a number of supermarkets and coming up short, I realized that if I wanted a juicy interior and a substantial crust, I was going to have to butcher a pork roast into chops myself.

For the best thick-cut pork chops, cut them yourself and (mostly) leave them be in a cast-iron skillet.

Chop Chop

Although rib bones insulate meat from heat, helping prevent overcooking, I decided right off the bat that I'd cut boneless chops for two reasons. First, the rib bones can be a challenge to slice through. Second, you don't get to decide how thick to make the chops, since that is dictated by the spacing between the ribs (usually about an inch). Starting with a boneless roast would make it possible to fashion chops of any thickness.

As for the type of roast, I considered both blade-end and center-cut loin roasts. Blade-end roasts come from near the shoulder of the animal and contain more fat, which made for slightly juicier chops. But that wasn't enough to overcome the cut's drawbacks: For one thing, the fattier parts are found only at the very end of the roast, meaning that you can't cut four identical chops. This roast also tends to widen toward the blade end, making it impossible to cut chops of equal thickness and weight. On the other hand, a center-cut roast, which comes from the pig's back, is compact, cylindrical, and lean from end to end, making it ideal for home-cut chops. What's more, it's readily available in most supermarkets.

See the Sear
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/feb17

I cut my center-cut pork loin roast crosswise into four even pieces. The thickness of the chops varied slightly depending on the diameter of the loin, but I found that starting with a 2½-pound roast guaranteed chops at least 1½ inches thick.

Flip Answer

We typically brine or salt pork to season it and enhance or maintain the meat's juiciness. But since the moisture added by brining would impede browning, I dismissed it—I didn't want to wait 45 minutes for the surface to dry out. As it turned out, salting the meat also interfered with developing a rich crust since it brought some of the meat's moisture to the surface. I decided to simply season the meat just prior to cooking. But here was the crux of the problem: To get the rich mahogany crust and juicy interior I was after, I needed to cook the meat both at high heat and more gently at the same time, a seeming contradiction.

Until now, I'd been using a basic approach to searing, cooking the chops in a stainless-steel skillet with a couple of teaspoons of oil over high heat and flipping them once. But the skillet never got hot enough to produce a great crust. I switched to a cast-iron skillet, which gets—and stays—exceptionally hot, even when four thick chops (which absorb a lot of heat from the metal) are added. The trick with cast iron is to preheat it thoroughly, so I put it in a cold oven set to 500 degrees and waited for the oven to come to temperature, by which time the pan would be well saturated with heat—the method we used in our Cast Iron Steaks with Herb Butter recipe. I also added more oil (2 tablespoons total) to the pan, which ensured that the chops, which tended to pull away from the pan here and there as they cooked, made full contact with the heat and seared evenly.

Now that the exterior was gorgeously brown, I focused on the interior. The chops needed to hit 140 degrees for serving, but that didn't mean I had to keep them in the pan to get them there, since they'd continue to cook off heat—the phenomenon referred to as carryover cooking. Usually, we remove meat from direct heat about 5 to 10 degrees shy of the serving temperature to avoid overcooking, but I wondered if the extreme heat I was getting on the chops' exteriors would allow me to take the meat off the heat sooner. In other words, could I use the high heat to my advantage?

It sounded counterintuitive, but it actually worked brilliantly. By the time the chops were seared on both sides, the meat registered 125 degrees, and there was more than enough residual heat on their surfaces to push them to 140 as they rested under foil. The only flaw was the gray band of overcooked meat that developed just below the surface as each side spent several minutes sitting over the heat to sear. The fix was to flip the chops every couple of minutes as they cooked, which slowed down cooking and just about eliminated the overcooked layer of meat.

The chops ultimately spend the same amount

Spotlight on Sauce

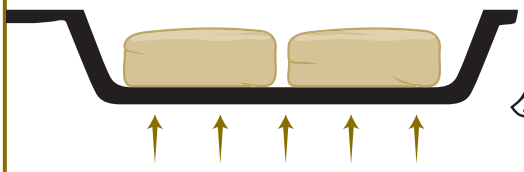
Our easy no-cook sauces add richness to the lean chops, but a little bit goes a long way: Too much sauce will make the crust on the pork soggy.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Hotter Pan, Juicier Chops

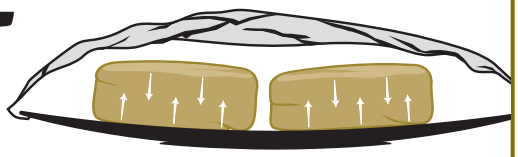
Searing pork chops in a blazing-hot cast-iron skillet was an obvious way to brown them deeply. But as we discovered, it was also a great way to keep a relatively lean cut juicy. That's because the internal temperature of the chops continues to rise off the heat—the phenomenon referred to as carryover cooking—and the hotter the exteriors of the chops got, the more heat there was to transfer to the centers. As a result, we were able to take the chops off the heat 15 degrees shy of the serving temperature and rely on much gentler residual heat to finish cooking them as they rested.

START COOKING IN THE PAN



A superhot skillet builds up heat on the chops' exteriors.

FINISH COOKING ON THE PLATE



As the chops rest, residual heat brings their interiors to a safe temperature.

of time in contact with the pan as they would with uninterrupted searing on each side, but with every flip, some of the heat that accumulates in the chop dissipates, preventing overcooking on the interior.

No brining. No salting. No fancy techniques. These were by far the easiest pork chops I'd ever made, and they looked and tasted great. But to give the recipe plenty of utility—even for company, since thick-cut chops are nice for entertaining—I decided to develop a few sauces to dress up the chops. I made them intensely flavored and relatively rich to give the meat plenty of character, but they're still quick enough to whip up any night of the week. In a nod to the vinegar-pepper topping commonly found in Italian pork chop recipes, I created a roasted red pepper–vinegar sauce. I also pulled together a couple of pesto-like concoctions: a French mint persillade (a parsley-based sauce with garlic and oil) and a Sicilian-inspired walnut and raisin pesto.

PAN-SEARED THICK-CUT BONELESS PORK CHOPS

SERVES 4

Look for a pork loin that is 7 to 8 inches long and 3 to 3½ inches in diameter. We strongly prefer using natural pork here. Using pork that is enhanced (injected with a salt solution) will inhibit browning. This recipe works best in a cast-iron skillet, but a 12-inch stainless-steel skillet will work. Serve the chops with our Roasted Red Pepper–Vinegar Sauce or our Mint Persillade (recipes follow), if desired.

- 1 (2½- to 3-pound) boneless center-cut pork loin roast, trimmed
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position, place 12-inch cast-iron skillet on rack, and heat oven to 500 degrees. Meanwhile, cut roast crosswise into 4 chops of equal thickness.

2. When oven reaches 500 degrees, pat chops dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Using potholders, remove skillet from oven and place over high heat. Being careful of hot skillet handle, add oil and heat until just smoking. Add chops and cook, without moving them, until lightly browned on first side, about 2 minutes. Flip chops and cook until lightly browned on second side, about 2 minutes.

3. Flip chops and continue to cook, flipping every 2 minutes and adjusting heat as necessary if chops brown too quickly or slowly, until exteriors are well browned and meat registers 125 to 130 degrees, 10 to 12 minutes longer. Transfer chops to platter, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for 15 minutes (temperature will climb to 140 degrees). Serve.

ROASTED RED PEPPER–VINEGAR SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

Red wine vinegar or sherry vinegar can be substituted for the white wine vinegar, if desired.

- ¾ cup jarred roasted red peppers, rinsed and patted dry
- 2 jarred hot cherry peppers, stems removed
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- 2 teaspoons dried rosemary, lightly crushed
- 2 anchovy fillets, rinsed and patted dry
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ cup water
- 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
- ⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

Pulse red peppers, cherry peppers, garlic, rosemary, anchovies, salt, and pepper in food processor until finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses. Add water and vinegar and pulse briefly to combine. Transfer mixture to medium bowl and slowly whisk in oil until fully incorporated. Stir in parsley.

TECHNIQUE

DIY THICK-CUT PORK CHOPS

Most supermarkets don't carry superthick (at least 1½ inches) boneless chops. Fortunately, it's a cinch to cut them yourself from a center-cut loin roast.

If necessary, trim to square off ends. Divide roast in half crosswise. Divide each half again crosswise to form 4 equal-size chops.

MINT PERSILLADE

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

You can substitute 1½ teaspoons of anchovy paste for the fillets, if desired.

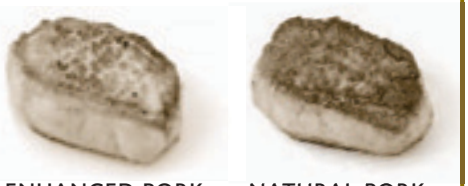
- 1 cup fresh mint leaves
- 1 cup fresh parsley leaves
- 3 garlic cloves, peeled
- 3 anchovy fillets, rinsed and patted dry
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest plus 1 tablespoon juice
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- ⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil

Pulse mint, parsley, garlic, anchovies, lemon zest, salt, and pepper in food processor until finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses. Add lemon juice and pulse briefly to combine. Transfer mixture to medium bowl and slowly whisk in oil until fully incorporated.

SHOPPING

Go Natural

For a better sear and deeper flavor, look for natural, not enhanced, pork. Enhanced pork is injected with a solution of salt, water, and sodium phosphate (this will be indicated on the packaging) that we've found thwarts browning and dulls the flavor of the meat.



ENHANCED PORK
Faint sear

NATURAL PORK
Deep sear

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Grilled Pork Tenderloin

For a rich crust and tender, juicy meat, we explored the highs and lows of grilling.

BY STEVE DUNN

Anyone who has simply thrown a pork tenderloin over a hot fire knows that its exterior will quickly overcook before its interior comes up to temperature, guaranteeing a thick gray band of dry meat between the tenderloin's crust and its thicker center. That's why many pork tenderloin grilling recipes call for setting up a half-grill fire, where the hot coals are spread evenly over just half the bottom of the grill. That way, there's a hotter side for searing the meat to develop flavorful browning and a cooler side for cooking it gently so that it stays tender and juicy. But does it matter if you sear the meat before or after it cooks on the cooler side?

To find out, I seasoned four pork tenderloins with salt and pepper, set up two grills with half-grill fires, and started one pair of tenderloins over the cooler sides and the other pair over the hotter sides. We've successfully used this reverse-searing technique in the past to cook pan-seared thick steaks and beef roasts, so I was placing my bets on the pair started on the cooler sides of the grills. In this setup, the bulk of the cooking takes place over low heat, resulting in meat that is cooked evenly from edge to edge (the lower the temperature, the less variation in doneness).

A grilled salsa, made while the meat rests, enhances the smoky char flavor.

But as it turned out, this technique didn't translate well to grilling pork tenderloins. The key with reverse searing is knowing when to move the meat from low heat to high heat to ensure that the interior is just cooked through at the same time the meat is sufficiently browned. Stovetop heat is fairly standard, meaning meat will brown within the same narrow window of time from one stove to the next. But the heat output of grills (especially gas grills) is far more variable. Moving the meat to the hotter side when it reaches, say, 110 degrees might give it enough time to brown on one grill, but it might take far longer on another.

Searing the meat first, when any charcoal grill would be at its hottest, was the best way to guarantee a rich crust and a juicy, rosy interior every time. To minimize any gray band, I also turned the meat every 2 minutes as it seared (it took about 8 minutes total) and again every 5 minutes once I moved it to the cooler side.

All these beautifully browned tenderloins needed was a bit more seasoning and character. So I applied a simple spice rub to the exteriors of the roasts: salt; sugar, which aided browning; and cumin and chipotle chile powder for savory smokiness. I also created an easy grilled pineapple–onion salsa that added bright punch and made use of the hotter side of the grill while the tenderloins cooked through on the cooler side.

See How Simple It Is
A step-by-step video is available at Cooksillustrated.com/june17

GRILLED PORK TENDERLOIN WITH GRILLED PINEAPPLE–RED ONION SALSA

SERVES 4 TO 6

We prefer unenhanced pork in this recipe, but enhanced pork (injected with a salt solution) can be used.

Pork

- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt
- 1½ teaspoons sugar
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon chipotle chile powder
- 2 (12- to 16-ounce) pork tenderloins, trimmed

Salsa

- ½ pineapple, peeled, cored, and cut lengthwise into 6 wedges
- 1 red onion, cut into 8 wedges through root end
- 4 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ cup minced fresh cilantro
- 1 serrano chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced
- 2 tablespoons lime juice, plus extra for seasoning
- Salt

1. FOR THE PORK: Combine salt, sugar, cumin, and chile powder in small bowl. Reserve ½ teaspoon spice mixture. Rub remaining spice mixture evenly over surface of both tenderloins. Transfer to large plate or rimmed baking sheet and refrigerate while preparing grill.

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

2B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave primary burner on high and turn off other burner(s).

3. Clean and oil cooking grate. Place tenderloins on hotter side of grill. Cover and cook, turning tenderloins every 2 minutes, until well browned on all sides, about 8 minutes.

4. FOR THE SALSA: Brush pineapple and onion with 1 teaspoon oil. Move tenderloins to cooler side of grill (6 to 8 inches from heat source) and place pineapple and onion on hotter side of grill. Cover and cook until pineapple and onion are charred on both sides and softened, 8 to 10 minutes, and until pork registers 140 degrees, 12 to 17 minutes, turning tenderloins every 5 minutes. As pineapple and onion and tenderloins reach desired level of doneness, transfer pineapple and onion to plate and transfer tenderloins to carving board. Tent tenderloins with aluminum foil and let rest for 10 minutes.

5. While tenderloins rest, roughly chop pineapple. Pulse pineapple, onion, cilantro, serrano, lime juice, reserved spice mixture, and remaining 1 tablespoon oil in food processor until mixture is roughly chopped, 4 to 6 pulses. Transfer to bowl and season with salt and extra lime juice to taste.

6. Slice tenderloins crosswise ½ inch thick. Serve with salsa.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Crispy Pan-Fried Chicken Cutlets

We ditch the classic breading technique and think about crumb size.

BY LAN LAM

Chicken cutlets coated in bread crumbs and pan-fried are a quick crowd-pleaser. But I've always thought that their shortcomings—an uneven crust that's often soggy, greasy, and insufficiently browned—get a bit of a hall pass. Plus, there's the fussy three-step breading process of flour, egg, and bread crumbs. I set out to make a version with a perfectly golden-brown crust—and to streamline things.

I began by cutting four breasts in half horizontally and pounding the fatter ends to create a uniform ¼-inch thickness. I seasoned both sides of the cutlets with salt; lined up bowls of flour, egg, and homemade toasted bread crumbs; and proceeded with the usual steps: Blot the cutlets dry, dip them in each bowl, and shallow-fry them in oil. The results exhibited the flaws typical of this dish, and the breading created dirty dishes and extra steps I wanted to eliminate.

First, instead of salting, flipping, and salting each cutlet, I simply whisked salt into the eggs. Next, I considered the flour and egg. Theoretically, the flour helps the egg adhere to the chicken and the egg holds on to the bread crumbs. Egg was essential—when I tried dipping cutlets into bread crumbs without it, only a few clung—but what about the flour? When I left it out, the egg and bread crumbs clung to the chicken just fine. Plus, after cooking a batch, I noticed that the coating's texture had changed—it was more delicate. Plus, without the flour in the mix, I realized I could skip patting the chicken dry.

Finally, I focused on the bread crumbs. I swapped the homemade ones for panko, which are dry and airy and make for an ultracrunchy coating. But I noticed that the panko sometimes clung unevenly because the size of the crumbs varied and large pieces didn't cling well. I needed a mix of medium and largish crumbs. The larger crumbs would provide crunch while the medium bits would fill in the gaps to make a uniform but not dense coating. To achieve this, I poured the panko into a bag and broke down the larger pieces with a rolling pin. With these crumbs, the cutlets had a perfectly even coating. It was time to fine-tune the cooking method.

One of the main challenges of frying is making sure that the food cooks through and the exterior browns and crisps simultaneously. I heated ¼ cup of vegetable oil in a skillet over medium-high heat, and as soon as shimmery whorls appeared, I slipped four cutlets into the pan. After 30 seconds or so, they began to sizzle. I let the cutlets cook undisturbed until the crumbs were golden brown, and then I flipped them to cook the second side. The exteriors were nicely browned, but the meat was overcooked. And I noticed that the second batch browned unevenly and was flecked with small pieces of burnt panko.

Clearly, the timing was off: To avoid overcooking the meat, I needed to use hotter oil to deliver faster browning. For my next batch, I added a pinch of panko to the skillet with the oil. Only when the bits of panko floating in the oil had turned golden brown did I place the chicken in the skillet. The immediate sizzle was a sure sign that I was on the right track. And to fix the spotty browning and burnt bits of panko in the second batch, I discarded the cooking oil after the first batch and started over with fresh oil. As soon as each cutlet was done, I transferred it to a paper towel–lined wire rack. Most recipes just note to set aside the chicken, but steam on the underside will condense and turn the coating soggy. Elevating the cutlets on a rack would prevent this, and the paper towel would wick away any excess oil.

The results were impressive: tender, juicy chicken and a perfectly golden-brown coating. All that these cutlets required was a squeeze of lemon, but to go beyond the everyday, I turned east for inspiration. In Japan, breaded chicken cutlets (known as chicken *katsu*) are often served sliced over a bowl of rice with a tangy barbecue-style sauce known as *tonkatsu* that's made with ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, Dijon mustard, and soy sauce. I also put together a creamy option featuring curry powder and garlic. These cutlets are equally good on a salad or sandwiched in buns and topped with lettuce and sauce.

CRISPY PAN-FRIED CHICKEN CUTLETS

SERVES 4 TO 6

Remove any tenderloins from the breasts before halving them. The breasts will be easier to slice into cutlets if you freeze them for 15 minutes. If you're working with 8-ounce breasts, the skillet will initially be crowded; the cutlets will shrink as they cook. The first batch can be kept warm in a 200-degree oven while you cook the second batch. The cooked cutlets can be sliced into ½-inch-wide strips and served over rice with Tonkatsu Sauce or Garlic-Curry Sauce (recipes follow). They can also be served spritzed with lemon, in a sandwich, or over a green salad.

- 2 cups panko bread crumbs
- 2 large eggs
- Salt
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed, halved horizontally, and pounded ¼ inch thick
- ½ cup vegetable oil

1. Place panko in large zipper-lock bag and lightly crush with rolling pin. Transfer to shallow dish. Whisk eggs and 1 teaspoon salt in second shallow dish until well combined.

2. Working with 1 cutlet at a time, dredge cutlets in egg mixture, allowing excess to drip off, then coat all sides with panko, pressing gently so crumbs adhere. Transfer cutlets to rimmed baking sheet.

3. Set wire rack in second rimmed baking sheet and line rack with paper towels. Heat ¼ cup oil and small pinch panko in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat. When panko has turned golden brown, place 4 cutlets in skillet. Cook, without moving cutlets, until bottoms are deep golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Using tongs, carefully flip cutlets and cook on second side until deep golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer cutlets to prepared rack and season with salt to taste. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels. Repeat with remaining ¼ cup oil and remaining 4 cutlets. Serve immediately.

TONKATSU SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT ⅓ CUP

You can substitute yellow mustard for the Dijon, but do not use a grainy mustard.

- ¼ cup ketchup
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

Whisk all ingredients together in bowl.

GARLIC-CURRY SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

Full-fat and nonfat yogurt will both work well here.

- ⅓ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ cup plain yogurt
- 2 tablespoons ketchup
- 2 teaspoons curry powder
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- ¼ teaspoon minced garlic

Whisk all ingredients together in bowl.

Watch the Process
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/oct17

Fastest Weeknight Chicken

Two keys to getting a whole chicken on the table quickly? Start it in a cold oven and then crank up the broiler.

BY LAN LAM

A juicy, crisp-skinned roast chicken is always welcome in my house, but achieving it on a weeknight can seem like wishful thinking. A few years back, we made this goal more manageable with our Weeknight Roast Chicken, which cut a good 40 minutes off the usual 2½-hour preparation time. That recipe eliminates brining (and salting, which must be done overnight) and calls for starting the bird in a preheated skillet in a very hot oven and then turning off the heat midway through cooking. The hot skillet jump-starts the cooking of the thighs, while finishing the bird in a cooling oven ensures that the breast stays moist and tender. Though a roast chicken that clocks in at 1 hour and 50 minutes from start to finish is impressive, I wondered if I could speed things up even more.

The chicken leaves flavorful drippings in the pan that make a great sauce; we simply add fresh thyme and garlic.

Racking Up Solutions

Out of the gate I knew that, as in our previous recipe, I would skip salting and brining to save as much time as possible. Next, I made a big decision: I wouldn't roast my chicken. Instead, I would broil it. An oven takes 20 minutes to preheat, while a broiler requires just 5 minutes. Beyond that, roasting relies on the air in the oven to transfer heat to the chicken, and air is a poor conductor. A broiler heats the chicken directly via waves of radiant heat, which transfer heat much more efficiently.

Flattening the bird by butterflying it was the essential first step. If I didn't do this, the skin on the breast, which would be situated close to the heat, would burn before the thighs, located farther away, would cook through. With a good pair of kitchen shears, the task took just a few minutes. I snipped down either side of the backbone and removed it. I then flipped the chicken over, breast side up, and pressed firmly on the breastbone to flatten the bird. Finally, I tucked the wings beneath the breasts to keep them from burning. After applying a thin coat of oil, I generously seasoned both sides with salt and pepper.

See How It's Done
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/apr17

But before I could start broiling, I needed to settle on a rack position. While one might reflexively use the top rack for broiling, it's not always the best option. Think of the broiler element in an electric oven as a collection of hot lights affixed to the top of the oven. The farther the food is from the "lights," the more diffuse and uniform the illuminated area, while placing food closer to the element will create concentrated spots of "light" (for more information, see "For Perfect Broiled Chicken, Keep It out of the Spotlight"). To cook the chicken evenly and efficiently, I needed to set the oven rack far enough from the element to minimize the number of hot spots but not so far away that the chicken cooked too slowly.

I broiled a few birds, placing the rack about 6 inches from the element and moving it progressively farther away. As I expected, the farther away I placed the rack, the more even the cooking and browning became—but too far and the chicken cooked through before I got enough browning on the skin. Twelve to 13 inches from the broiler was the sweet spot. I preheated the broiler, placed my butterflied chicken on a baking sheet, and slid the sheet into the oven, rotating it once halfway through the cooking time.

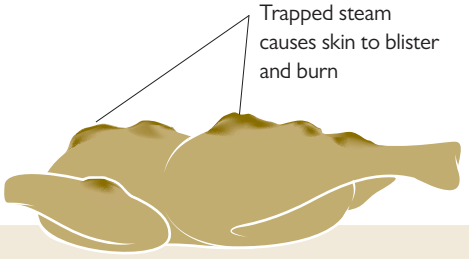
The results were promising but not perfect. I'd shaved off about 30 minutes (it took me 1 hour and 20 minutes start to finish), and after the prep, it was totally hands-off except for the quick rotation. But though I'd stopped cooking at our usual target doneness temperature of 160 degrees, the breast was dry and overcooked, while the leg quarters were undercooked. Plus, there were problems with the skin. Despite the fact that I'd flattened the bird and rotated it during cooking, the skin had blistered and blackened in spots, particularly on the legs, which had contracted due to the intense heat and drawn up away from the skillet, closer to the heat source. The fat also hadn't rendered away completely, leaving the skin rubbery in places. I wanted to fix these problems, and I wanted to shave off even more time.

The Heat Is on (and Off)

To help the fat deposits under the skin render better, I used a paring knife to pierce the skin in multiple

Prevent Blackened Skin

In our early tests, the chicken's skin bubbled up from the meat, which put it closer to the broiler and caused it to burn. Our solution? Pierce the skin at ¾-inch intervals all over the bird, which provides enough vents for steam to escape.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

spots, which would allow the fat to escape. As for getting the dark and white meat to reach the right doneness temperatures at the same time, I needed to slow down the rate at which the white meat cooked while speeding up the dark meat. My solution was two-pronged. First, I swapped out the baking sheet for a skillet and preheated the skillet on the stovetop before adding the chicken. Second, I didn't preheat the broiler but rather put the chicken in a cold oven and then turned on the broiler. This allowed the legs to begin cooking as soon as the chicken went into the hot pan, while the breast side, held slightly away from the pan by the ribs, would cook from above at a slower rate. To further ensure that the legs wouldn't scorch, I tied them together with kitchen twine to keep them from drawing up toward the heat source.

As yet another safeguard against overcooking, I decided to remove the chicken from the oven a little sooner. A chicken roasted until the breast meat reaches an internal temperature of 160 degrees carries over about 5 to 7 degrees, but because of the broiler's more intense, direct heat, the meat was carrying over more—an extra 10 to 15 degrees. This left the lean breast meat dried out and chalky. Removing the chicken from the oven when the breast reached 155 degrees allowed it to carry over to just the right temperature and helped keep it moist. The thighs reached about 180 degrees, above our usual target of 175 degrees, but with their extra fat for protection, they could handle it. As a bonus, pulling the chicken out earlier shaved off a couple more minutes.

Poking Holes

Now my chicken was much more tender and juicy. But the skin wasn't what I had imagined—it was still too dark in spots. Upon closer inspection I saw that the portions of skin that I had pierced had stayed flush against the meat and were perfectly browned. But the remaining unpierced areas were blistered and blackened. Here's why: Water exuded by the meat was turning into steam. In areas where that steam couldn't escape, it inflated the skin away from the flesh. The closer the skin was to the broiler element, the more it charred. The fix was simple. When I pierced the skin at ¾-inch intervals all over, sure enough, the chicken emerged from the broiler with deeply and evenly browned, well-rendered skin.

After transferring the bird to a carving board, I contemplated the drippings left in the skillet. They were nicely seasoned and had an intense chicken flavor. Could I turn them into a pan sauce with minimal work? I stirred in a smashed garlic clove and some thyme sprigs and let them infuse while the chicken rested; then I skimmed the fat from the surface with a spoon. The impact was impressive; I had a simple but surprisingly full-flavored sauce to serve alongside the chicken.

When I glanced up at the clock, I saw that I had cut the cooking time down to 45 minutes and the total time to 1 hour and 5 minutes. Here was a golden-brown, juicy, tender, hands-off broiled chicken and sauce fit for any night of the week.

ONE-HOUR BROILED CHICKEN AND PAN SAUCE

SERVES 4

If your broiler has multiple settings, choose the highest one. This recipe requires a broiler-safe skillet. In step 3, if the skin is dark golden brown but the breast has not yet reached 155 degrees, cover the chicken with aluminum foil and continue to broil. Monitor the temperature of the chicken carefully during the final 10 minutes of cooking, because it can quickly overcook. Do not attempt this recipe with a drawer broiler.

- 1 (4-pound) whole chicken, giblets discarded
- 1½ teaspoons vegetable oil
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and crushed
- Lemon wedges

1. Adjust oven rack 12 to 13 inches from broiler element (do not preheat broiler). Place chicken breast side down on cutting board. Using kitchen shears, cut through bones on either side of backbone. Trim off any excess fat and skin and discard backbone. Flip chicken over and press on breastbone to flatten. Using tip of paring knife, poke holes through skin over entire surface of chicken, spacing them approximately ¾ inch apart.

2. Rub ½ teaspoon oil over skin and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Flip chicken over, sprinkle bone side with ½ teaspoon salt, and season with pepper. Tie legs together with kitchen twine and tuck wings under breasts.

3. Heat remaining 1 teaspoon oil in broiler-safe 12-inch skillet over high heat until just smoking. Place chicken in skillet, skin side up, and transfer to oven, positioning skillet as close to center of oven as handle allows (turn handle so it points toward one of oven's front corners.) Turn on broiler and broil chicken for 25 minutes. Rotate skillet by moving handle to opposite front corner of oven and continue to broil until skin is dark golden brown and thickest part of breast registers 155 degrees, 20 to 30 minutes longer.

4. Transfer chicken to carving board and let rest, uncovered, for 15 minutes. While chicken rests, stir thyme sprigs and garlic into juices in pan and let stand for 10 minutes.

5. Using spoon, skim fat from surface of pan juices. Carve chicken and transfer any accumulated juices to pan. Strain sauce through fine-mesh strainer and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve chicken, passing pan sauce and lemon wedges separately.

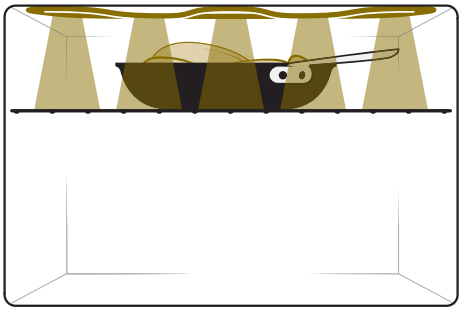
CORE TECHNIQUE

REMOVING THE BACKBONE

Butterflying the chicken allows for even cooking under the broiler's direct heat and also speeds up the cooking process. To remove the backbone, place the chicken breast side down on a cutting board and use kitchen shears to cut along each side of the backbone. A good pair of shears is key (the text kitchen's favorite pair is the Kershaw Taskmaster Shears/Shun Multipurpose Shears, $49.95).

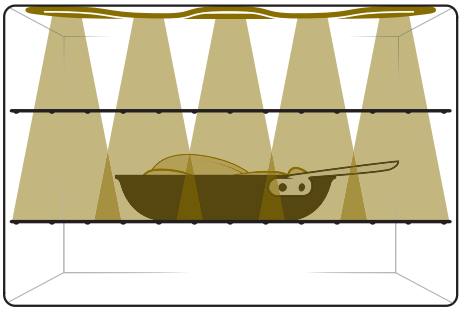
For Perfect Broiled Chicken, Keep It out of the Spotlight

For even cooking and browning, the butterflied chicken must be placed at the right distance from the broiler element. Though electric (illustrated below) and gas broilers are designed differently, both work the same way: The radiant heat is more focused and intense near the element and becomes more diffuse the farther away it gets.



SPOTTY COVERAGE

When the oven rack is placed too close to the broiler element, the heat radiating from the "spotlights" is concentrated, resulting in burnt skin and uneven cooking.



UNIFORM COVERAGE

When the oven rack is placed farther from the broiler element, the heat radiating from the "spotlights" is diffused, which results in browned skin and even cooking.

Chicken and Sausage Gumbo

The depth and body of this Louisiana mainstay largely depend on a humble pantry staple: flour. We rethought its treatment—from how it is cooked to how it is incorporated.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Like any folk recipe, gumbo has hundreds of variations. The flavor, texture, and even the provenance of this legendary dish—a symbol of melting-pot cooking—are all fodder for debate.

There are, however, some characteristics that all gumbos share. Some are brothy, while others are thick. A pot typically holds seafood, poultry, or wild game, along with andouille sausage or some type of cured smoked pork. The proteins are simmered with the "holy trinity" of celery, bell pepper, and onion while seasonings such as garlic, cayenne, paprika, thyme, and bay leaves provide complexity. This mix is thickened slightly, sometimes with okra or ground dried sassafras leaves, known as filé ("fee-LAY") powder. Last, and perhaps most important, is the roux—a slow-cooked mixture of flour and fat that gives the gumbo its deep brown color, a bit of body, and a toasty flavor.

Inspired by the late Louisiana chef Paul Prudhomme's dark, meaty, poultry-centric gumbo, I decided to develop my own recipe featuring just chicken and andouille. I also opted to omit okra and filé—okra is more typical of shrimp- and tomato-based gumbos, and filé's distinct, earthy flavor can be polarizing.

Gumbo doesn't always include shrimp. Our version pairs shredded chicken thighs with slices of garlicky andouille sausage.

Roux-minating

I started with the roux. In classic French cuisine, roux can be cooked to shades ranging from blondish white to the color of peanut butter. But Cajun and Creole chefs push the roux much further—to a deep, dark brown or even just short of black—to develop the toasty, nutty flavor that characterizes gumbo. To guard against burning, the roux is stirred constantly over low heat, meaning it can take an hour or more of hands-on attention to make.

That said, there are renegade techniques for making dark roux that don't require stirring at the stove for long (if at all). I found methods using the microwave or the oven, as well as a quick one that involved heating the oil on the stovetop until smoking and then adding the flour.

Watch Every Step
A step-by-step video is available at Cooksillustrated.com/feb17

Working with the typical 1:1 ratio of all-purpose flour to vegetable oil—½ cup of each for now—I first tried the quick method of adding flour to smoking oil. This produced a superdark roux in a mere 10 minutes, but the flour was more burnt than deeply toasted. The microwave wasn't much more hands-off than the stove, as I had to stir the roux frequently between short bursts of heating. However, in the dry, even heat of a 425-degree oven, a roux required stirring just every 20 minutes. The downside was that it took 1¼ hours to reach the proper dark chocolate color.

Still, I pressed on. In the roux, I sautéed onion, celery, and green bell pepper. I then poured in 6 cups of chicken broth and added a couple of pounds of boneless, skinless chicken thighs and some sliced andouille. I kept the seasonings simple for now: cayenne, bay leaves, and thyme sprigs. I simmered the gumbo until the chicken was tender, at which point I removed it, shredded it for easy eating, and added it back to the pot. This version boasted just the right toastiness from the roux, but the seasonings needed tweaking.

I'd address those later. For now, I wanted to deal with the fact that the roux had taken more than an hour to make. Plus, my gumbo was thin, with a thick slick of grease that had to be skimmed off the surface. That wasn't surprising: The fat in a typical roux coats its flour particles, making it easier for them to disperse in a hot liquid without forming lumps. At the same time, the starch chains in the flour are becoming hydrated and thickening the hot liquid. But browning the flour for a gumbo's roux weakens its ability to trap (and thereby thicken) liquid as well as its ability to keep the fat in it from separating and pooling on the surface. This is where okra and filé powder—secondary thickeners—usually come in, but I stuck to my decision to keep them out of the pot.

At this point, I considered a less-common approach that I had initially dismissed: a dry roux, where the flour is toasted without fat. The benefits were clear: no hot oil-flour paste to stand over, no skimming, and—while it hadn't been my original goal—a gumbo with less fat overall. What, if anything, would I be losing if I ditched the oil?

To find out, I would need to produce a dry roux comparable in color to the wet roux I'd been using. Dry roux can be made on the stovetop or in the microwave, but each method has the same challenges as a wet roux does, so I stuck with the oven. Conveniently, a hands-off dry roux cooked faster than the wet kind, clocking in at about 45 minutes. That's because a hot pan transfers heat more rapidly to dry flour than to oil-coated flour, as oil is a much poorer conductor of heat energy than hot metal is.

I moved forward, making two batches: one with a dry roux and one with a wet roux. Happily, the dry-roux gumbo boasted a dark color, rich flavor that compared favorably to the wet-roux gumbo, and a minimal grease slick. What's more, thanks to the dark-meat chicken and sausage, the dish didn't taste lean, even though I'd cut out ½ cup of oil. Satisfied, I shifted my focus to the gumbo's consistency.

The most obvious way to make the gumbo thicker was to increase the amount of roux. I gradually added more flour until I hit a full cup. It helped, but it wasn't enough (see "The Thick (and Thin) of It"). Rather than up the roux amount even more, which might

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

RECIPE TESTING The Right Hue for Roux

After making a traditional wet roux (cooked flour and fat) in the microwave, on the stovetop, and in the oven, we opted for a less-traditional method that calls for toasting the flour with no fat. This dry roux can be made on the stovetop or in the microwave, but we found that baking the flour in a skillet in a 425-degree oven until it was the color of ground cinnamon gave our gumbo just the right amount of nutty toastiness along with an appealing rich color. That toasty flavor happens when flour is heated to the point where its starch breaks down and undergoes the Maillard reaction, forming dark brown pigments and flavorful compounds.

We cooked flour to different shades before determining that a shade similar to that of ground cinnamon (which took about 40 minutes to develop) gave us the best gumbo.

have overwhelmed the dish, I decided to compensate by decreasing the amount of broth. After a few tests, I found that using just 4 cups finally gave me the perfect ratio of liquid to dark roux, yielding a rich, glossy, emulsified gumbo with body that coated the back of a spoon.

So Efficient

My gumbo was coming along and, at this point, took just under 2 hours from start to finish. I wondered if I could speed things along by adding the roux at the end of cooking instead of the beginning. That way I could prep my other ingredients and start cooking while the flour toasted.

Whisking the roux directly into the simmering broth made it difficult to incorporate without clumping, so I decided to reserve half the broth used for cooking the chicken to make a paste with the flour, allowing me to break up any lumps beforehand. Bingo: The paste whisked seamlessly into the remaining broth. Now I had rich, dark, luscious gumbo in just under 90 minutes.

All that was left to do was enliven the flavors. I stirred in ground black pepper, paprika, and minced garlic to mimic and highlight the seasonings in the andouille. I also incorporated some sliced scallions, a common garnish. The gumbo needed acidity to lift its rich, meaty flavor, but rather than add hot sauce (the usual final flourish), I stirred in clean-tasting white vinegar, letting my guests choose whether to add hot sauce to their own portions.

As I ladled my gumbo over a pile of white rice, I was satisfied with my recipe, and as I watched it disappear from the pot, I knew everyone else was, too.

CHICKEN AND SAUSAGE GUMBO

SERVES 6

This recipe is engineered for efficiency: Start toasting the flour in the oven before prepping the remaining ingredients and beginning to cook. We strongly recommend using andouille, but in a pinch, you can substitute kielbasa, if desired. In step 3, be sure to whisk the broth into the toasted flour in small increments to prevent lumps from forming. The saltiness of the final dish may vary depending on the brand of andouille you use, so liberal seasoning with additional salt before serving may be necessary. Serve over white rice.

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 1 green bell pepper, chopped fine
- 2 celery ribs, chopped fine
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 2 bay leaves
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- Salt and pepper
- 4 cups chicken broth, room temperature
- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed
- 8 ounces andouille sausage, halved and sliced ¼ inch thick
- 6 scallions, sliced thin
- 1 teaspoon distilled white vinegar
- Hot sauce

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Place flour in 12-inch skillet and bake, stirring occasionally, until color of ground cinnamon, 40 to 55 minutes. (As flour approaches desired color, it will take on very nutty aroma that will smell faintly of burnt popcorn, and it will need to be stirred more frequently.) Transfer flour to medium bowl and let cool. (Toasted flour can be stored in airtight container in cool, dark place for up to 6 months.)

2. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, bell pepper, and celery and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in thyme, garlic, paprika, bay leaves, cayenne, ¼ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in 2 cups broth. Add chicken in single layer (chicken will not be completely submerged in liquid) and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer until chicken is fork-tender, 15 to 17 minutes. Transfer chicken to plate.

3. Slowly whisk remaining 2 cups broth in small increments into toasted flour until thick, smooth, batter-like paste forms. Increase heat to medium and slowly whisk paste into gumbo, making sure each addition is incorporated before adding next. Stir in andouille. Simmer, uncovered, until gumbo thickens slightly, 20 to 25 minutes.

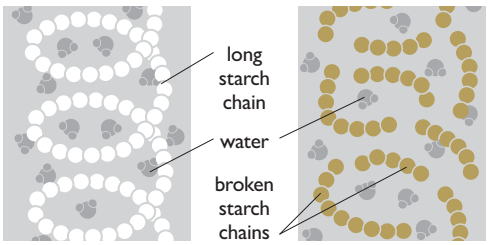
4. Once cool enough to handle, shred chicken into bite-size pieces. Stir chicken and scallions into gumbo. Remove pot from heat, stir in vinegar, and season with salt to taste. Discard bay leaves. Serve, passing hot sauce separately. (Gumbo can be refrigerated in airtight container for up to 3 days.)

SCIENCE The Thick (and Thin) of It

In addition to a roux, gumbos are thickened with okra (in fact, the name "gumbo" likely stems from *ki ngombo*, which is the word for okra in several central and southern African dialects), or filé powder (ground sassafras leaves). Because both ingredients can be polarizing—people either love or hate the slippery texture of okra and the root-beery taste of filé—we turned to the roux alone to thicken our broth. But this decision was not an easy fix.

THE PROBLEM

Browning flour, dry or in fat, causes its starch chains to break down into smaller molecules, which are less effective at trapping (and thereby thickening) liquid. The darker the roux, the more compromised its thickening power.



RAW FLOUR
Great sponge

TOASTED FLOUR
Can't hold as much liquid

THE SOLUTION

We increased the amount of roux and decreased the amount of broth we called for in the recipe to achieve a satisfyingly thick consistency.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Grilled Chicken Drumsticks

When grilled as part of a whole chicken, drumsticks taste just fine. But with the right treatment, they can be the solo stars of your cookout.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Chicken breasts have been the most popular part of the chicken for decades, thighs are currently trendy, and wings are a sports-bar standby. Drumsticks, on the other hand, have been neglected. Maybe that's because when you eat them as part of a whole chicken, they don't seem that special. In fact, they can be chewy and tough. Nevertheless, with their built-in handles and conveniently small size, they are tailor-made for a cookout. They also happen to be the most economical part of the bird.

I decided to devise a foolproof way to grill drumsticks to perfection. In my book, that means fully rendered, nicely browned skin and moist, flavorful meat. And if I really wanted to start a drumstick fad, I'd have to make sure my method was easy, even for grill novices.

Since a glaze would make drumsticks messy to eat out of hand, we opt for a spice rub instead.

An Indirect Approach

There aren't a lot of drumstick-specific recipes out there; most just lump them under the heading "parts." And most of the recipes I managed to find followed a similar pattern: Soak chicken in a marinade for a few hours or simply dust it with a spice rub and then grill it over a medium fire until it's done. If a final internal temperature was specified, it was usually 165 degrees.

I decided to put off dealing with marinades and spice rubs until I had figured out the best grilling strategy. My first stop was the popular grill-over-medium-fire-until-done approach, which took only about 25 minutes, but speed turned out to be its only virtue. Fat from the drumsticks dripped onto the coals, causing flames to shoot up, so I was frantically moving the pieces around to avoid scorching, which was difficult because the chicken skin was still stuck to the grate. Because the drumsticks cooked pretty quickly, the skin, though inevitably scorched (and torn in spots), was still blubbery and soft underneath. Meanwhile, the meat was tough and even a bit dry.

Don't Let the Probe Touch Bone

The bones in these drumsticks were 5 degrees hotter than the meat. For an accurate reading, insert the probe into the thickest part of the drumstick until it hits the bone and then pull back about ¼ inch.

I had a pretty good idea of how to fix that last problem. All parts of the chicken are food-safe at 165 degrees. Taking white meat any higher dries it out, but dark meat is different. We've found that it benefits from being cooked to as high as 190 degrees, especially if it's brought to that temperature slowly. That's because the legs and thighs have a lot of connective tissue, which is made up of a sturdy protein called collagen. This can work to the smart cook's advantage because, given time, that collagen transforms into rich gelatin, which lubricates the muscle fibers so the meat is juicy and tender. At 140 degrees, collagen begins to break down. The more time the meat spends between 140 degrees and its final temperature, the more collagen will be converted into gelatin and the more tender and juicy the meat will be.

Slowing down the cooking was imperative. On a grill, that means cooking over indirect heat. I lit a full chimney of charcoal, and when it was partially covered with ash, I poured it over half the grill. I placed the chicken, skin side down, on the cooler side; covered the grill; and settled in to enjoy one of my favorite features of indirect grilling: doing nothing.

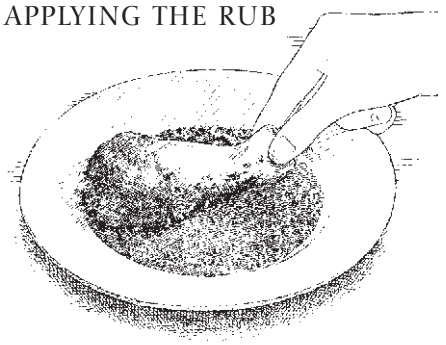
Except for one moment when I rearranged the pieces so that they all had equal time close to the coals, I carried on doing nothing for a full 50 minutes. But in that time, good things were happening inside the grill. The drumsticks were shedding their excess fat, but without any coals beneath them, there were no flare-ups to contend with. This meant I didn't need to frantically move them around to avoid scorching—they clung lightly to the grill grate but were easily dislodged. Once the drumsticks reached 185 degrees, they easily released from the grate, so I moved them over to the hotter side to char and crisp up a bit, which took only about 5 minutes.

This batch was a big improvement over the previous one. The skin was rendered, not rubbery, and the meat was tender and reasonably juicy. I wondered if adding one step to my ultrasimple process might be worthwhile.

Drumming Up Dinner
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/june17

TECHNIQUE

APPLYING THE RUB



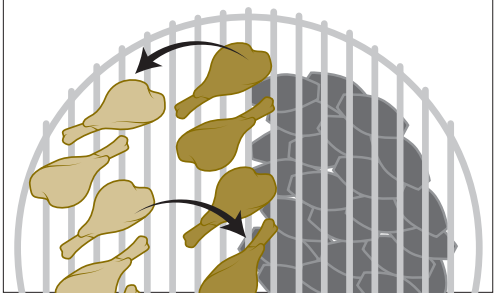
For a light, even coating of spice rub, hold each drumstick by its "handle," pressing it into the spices, and then gently pat away any excess rub.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

TECHNIQUE

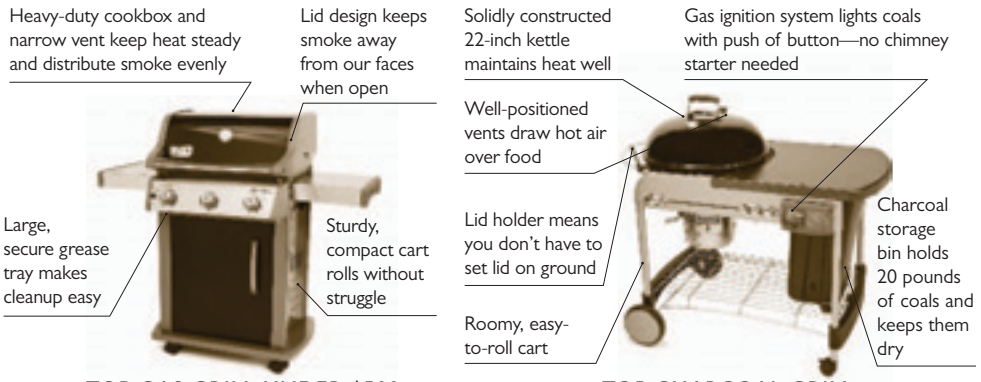
CHICKEN LEG TWO-STEP

To ensure that all the drumsticks are done at the same time, we rearrange them halfway through cooking, moving those closer to the heat to the outside and those on the outside closer to the heat.



EQUIPMENT SPOTLIGHT

Our Favorite Grills—and Why We Like Them



TOP GAS GRILL UNDER $500
Weber Spirit E-310 Gas Grill ($499.00)

TOP CHARCOAL GRILL
Weber Performer Deluxe Charcoal Grill ($399.00)

Salt Solution

I almost always brine or salt white meat (and whole birds) before cooking. It seasons the meat, but more important, it changes the meat's proteins in such a way that they hold on to more of their moisture when cooked. This extra step usually isn't necessary when cooking fattier dark meat because it is not as easily overcooked. But I was cooking the drumsticks for an unusually long time in the grill's dry heat, so I figured some kind of salt treatment might be advantageous.

Salting takes at least 6 hours, but brining takes only 30 minutes, so I opted for brining. Sure enough, the saltwater soak plus my mostly hands-off cooking method produced the juiciest drumsticks I had ever eaten. If only the flavor were a bit more interesting.

In the test kitchen, we often avoid marinating. The oil tends to drip and cause flare-ups on the grill (admittedly, this would be less of a problem with my indirect cooking strategy), and the acid turns the exterior of the meat mealy and mushy. Glazes can add interest, but they make eating chicken out of hand a messy proposition. I opted for a spice rub instead.

I started with sugar, which would melt and turn tacky to help the spices stick. I then added paprika, chili powder, garlic powder, cayenne, salt, and pepper. After brining the chicken, I patted it dry and coated it with the rub. One hour later I had chicken that would be the star of any cookout. I also developed a jerk-style spice rub. After all, a single flavor profile might not be enough to sustain a new drumstick-eating trend, and I wanted this craze to have legs.

SCIENCE

Brining Dark Meat

We typically don't brine dark meat because it has enough fat to keep it moist when cooked to 175 degrees. But in this recipe, we cook the drumsticks to between 185 and 190 degrees to ensure that most of the collagen converts to gelatin, making what can be a chewy cut tender. And since the long cooking time needed to get the drumsticks to 190 degrees (plus the dry heat of the grill) can compromise dark meat's juiciness, we brine the drumsticks to dissolve some of their proteins, making them better able to hold on to moisture. The upshot: ultratender drumsticks that are also wonderfully juicy.

GRILLED SPICE-RUBBED CHICKEN DRUMSTICKS

SERVES 6

Before applying the spice rub, smooth the skin over the drumsticks so it is covering as much surface area as possible. This will help the skin render evenly and prevent the meat from drying out.

- ½ cup salt
- 5 pounds chicken drumsticks
- 1 recipe spice rub (recipes follow)

1. Dissolve salt in 2 quarts cold water in large container. Submerge drumsticks in brine, cover, and refrigerate for 30 minutes to 1 hour.

2. Place spice rub on plate. Remove drumsticks from brine and pat dry with paper towels. Holding 1 drumstick by bone end, press lightly into rub on all sides. Pat gently to remove excess rub. Repeat with remaining drumsticks.

3A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open bottom vent halfway. 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 halfway. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

3B. 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 three-burner grill, primary burner and second burner] as needed to maintain grill temperature between 325 and 350 degrees.)

4. Clean and oil cooking grate. Place drumsticks, skin side down, on cooler side of grill. Cover and cook for 25 minutes. Rearrange pieces so that drumsticks that were closest to edge are now closer to heat source and vice versa. Cover and cook until drumsticks register 185 to 190 degrees, 20 to 30 minutes.

5. Move all drumsticks to hotter side of grill and cook, turning occasionally, until skin is nicely charred, about 5 minutes. Transfer to platter, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Serve.

BARBECUE SPICE RUB

MAKES ABOUT ⅓ CUP

You can substitute granulated garlic for the garlic powder, if desired.

- 3 tablespoons packed brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- 2 teaspoons garlic powder
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¾ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper

Combine all ingredients in small bowl.

JERK-STYLE SPICE RUB

MAKES ABOUT ¼ CUP

If you can't find whole allspice berries, substitute 2 teaspoons of ground allspice.

- 1 tablespoon allspice berries
- 1 tablespoon black peppercorns
- 1½ teaspoons dried thyme
- 2 tablespoons packed brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons garlic powder
- 1½ teaspoons dry mustard
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¾ teaspoon cayenne pepper

Grind allspice, peppercorns, and thyme in spice grinder or mortar and pestle until coarsely ground. Transfer to bowl and stir in sugar, garlic powder, mustard, salt, and cayenne.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Thai Grilled Chicken

You don't need a well-stocked Asian pantry or specialty equipment to make this street-food classic. Just a low fire, a bold marinade, and Cornish hens.

BY ANNIE PETITO

I can't think of a cuisine that doesn't lay claim to a grilled chicken dish, but the Thai version might be my favorite. Called *gai yang*, it's street food that originated in Thailand's northeastern Isan region but has become ubiquitous throughout the country. Countless variations exist, but the most popular features small whole chickens that are butterflied, flattened, and marinated in a garlic-herb paste. To keep the hens flat, cooks position them between bamboo clips that look like giant clothespins; they then grill the hens over a low charcoal fire so that their fat renders and their skin crisps. What you get is the best version of grilled chicken—juicy meat, bronzed skin, and smoky char—made extraordinary by the flavor-packed marinade. The chicken is cut into pieces and served with a tangy-sweet-spicy dipping sauce and sticky rice, which soaks up the assertive flavors.

As a bonus, this dish can be prepared using mostly pantry staples. The only ingredient I'd have to work around was the bird itself. Thai chickens typically weigh between 1 and 3 pounds, so I'd have to find an alternative. After that, it would be a matter of ironing out the marinade and the fire setup, as many recipes are vague on the grill instructions.

Cornish hens are a good substitute for small Thai chickens. Plus, they're easy to portion when entertaining—one bird per person.

Flat Out

I discovered that the Thai chickens are often replaced with whole conventional chickens, while other recipes call for parts or Cornish hens. Cornish hens offer a few unique benefits that make them ideal for this recipe: They have a high ratio of skin to meat, so both the dark and white portions cook up juicy; they weigh 1¼ pounds or so (about the same size as the Thai chickens) and cook in about 30 minutes when butterflied; and they're convenient and elegant for portioning—one bird per person.

Gai yang vendors typically butterfly chickens along the breastbone, but I found that this method caused the skin to pull away from the breast, leaving the lean white meat exposed and at greater risk of drying out. Butterflying by cutting out the backbones with kitchen shears and flattening the birds was the better approach. The skin stayed intact on one side, so it browned evenly, and the hens were uniformly flat, so they cooked at the same rate. As for the bamboo "clothespins," they flatten the birds and function as handles that make them easier to flip. But as long as I handled the hens carefully with tongs, I could move them on the grill without skewering.

Annie Grills the Birds
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/aug17

Cut and Paste

I marinated the hens overnight in a paste made from garlic, cilantro stems (a substitute for the traditional cilantro root), white pepper, and fish sauce—the four marinade components I found in every recipe. Then I grilled the hens skin side up over the cooler side of a half-grill fire. Just before the meat was done, I placed them over the coals to crisp the skin.

They cooked up juicy and savory, thanks in large part to the salty fish sauce, which essentially brined the meat, seasoning it and helping it retain moisture during cooking. To bolster that effect, I added a couple of teaspoons of salt. But many recipes further season the marinade with soy sauce, ginger, lemon grass, ground coriander, or sugar (usually Thai palm sugar or brown sugar). When I added some of these to the base ingredients for evaluation, I liked the nutty, citrusy flavor of ground coriander (made from the seeds of the cilantro plant) and the malty sweetness of brown sugar, so these were in. I also thickened the marinade, which tended to slide off the meat, to a clingy, pesto-like consistency by adding cilantro leaves along with the stems.

Sweet and Hot

On to fixing the flavor and consistency of the dipping sauces, which ranged from sticky and cloyingly sweet to thin and fiery. I wanted a balance of sweetness and tang, so I simmered white vinegar and sugar until the mixture thickened to a light syrup. Minced raw garlic and Thai chiles gave the sauce a fruity burn that red pepper flakes just couldn't match.

I set out the hens and sauce along with sticky rice, which I made by mimicking the equipment used in Thailand (see "The Traditional Sticky Rice Setup"). As my colleagues tore into the burnished hens, sweet-tangy sauce dripping from their fingers, they joked (sort of) that I should set up a gai yang stand of my own.

Stick 'em Up

Street vendors all over Thailand hawk grilled chicken (called *gai yang*) from setups like this, with the bird pinned between bamboo holders positioned over a low fire. That way, the meat stays moist as the skin renders and browns.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY (TOP), ORLANDO STOCKER/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (BOTTOM)

Grill—and Serve—Chicken the Thai Way

Gai yang isn't your garden-variety grilled chicken. These Cornish hens are flavor-packed and portion nicely, and the sticky rice and chili dipping sauce served alongside complete the package.

USE CORNISH HENS

- Like the smaller chickens grilled in Thailand, Cornish hens have a high ratio of flavorful skin to meat.
- Butterflying the hens keeps the skin intact and helps them cook evenly.

MARINATE IN FLAVORFUL PASTE

- Cilantro leaves and stems, garlic, fish sauce, brown sugar, salt, and spices create a thick, superflavorful marinade that seasons the birds.

MAKE A QUICK DIPPING SAUCE

- This sweet-spicy-tangy dipping sauce is viscous enough that the garlic and chiles it contains stay suspended rather than sink to the bottom.

STEAM SOME STICKY RICE

- Densely packed sticky rice is ideal for soaking up the bold flavors (steamed regular white rice is a fine substitute).

THAI GRILLED CORNISH HENS WITH CHILI DIPPING SAUCE (GAI YANG)

SERVES 4

The hens need to marinate for at least 6 hours before cooking (a longer marinating time is preferable). If your hens weigh 1½ to 2 pounds, grill three hens instead of four and extend the initial cooking time in step 6 by 5 minutes. If you can't find Thai chiles, substitute Fresno or red jalapeño chiles. Serve with Thai-Style Sticky Rice or steamed white rice.

Hens

- 4 Cornish game hens (1¼ to 1½ pounds each), giblets discarded
- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves and stems, chopped coarse
- 12 garlic cloves, peeled
- ¼ cup packed light brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons ground white pepper
- 2 teaspoons ground coriander
- 2 teaspoons salt
- ¼ cup fish sauce

Dipping Sauce

- ½ cup distilled white vinegar
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon minced Thai chiles
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ teaspoon salt

1. FOR THE HENS: Working with 1 hen at a time, place hens breast side down on cutting board and use kitchen shears to cut through bones on either side of backbones; discard backbones. Flip hens and press on breastbones to flatten. Trim any excess fat and skin.

2. Pulse cilantro leaves and stems, garlic, sugar, pepper, coriander, and salt in food processor until finely chopped, 10 to 15 pulses; transfer to small bowl. Add fish sauce and stir until marinade has consistency of loose paste.

3. Rub hens all over with marinade. Transfer hens and any excess marinade to 1-gallon zipper-lock bag and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or up to 24 hours, flipping bag halfway through marinating.

4. FOR THE DIPPING SAUCE: Bring vinegar to boil in small saucepan. Add sugar and stir to dissolve. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until vinegar mixture is slightly thickened, 5 minutes. Remove from heat and let vinegar mixture cool completely. Add chiles, garlic, and salt and stir until combined. Transfer sauce to airtight container and refrigerate until ready to use. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 2 weeks. Bring to room temperature before serving.)

5A. 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.

5B. 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 three-burner grill, primary burner and second burner) as needed to maintain grill temperature between 400 and 450 degrees.

6. Clean and oil cooking grate. Remove hens from bag, leaving any marinade that sticks to hens in place. Tuck wingtips behind backs and turn legs so drumsticks face inward toward breasts. Place hens, skin side up, on cooler side of grill (if using charcoal, arrange hens so that legs and thighs are facing coals). Cover and cook until skin is browned and breasts register 145 to 150 degrees, 30 to 35 minutes, rotating hens halfway through cooking.

7. Using tongs, carefully flip hens skin side down and move to hotter side of grill. Cover and cook until skin is crisp, deeply browned, and charred in spots and breasts register 160 degrees, 3 to 5 minutes, being careful to avoid burning.

8. Transfer hens, skin side up, to cutting board; tent with aluminum foil and let rest for 10 minutes. Slice each hen in half or into 4 pieces and serve, passing dipping sauce separately.

THE TRADITIONAL STICKY RICE SETUP

The traditional vessel for steaming Thai sticky rice is a bamboo basket set over an hourglass-shaped aluminum pot, which allows the rice to steam on all sides. We mimicked that setup with a saucepan and a fine-mesh strainer.

THAI-STYLE STICKY RICE (KHAO NIAW)

SERVES 4

This recipe requires letting the rice soak in water for at least 4 hours before cooking. When shopping, look for rice labeled "Thai glutinous rice" or "Thai sweet rice"; do not substitute other varieties. Thai glutinous rice can be found in Asian markets and some supermarkets or online.

- 2 cups Thai glutinous rice

1. Place rice in medium bowl and pour enough water over rice to cover by 2 inches. Let stand at room temperature for at least 4 hours or up to 8 hours.

2. Cut 18-inch square of double-thickness cheesecloth. Line large fine-mesh strainer with cheesecloth, letting excess hang over sides. Drain rice in prepared strainer, then rinse under running water until water runs clear. Fold edges of cheesecloth over rice and pat surface of rice smooth.

3. Bring 1½ inches water to boil in large saucepan. Set strainer in saucepan (water should not touch bottom of strainer), cover with lid (it will not form tight seal), reduce heat to medium-high, and steam rice for 15 minutes. Uncover and, using tongs, flip cheesecloth bundle (rice should form sticky mass) so side that was closer to bottom of saucepan is now on top. Cover and continue to steam until rice is just translucent and texture is tender but with a little chew, 15 to 20 minutes longer, checking water level occasionally and adding more if necessary.

4. Remove saucepan from heat, drain excess water from saucepan and return strainer to saucepan. Cover and let rice stand for 10 to 15 minutes before serving.

Roast Turkey Breast with Gravy

A perfectly cooked, crispy-skinned turkey breast can be just the ticket for a smaller holiday gathering—particularly if it comes with gravy.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Here's a Thanksgiving secret: You don't have to roast a whole turkey to get all the glory. A bone-in, skin-on turkey breast can be a great option when hosting a smaller crowd or if your guests simply prefer white meat. Other benefits: A breast requires less cooking time, which frees up your oven for other dishes, and it's much easier to carve than a whole bird. In fact, a whole turkey breast has so many advantages that you'll likely find yourself roasting one at other times of the year, too, whether for sandwiches or as a simple main course.

But I'm getting ahead of myself: To produce a true holiday centerpiece, I'd have to overcome a few turkey breast hurdles. White meat is notorious for emerging from the oven dry and chalky, and the skin is rarely adequately browned and crispy. What's more, since a breast doesn't offer much in the way of pan drippings, making gravy isn't always a given. I resolved to deliver an impressive roast turkey breast boasting juicy, well-seasoned meat; crispy, deeply browned skin; and a savory gravy to serve alongside.

To carve, simply use a chef's knife to remove each breast half from the bone, and then slice the meat crosswise.

Salt Treatment

First on my list: salt, which would keep the turkey juicy. When rubbed over the flesh, salt draws out moisture. The moisture then mixes with the salt and forms a concentrated solution, which, over time, migrates back into the meat, seasoning it and altering its proteins so that they retain moisture during cooking.

Using my fingers, I carefully peeled back the turkey breast's skin and rubbed salt onto the flesh and then on the bone side. I then smoothed the skin back into place and refrigerated the turkey for 24 hours. The next day, I placed the turkey breast, skin side up, in a V-rack set inside a roasting pan, brushed it with butter (its milk solids would encourage browning), sprinkled it with a bit more salt, and roasted it in a 450-degree oven. After about an hour, the breast reached the target temperature of 160 degrees. However, the meat was somewhat dry despite the salting, and browning was patchy. Plus, because the fat didn't have enough time to fully render, the skin wasn't particularly crispy. Finally, the breast itself was rather unwieldy—it tipped onto its side when I transferred it to the oven, and it was difficult to keep it upright during carving.

Removing the turkey's backbone would make it sit flat and be stable; this would also encourage even browning since the breast would be more level. Fortunately, this was easily accomplished with the help of kitchen shears. I set the backbone aside—I would use it later to make gravy.

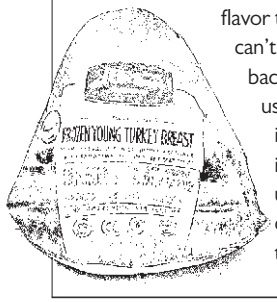
As I prepared to arrange the now-backless breast in the roasting pan, it struck me that the pan was excessively large. Plus, the minimal drippings in the roasting pan tended to scorch in the oven. Instead, I switched to a 12-inch ovensafe skillet. Freed of its backbone, the breast rested securely on its flat underside and fit snugly in the skillet so juices could collect directly beneath it with no risk of scorching.

Turkey in the Pan

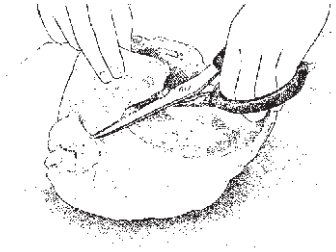
Now, about that dry meat and the skin that never fully rendered. Substantially lowering the oven temperature helped with the former problem: When

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

STEP BY STEP Roast Turkey Breast with Gravy

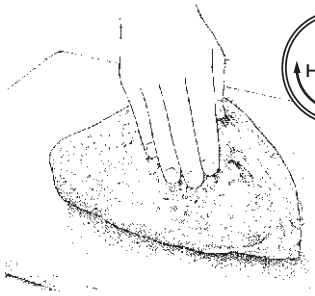


1. BUY CORRECT BREAST Look for a whole turkey breast with the backbone attached; we use it to flavor the gravy. If you can't find one with a backbone (the label usually indicates if the backbone is attached), use 1 pound of chicken wings for the gravy instead.



2. CUT RIBS Cut through the ribs following the line of fat where the breast meets the back, from the breast's tapered end to the wing joint.

3. REMOVE BACKBONE Bend the back away from the breast to pop the shoulder joints out of the sockets. Cut through the joints to remove the back.



4. SALT MEAT Without the backbone in the way, it's easy to pull back the skin so you can evenly season the breast meat.

roasted at 325 degrees, the meat stayed moist. Unfortunately, the skin was now pale, though much of its fat had rendered. I decided to try a reverse-sear technique, a method we sometimes use with smaller cuts such as steaks and chicken breasts, in which we cook the meat in a low oven until it reaches the desired temperature and then sear it on the stovetop. The interior stays incredibly juicy while the exterior browns quickly. In this case, I'd use a hot oven for the final "sear" rather than move the pan to the stovetop.

Eager to try this approach, I roasted the breast at 325 degrees until it reached an internal temperature of 145 degrees. Then I took it out of the oven and cranked the heat to 500 degrees. Once the oven was up to temperature, I returned the breast to the oven and roasted it until it hit 160 degrees, which happened faster than I expected. I hadn't accounted for carryover cooking while the breast sat in the hot skillet between oven stints, so it came to temperature before it could get much color. I tried again, removing the breast from the oven when the meat registered just 130 degrees, so it would have more time to brown in the hotter oven. This was my best turkey breast yet: The skin was a deep mahogany and beautifully crispy, and the well-seasoned meat was juicy.

Put Your Back Into It

While my final turkey breast was in the oven roasting, I used the reserved turkey back to make a simple broth that would be the gravy base. I browned the back; added onion, celery, carrot, fresh herbs, and water; and then simmered and strained the mixture. When I transferred the breast to a carving board to rest, I built the gravy right in the skillet, which was full of flavorful fat and drippings. I sprinkled flour into the fat to make a roux, added white wine followed by my quick turkey broth, and let the gravy simmer to reduce. After about 20 minutes, the gravy was nicely thickened and the breast was ready to carve.

I served up my impressive platter of turkey—burnished and crispy on the outside, moist and well seasoned within—and its flavorful gravy, without missing the dark meat at all.

ROAST WHOLE TURKEY BREAST WITH GRAVY

SERVES 6 TO 8

Note that this recipe requires refrigerating the seasoned breast for 24 hours. This recipe was developed using Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt. If you use Morton Kosher Salt, which is denser, reduce the salt in step 2 to 2½ teaspoons, rubbing 1 teaspoon of salt into each side of the breast and ½ teaspoon into the cavity. If you're using a self-basting (such as a frozen Butterball) or kosher turkey breast, do not salt in step 2. If your turkey breast comes with the back removed, you can skip making the gravy or substitute 1 pound of chicken wings for the turkey back.

- 1 (5- to 7- pound) bone-in turkey breast
  Kosher salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil,
  plus extra as needed
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 small carrot, chopped
- 1 small celery rib, chopped
- 5 cups water
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup dry white wine

1. Place turkey breast on counter skin side down. Using kitchen shears, cut through ribs, following vertical line of fat where breast meets back, from tapered end of breast to wing joint. Using your hands, bend back away from breast to pop shoulder joints out of sockets. Using paring knife, cut through joints between bones to separate back from breast. Reserve back for gravy. Trim excess fat from breast.

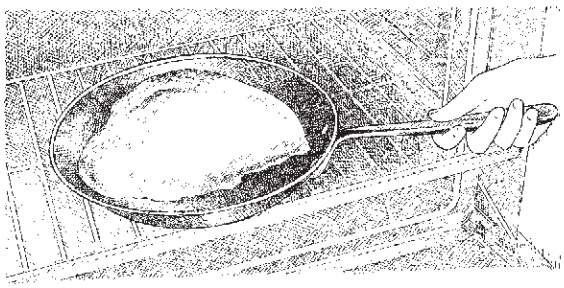
2. Place turkey breast, skin side up, on counter. Using your fingers, carefully loosen and separate turkey skin from each side of breast. Peel back skin, leaving it attached at top and center of breast. Rub 1 teaspoon salt onto each side of breast, then place skin back over meat. Rub 1 teaspoon salt onto underside of breast cavity. Place turkey on large plate and refrigerate, uncovered, for 24 hours.

3. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Pat turkey dry with paper towels. Place turkey, skin side up, in 12-inch ovensafe skillet, arranging so narrow end of breast is not touching skillet. Brush melted butter evenly over turkey and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon salt. Roast until thickest part of breast registers 130 degrees, 1 to 1¼ hours.

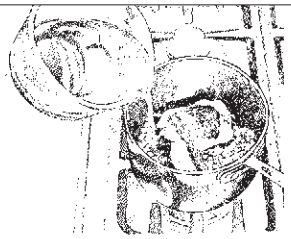
4. Meanwhile, heat oil in large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add reserved back, skin side down, and cook until well browned, 6 to 8 minutes. Add onion, carrot, and celery and cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are softened and lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Add water, thyme sprigs, and bay leaf and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for 1 hour. Strain broth through fine-mesh strainer into container. Discard solids; set aside broth (you should have about 4 cups). (Broth can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours.)

5. Remove turkey from oven and increase oven temperature to 500 degrees. When oven reaches 500 degrees, return turkey to oven and roast until skin is deeply browned and thickest part of breast registers 160 degrees, 15 to 30 minutes. Using spatula, loosen turkey from skillet; transfer to carving board and let rest, uncovered, for 30 minutes.

6. While turkey rests, pour off fat from skillet. (You should have about ¼ cup; if not, add extra oil as needed to equal ¼ cup.) Return fat to skillet and heat over medium heat until shimmering. Sprinkle flour evenly over fat and cook, whisking constantly, until flour is coated with fat and browned, about 1 minute. Add wine, whisking to scrape up any browned bits, and cook until wine has evaporated, 1 to 2 minutes. Slowly whisk in reserved broth. Increase heat to medium-high and cook, whisking occasionally, until gravy is thickened and reduced to 2 cups, about 20 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Carve turkey and serve, passing gravy separately.

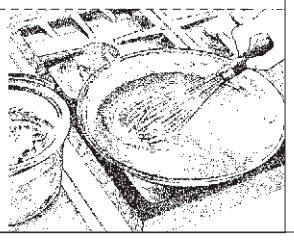


5. ROAST LOW; BROWN HIGH Arrange the breast in an ovensafe skillet so the drippings collect underneath without scorching. Roast at 325 degrees, and then crank the heat to 500 to brown the skin.



6. BUILD BROTH Use the reserved backbone, along with a few aromatics and herbs, to make 4 cups of broth.

7. MAKE GRAVY In the skillet used to roast the turkey, make a quick gravy with turkey fat, flour, wine, and broth.



Get Sauced After the Holidays

For a nonholiday meal, pair the turkey with a quick, bright-tasting sauce. Our recipes for Salsa Verde, Quick Roasted Red Pepper Sauce, and Cilantro-Mint Chutney are available for free for four months at Cookslllustrated.com/salsaverde, Cookslllustrated.com/redpeppersauce, and Cookslllustrated.com/cilantromintchutney.

See Every Step
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

Really Good Turkey Meatloaf

For a lighter, summery take on this comfort-food favorite, our goal was to enhance the ground turkey's clean, mild flavor without obscuring it.

BY LAN LAM

Swapping ground turkey for the usual ground beef and pork mixture can give meatloaf a lighter flavor profile that makes it more summertime-friendly. But simply substituting turkey for the beef and pork in the typical recipe, which calls for little more than the ground meat, an egg binder, and a tenderizer in the form of a panade (a mixture of bread crumbs and milk), results in a loaf that cooks up pasty and bland. Rather than solve these issues, most recipes try to merely distract from the problems by adding a thick glaze or folding in lots of vegetables or spices. Surely I could do better. I hoped to turn out a juicy, tender turkey meatloaf with complementary additions that highlighted the turkey's mild, meaty flavor instead of overshadowing it.

Quick oats help loosen the dense texture of the ground turkey while Worcestershire sauce and Dijon mustard add dimension.

Time to Open Up

Here's the main problem: Compared with beef or pork, turkey becomes very soft, with a slightly pasty consistency, when ground (see "Firming up Ground Turkey"). This translates to a meatloaf that can't hold its shape and has a compact, mushy texture. Grinding the turkey myself would help since I could grind it more coarsely, but this was more trouble than I wanted. I'd need to find a way to improve the preground stuff. I knew that 99 percent lean ground turkey was a nonstarter; the greater amount of fat in 85 percent lean turkey would provide more flavor and help keep the meatloaf from being too dry.

My first move was to drop the panade. It might often be the key to a moist and tender traditional meatloaf, but in this case the wet bits of bread throughout were exacerbating the pasty, dense consistency. Instead, I needed to add a more resilient ingredient, something that would lend some texture and break up the finely ground meat to make the loaf less dense. I baked up an assortment of meatloaves that contained just turkey, egg, salt, and pepper, along with one of several possible texturizers.

See the Loaf Happen
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/aug17

Tasters rejected ground nuts (too crunchy), bulgur and couscous (too wheaty), and pieces of turkey sausage (too springy). There was just one ingredient that they liked: quick oats. The flakes were the perfect size to break up the meat without calling too much attention to themselves, and they retained just the right amount of bite (sturdier rolled oats also worked if I chopped them finely).

Oats were in, but now I had a new problem: The loaf seemed wet; some tasters described it as almost watery. I realized I had stumbled upon another difference between turkey and beef/pork meatloaf: the meat's juices. While the juices in a traditional meatloaf have richness and viscosity from the fat and gelatin naturally found in ground beef and pork, turkey has less of both of these, and so its juices are thin in flavor and consistency. This was not as noticeable in a loaf made with a panade, as the bread soaked up almost all the juices. But the oats didn't soak up the juices as thoroughly; plus, they created a more open texture, with gaps where the juices could pool. The result: The shortcomings in the turkey's juices were now much more noticeable. I'd have to figure out a way to give them more flavor and body.

The surest way to add more flavor would be to add fat. But I wouldn't want to add much since I was aiming for a lighter dish. Happily, just 3 tablespoons of melted butter mixed into the ground turkey made a big difference. As a bonus, the melted butter firmed up when mixed into the cold ground turkey, giving the mixture some structure that made it easier to shape. I also added grated Parmesan, and instead of using whole eggs as a binder, I used just the less watery yolks. These changes made the whole loaf taste richer, juices included.

Now what about bumping up the turkey juices' viscosity? I considered adding gelatin but instead turned to cornstarch, an ingredient home cooks are more likely to keep on hand. I settled on 2 teaspoons, which I added to the oats, salt, and pepper in a small bowl before combining the mixture with the turkey.

I set my loaf on an aluminum foil–lined wire cooling rack set in a rimmed baking sheet, our go-to setup for meatloaf (see "A Setup for Better Meatloaf"), and popped it into the oven. I now had an impressively tender, juicy turkey meatloaf with a texture that rivaled that of the classic beef and pork version.

Glazed Over

Next, I focused on adding some complementary supporting flavors. To start, I sautéed onions gently in the melted butter until soft. To save time, I turned to a test kitchen trick to speed up their breakdown: adding a pinch of baking soda. Onion cell walls will break down more readily in an alkaline environment, so rather than the onion taking 15 minutes to soften, it took just 5 minutes. To further round out the flavor, I added garlic, thyme, and some tangy-savory Worcestershire sauce. Dijon mustard lent additional punch, and parsley contributed freshness. After letting this mixture cool slightly, I added the oat mixture, Parmesan, egg yolks, and ground turkey; shaped the loaf; and baked as before.

The flavor was leagues better than any turkey meatloaf I'd ever had. My only complaint was that it seemed a bit too plain. Though not always

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

a must for traditional meatloaf, a glaze seemed in order here—not only to bump up its looks but also to add another layer of flavor. I whisked together ketchup, brown sugar, cider vinegar, and hot sauce. Cooking the mixture for 5 minutes reduced it to the right consistency. To ensure that the glaze stayed put, I turned to a two-step technique we've used in the past. I applied half the glaze to the loaf before popping it into the oven. After 40 minutes, at which point the glaze had become firm and tacky, I brushed on another coat.

By the time the meatloaf reached 160 degrees, the glaze was starting to brown in spots and the meatloaf looked and smelled great. In fact, my tasters' only request was that I come up with another glaze option to give the dish some variety. For a lighter, brighter flavor, I warmed some apricot preserves until fluid, strained them, and combined them with ketchup and Dijon mustard. The preserves helped thicken the glaze, so I didn't even have to reduce it before applying it to the meatloaf. My turkey meatloaf might be perfect warmer-weather fare, but it's so good that I'll be making it year-round.

TURKEY MEATLOAF WITH KETCHUP–BROWN SUGAR GLAZE

SERVES 4 TO 6

Do not use 99 percent lean ground turkey in this recipe; it will make a dry meatloaf. Three tablespoons of rolled oats, chopped fine, can be substituted for the quick oats; do not use steel-cut oats.

Meatloaf

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- Pinch baking soda
- ½ onion, chopped fine
- Salt and pepper
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 3 tablespoons quick oats
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 large egg yolks
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 2 pounds 85 or 93 percent lean ground turkey
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup)
- ⅓ cup chopped fresh parsley

Glaze

- 1 cup ketchup
- ¼ cup packed brown sugar
- 2½ teaspoons cider vinegar
- ½ teaspoon hot sauce

1. FOR THE MEATLOAF: Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Line wire rack with aluminum foil and set in rimmed baking sheet. Melt butter in 10-inch skillet over low heat. Stir baking soda into melted butter. Add onion and ¼ teaspoon salt, increase heat to medium, and cook, stirring frequently, until onion is softened and beginning to brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Add garlic and thyme and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in Worcestershire and continue to cook until slightly reduced, about 1 minute longer. Transfer onion mixture to large bowl and set aside. Combine oats, cornstarch, ¾ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper in second bowl.

2. FOR THE GLAZE: Whisk all ingredients in saucepan until sugar dissolves. Bring mixture to simmer over medium heat and cook until slightly thickened, about 5 minutes; set aside.

3. Stir egg yolks and mustard into cooled onion mixture until well combined. Add turkey, Parmesan, parsley, and oat mixture; using your hands, mix until well combined. Transfer turkey mixture to center of prepared rack. Using your wet hands, shape into 9 by 5-inch loaf. Using pastry brush, spread half of glaze evenly over top and sides of meatloaf. Bake meatloaf for 40 minutes.

4. Brush remaining glaze onto top and sides of meatloaf and continue to bake until meatloaf registers 160 degrees, 35 to 40 minutes longer. Let meatloaf cool for 20 minutes before slicing and serving.

Glaze: Twice Is Nicer

We brush our meatloaf with glaze twice to get a thick, uniform application. The first coat needs to dry slightly before the second coat is applied so that the second coat has something to stick to.

Firming Up Ground Turkey

Compared with ground beef and pork, ground turkey can cook up pasty, even mushy, and its juices are more watery and thin. Why the difference? Poultry has less fat than most ground red meat, of course, but it also has less connective tissue. Connective tissue provides support and texture to meat, so with less of it, meat becomes mushy and compact when cooked. Also, less-fatty poultry juices lack the unctuous viscosity of red meat juices.

To address these issues, we turned to three pantry ingredients: oats, which we mixed into the turkey to help give the loaf more structure and make it less dense, and cornstarch and butter, which added appealing body to the juices.

TURKEY MEATLOAF WITH APRICOT-MUSTARD GLAZE

Microwave ¼ cup apricot preserves until hot and fluid, about 30 seconds. Strain preserves through fine-mesh strainer into bowl; discard solids. Stir in 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard, 2 tablespoons ketchup, and pinch salt. Proceed with recipe, substituting apricot mixture for glaze.

A Setup for Better Meatloaf

Many recipes call for cooking meatloaf in a loaf pan, but we found that this method causes the meat to steam and stew in its own juices. We take a different approach.

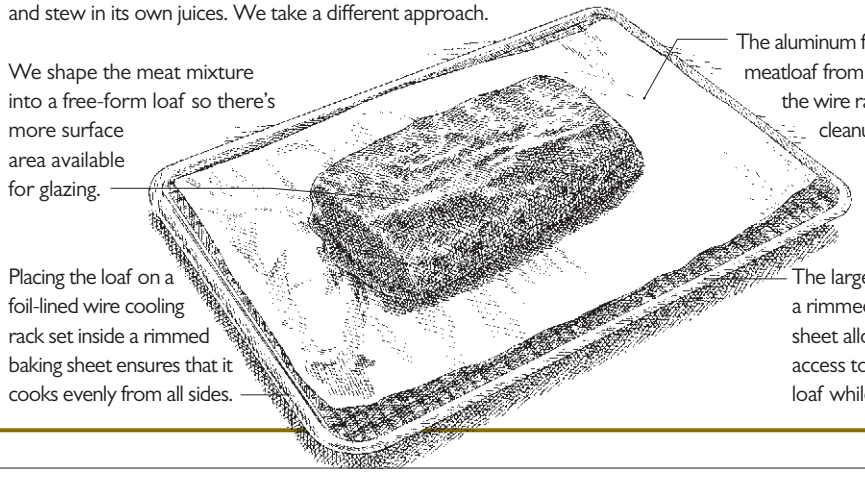


ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Grilled Lamb-Stuffed Pita

With a deeply flavorful filling in a supercrisp pita, this adaptation of Middle Eastern street food is a terrific alternative to a plain grilled burger.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Lamb is a staple in Middle Eastern cooking; roasted leg of lamb, shanks braised in heady spice mixtures, flavorful stews, and meatballs are all common. But I recently encountered a whole new application from the estimable Lebanese cookbook author Anissa Helou: ground meat sandwiches known as *arayes*. What makes these sandwiches—a popular street food found across the region—so intriguing is that the meat gets cooked inside the pita. In Helou's version, she seasons ground lamb with parsley, onion, cumin, and cinnamon; spreads it over the pita; and places the sandwich on a hot grill (baking the sandwich is also common). As the lamb cooks, its flavorful juices and fat soak into the pita, which turns crisp and toasty. This sounded like a great alternative to plain grilled burgers; I had to try it.

As I'd hoped, the lamb plus seasonings made for a juicy, flavorful filling. And I loved the thin bread, which let the lamb take center stage but also lent a satisfying crunch where the edges had crisped. The whole thing was definitely a notch above plain ground meat shrouded in a burger bun.

Ground lamb seasoned with herbs and spices is grilled directly inside pitas. As the meat cooks, its juices and fat help turn the bread supercrisp.

Still, there were aspects that could be rejiggered. First, stuffing the pitas was a challenge: I cut each pita halfway around its circumference, spooned in the meat mixture, and spread it in an even layer from edge to edge. But it was difficult to spread evenly, especially into the edges of the pita pocket; more than one pita tore in my hands. Also, I needed to develop a more detailed grilling process. Helou's version didn't indicate how hot the fire should be but merely said to grill the sandwiches for about 5 minutes per side until the filling was cooked and the bread crisp. The bread cooked up a bit dry and tough toward the center rather than crisp, a problem that I suspected had to do with the heat level and cooking method. Tasters also found the meat a bit thin, and I wondered if, though flavorful, the filling couldn't stand a little bit more seasoning to better balance the lamb's richness.

The first thing I did was work out an easier way to fill the sandwiches. Since it was hard to reach deep into the pocket without tearing the bread, why not separate it into two pieces by running a pair of scissors around the bread's circumference? I worried that creating two pieces might make the bread separate from the filling, but the ground lamb proved sticky enough to hold on to the pita pieces both during cooking and once the sandwiches were done. To further ensure that the bread remained intact, I used the freshest pitas I could find, since older pitas are drier and thus more brittle, and I spread the meat mixture over the less fragile of the two sides since it would be less likely to break (see "Perfecting the Pita").

Next, I dealt with the meat. I upped the ratio of ground lamb to pita so that each sandwich was thicker. And to better balance the lamb's richness, I added a little lemon juice and swapped out more neutral, grassy parsley for brighter, more aromatic cilantro. Bigger pieces of cilantro and onion were distracting, so I pulsed them together in the food processor until they were finely chopped. And paprika and cayenne contributed both pepper flavor and heat that balanced the richness of the lamb.

What's in Ground Lamb?

When buying ground beef, you're provided with a number of choices and plenty of information: the cut used (chuck, sirloin, or round, for example); the fat content, which can range from 7 to 20 percent; and if the meat is grass-fed or conventional. But when you buy ground lamb, there's usually only one option and little information provided. So what's in the package? After talking to a number of butchers and supermarkets, here's what we found out: It's typically American lamb, which is preferred in the United States to lamb imported from Australia or New Zealand because of its milder, less gamy flavor. Leg and shoulder are ground most often, and the fat content falls between 15 and 20 percent.

TECHNIQUE | PERFECTING THE PITA

When we stuffed the lamb filling into a pita pocket, the pocket always tore. To avoid this, we separated each pita into two pieces and spread the filling on the sturdier piece. Didn't know that there's a difference between the two halves of a pita? Well, as it turns out, the side that is against the oven floor as the pita bakes is always more fragile. You can identify it by the pattern of dotted lines across it, which is from the metal-chain conveyor belt that the breads sit on as they move through the oven. When we could, we also selected the freshest pitas, since older pitas are drier and more brittle.

We cut around the perimeter with scissors to separate the bread into two pieces and then spread the meat mixture on the thicker side.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

As for the grill setup, a medium fire didn't toast the bread sufficiently, while a very hot fire burned it before the meat cooked through. A medium-hot fire worked best, but I noticed that the bread tended to dry out rather than toast. To fix this, I needed the meat to render its fat more quickly, as the fat would cause the bread to fry a bit. To jump-start the rendering process, I started cooking with the grill covered to create an oven-like environment that would heat the filling from the get-go. With these changes, I had a juicy, flavor-packed lamb pita sandwich that might just beat my regular old beef burger.

Now my sandwiches just needed a few accompaniments. Arayes are traditionally served with yogurt, so I created a tart, minty yogurt-tahini sauce to serve alongside. I also made a simple Mediterranean-style parsley salad with cucumber, pomegranate, and feta.

My tasters all loved this Middle-Eastern alternative to a burger, with its spicy, flavorful lamb filling and supercrisp pita.

GRILLED LAMB-STUFFED PITAS WITH YOGURT SAUCE

SERVES 4 TO 6

You can substitute 85 percent lean ground beef for the ground lamb, if desired. This recipe works best with ¼-inch-thick pitas that are fresh and pliable. To determine which side of the pita is thicker, look closely at the pattern of browning across its surface; the less-fragile side is usually covered with char marks in a dotted-line pattern. Serve with a dressed green salad or with Parsley-Cucumber Salad with Feta, Pomegranate, and Walnuts (recipe follows).

Sauce

- 1 cup plain Greek yogurt
- ½ cup minced fresh mint
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons tahini
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ teaspoon salt

Sandwiches

- 1 onion, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon grated lemon zest plus 3 tablespoons juice
- 1 tablespoon ground coriander
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1½ teaspoons pepper
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 pounds ground lamb
- 4 (8-inch) pita breads

1. FOR THE SAUCE: Whisk all ingredients together in bowl. Set aside.

2. FOR THE SANDWICHES: Pulse onion and cilantro in food processor until finely chopped, 10 to 12 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Transfer mixture to large bowl. Stir in oil, lemon zest and juice, coriander, cumin, paprika, salt, pepper, cayenne, and cinnamon. Add lamb and knead gently with your hands until thoroughly combined.

3. Using kitchen shears, cut around perimeter of each pita and separate into 2 halves. Place 4 thicker halves on counter with interiors facing up. Divide lamb mixture into 4 equal portions and place 1 portion in center of each pita half. Using spatula, gently spread lamb mixture into even layer, leaving ½-inch border around edge. Top each with thinner pita half. Press each sandwich firmly until lamb mixture spreads to ¼ inch from edge of pita. Transfer sandwiches to large plate, cover with plastic wrap, and set aside. (Sandwiches may be held for up to 1 hour before grilling.)

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

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

5. Clean and oil cooking grate. Place sandwiches on grill, cover, and cook until bottoms are evenly browned and edges are starting to crisp, 7 to 10 minutes, moving sandwiches as needed to ensure even cooking. Flip sandwiches, cover grill, and continue to cook until second sides are evenly browned and edges are crisp, 7 to 10 minutes longer. Transfer sandwiches to cutting board and cut each in half crosswise. Transfer sandwiches to platter and serve, passing sauce separately.

Our Favorite Charcoal Grill Setups

Many recipes simply instruct "Grill over a hot fire." But we know that for the best results, there's no one-size-fits-all fire setup. Here are the three we use most often and the applications we typically use them for.

SINGLE-LEVEL FIRE

This simple arrangement is suited to foods that you want to brown but that can also overcook quickly.

Setup: Distribute lit coals in even layer across bottom of grill.

Best for: Quick-cooking foods such as fish fillets, shrimp, and our Grilled Lamb-Stuffed Pitas with Yogurt Sauce

HALF-GRILL FIRE

With hotter and cooler sides, this versatile setup is ideal for quickly searing foods and then gently cooking them through. We also use it to cook different types of food in a single recipe.

Setup: Distribute lit coals over half of grill in even layer.

Best for: Chicken parts, thick steaks, recipes with different components

CONCENTRATED FIRE

Corralling the coals in a disposable pan concentrates the heat to create an intense fire ideal for quick-cooking foods that we want to give a substantial char.

Setup: Poke holes in bottom of large disposable aluminum pan, place pan in center of grill, and pour lit coals into pan.

Best for: Burgers, thin steaks

PARSLEY-CUCUMBER SALAD WITH FETA, POMEGRANATE, AND WALNUTS

SERVES 4 TO 6

Use flat-leaf parsley for this salad.

- 1 tablespoon pomegranate molasses
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- Salt and pepper
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 cups fresh parsley leaves
- 1 seedless English cucumber, unpeeled, halved lengthwise and sliced thin
- 1 cup walnuts, toasted and chopped coarse
- ½ cup pomegranate seeds
- 4 ounces feta cheese, sliced thin

Whisk molasses, vinegar, ¼ teaspoon salt, ⅛ teaspoon pepper, and cayenne together in large bowl. Whisking constantly, add oil in thin stream until fully incorporated. Add parsley and cucumber and toss to coat. Add half of walnuts and half of pomegranate seeds and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to serving platter and top with feta, remaining walnuts, and remaining pomegranate seeds. Serve.

See the Crispness Happen
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/oct17

Stir-Fried Shrimp

The key to good stir-fried shrimp? Don't stir-fry them at all.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

I love the delicate, briny flavor that shrimp brings to a stir-fry, as well as the contrast between crisp vegetables and the shrimp's juicy, tender flesh. And if you use shelled, deveined shrimp, few dishes can be faster. That said, because shrimp cook in a flash, avoiding rubbery results takes some care. I wanted to figure out the best way to preserve a plump, tender texture in a few simple stir-fries. I'd add one or two vegetables to each, along with a potent sauce.

I started by letting the shrimp sit for 30 minutes in a combination of salt and sugar. Both would be drawn into the flesh, thanks to shrimp's loose protein structure. Salt would add seasoning while sugar would add complexity without noticeable sweetness; both would also help the shrimp retain moisture. Because the ionic structure of salt allows it to move into protein faster than sugar does, I used just ½ teaspoon of it and a full teaspoon of sugar.

Meanwhile, for a springtime dish, I settled on delicate, grassy asparagus, cut into 2-inch lengths, to pair with the shrimp. Following our usual technique for stir-frying vegetables, I cranked up the heat under a nonstick skillet (our preferred vessel for stir-frying), added oil, tossed in the asparagus, covered the skillet, and let the asparagus cook for a few minutes until crisp-tender. I then transferred it to a bowl and turned back to the shrimp.

Though many stir-fry recipes call for browning the shrimp, I opted not to. I prefer clean shrimp flavor in a stir-fry; plus, browning would make things more challenging, since shrimp's moisture is an impediment to achieving decent color. This decision freed me up to make another, more unconventional one: Why not skip the blazing-hot skillet and gently shallow-poach the shrimp in the sauce? Because the temperature of the sauce can't get above 212 degrees, there's much less risk of overcooking.

I added both the shrimp and the sauce (a placeholder for now) to the empty skillet. I lowered the heat, covered the skillet, and let the crustaceans cook for 5 minutes or so, stirring once or twice to make sure they cooked evenly. It worked perfectly; the shrimp were tender, plump, and moist. All I needed to do was settle on the sauce.

Thanks to a bold-tasting sauce, this simple shrimp stir-fry featuring just shrimp, asparagus, and scallions has plenty of flavor.

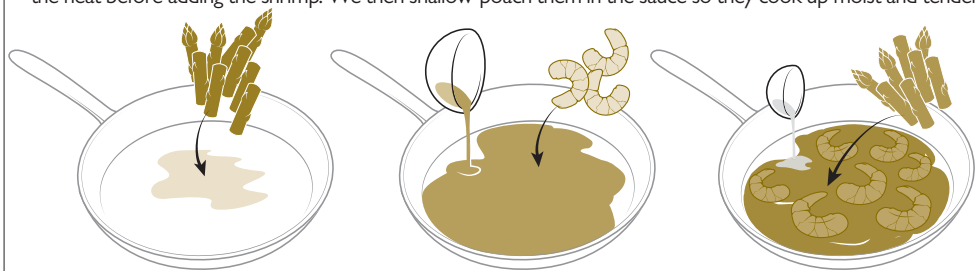
I opted for a classic, boldly flavored garlic sauce. I started by cooking six thinly sliced cloves of garlic in oil over medium heat for several minutes, until they were just beginning to brown, to bring out the garlic's nuttiness and infuse the oil with flavor. Next I increased the heat to high and added grated fresh ginger and scallion whites to the pan, followed by the asparagus as before, as well as the tender scallion greens, which I'd cut into 1-inch pieces. Once the vegetables were cooked, I set them aside and added the sauce's liquid ingredients to the pan. Many recipes call for Shaoxing, a Chinese rice wine. Since it can be hard to find, I settled on the test kitchen's preferred alternative, sherry. I also added a splash of sherry vinegar for a little bright acidity and savoriness, plus soy sauce and broad bean chili paste for more savory depth and a touch of heat. I then added the shrimp and let them cook through. Once they were done, all I needed to do was add a little cornstarch (which I made into a slurry with a touch of sherry) to thicken the sauce to just the right consistency, return the vegetables to the pan, toss, and serve over rice.

From there, it was easy enough to come up with a few variations, swapping out the vegetable and making adjustments to the sauce base: shrimp with broccoli in oyster sauce and shrimp with onions, bell peppers, and cumin. Each version was simple and satisfying and boasted perfectly tender shrimp.

See the Two-Step
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/june17

TECHNIQUE | A DIFFERENT WAY TO MAKE STIR-FRIED SHRIMP

Instead of using a searing-hot skillet to cook all the components, we cook the vegetables on high but turn down the heat before adding the shrimp. We then shallow-poach them in the sauce so they cook up moist and tender.



1. START HIGH Cook the vegetables over high heat; remove them from the skillet.

2. LOWER HEAT Add the sauce ingredients and then the shrimp; cover and cook gently over medium-low heat.

3. RETURN TO HIGH Add a cornstarch slurry to thicken the sauce. Return the vegetables to the skillet; toss and serve.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

STIR-FRIED SHRIMP AND ASPARAGUS IN GARLIC SAUCE

SERVES 4

If your shrimp are treated with salt, skip step 1 (see "Shopping for Shrimp: Buyer Beware"). Asian broad bean chili paste or sauce is also known as *toban djan*; Lee Kum Kee is a common brand. Serve with rice.

- 1 pound extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅓ cup plus 2 tablespoons dry sherry
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon Asian broad bean chili paste
- 1 teaspoon sherry vinegar
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 6 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 3 large scallions, white parts chopped fine, green parts cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 tablespoons grated fresh ginger
- 1½ pounds asparagus, trimmed and cut on bias into 2-inch lengths

1. Combine shrimp, sugar, and salt in medium bowl. Let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes.

2. Whisk ⅓ cup sherry, soy sauce, chili paste, and vinegar together in bowl. Whisk cornstarch and remaining 2 tablespoons sherry together in second bowl.

3. Heat oil and garlic in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until garlic is just beginning to brown at edges, 3 to 4 minutes. Increase heat to high, add scallion whites and ginger, and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add asparagus and scallion greens, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until asparagus is crisp-tender, 2 to 4 minutes. Transfer vegetable mixture to bowl.

4. Add sherry–soy sauce mixture and shrimp to skillet and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until shrimp are just cooked through, 3 to 5 minutes.

5. Whisk sherry-cornstarch mixture to recombine and add to skillet; increase heat to high and cook, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened, 1 to 2 minutes. Return vegetable mixture to skillet and toss to combine. Transfer to serving dish and serve.

Shopping for Shrimp: Buyer Beware

Most supermarket shrimp are frozen, so to prevent darkening or water loss during thawing, some manufacturers treat the shrimp with salt or sodium tripolyphosphate (STPP). (To determine if your shrimp has been treated with salt or STPP, look on the ingredient list.) We cooked samples of salt- and STPP-treated shrimp, as well as untreated shrimp, and tasted the samples side by side. We also brined a batch of each type of shrimp before cooking to see how it affected their flavors and textures. Here are our recommendations.

SALT-TREATED SHRIMP ARE OK IN A PINCH Salt-treated shrimp were a bit saltier than plain shrimp, though not objectionable, and their textures were comparable. If using salt-treated shrimp, skip any brining, which doesn't have a pronounced effect on the shrimp's flavor.

AVOID STPP-TREATED SHRIMP Tasters disliked the chemical flavor and mushy texture of STPP-treated shrimp, both plain and brined. We do not recommend cooking with STPP-treated shrimp.

STIR-FRIED SHRIMP AND BROCCOLI

SERVES 4

If your shrimp are treated with salt, skip step 1 (see "Shopping for Shrimp: Buyer Beware"). If you can't find chili-garlic sauce, substitute 2 teaspoons Sriracha sauce. Serve with rice.

- 1 pound extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅓ cup plus 2 tablespoons dry sherry
- 2 tablespoons oyster sauce
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon Asian chili-garlic sauce
- 1 teaspoon sherry vinegar
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 pound broccoli, florets cut into 1-inch pieces, stalks peeled and sliced ¼ inch thick
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 2 garlic cloves, minced

1. Combine shrimp, sugar, and salt in medium bowl. Let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes.

2. Whisk ⅓ cup sherry, oyster sauce, soy sauce, chili-garlic sauce, and vinegar together in bowl. Whisk cornstarch and remaining 2 tablespoons sherry together in second bowl.

3. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat until smoking. Add broccoli and 2 tablespoons sherry–oyster sauce mixture and toss to coat. Cover skillet and cook for 4 minutes, stirring halfway through cooking. Uncover and continue to cook until broccoli is crisp-tender and beginning to brown in spots, 2 to 3 minutes longer. Transfer broccoli to bowl.

4. Add remaining 1 tablespoon oil, ginger, and garlic to skillet and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add remaining sherry–oyster sauce mixture and shrimp to skillet and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until shrimp are just cooked through, 3 to 5 minutes.

5. Whisk sherry-cornstarch mixture to recombine and add to skillet; increase heat to high and cook, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened, 1 to 2 minutes. Return broccoli to skillet and toss to combine. Transfer to serving dish and serve.

STIR-FRIED SHRIMP WITH ONION, BELL PEPPERS, AND CUMIN

SERVES 4

If your shrimp are treated with salt, skip step 1 (see "Shopping for Shrimp: Buyer Beware"). Sichuan peppercorns have a piney, citrusy aroma and a unique tingling sensation; they don't contribute heat, so don't substitute black pepper or red pepper flakes. Serve with rice.

- 1 pound extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons cumin seeds
- 1½ teaspoons Sichuan peppercorns
- ⅓ cup plus 2 tablespoons dry sherry
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon sherry vinegar
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 red onion, halved and sliced thin
- 3 large bell peppers (2 red and 1 green), stemmed, seeded, and cut into 1-inch by 3-inch strips
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh cilantro

1. Combine shrimp, 1 teaspoon sugar, and salt in medium bowl. Let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes.

2. Microwave cumin seeds and peppercorns in small bowl until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes. Let cool slightly, then grind coarse in mortar and pestle or spice grinder. Whisk ⅓ cup sherry, soy sauce, vinegar, and remaining 1 teaspoon sugar together in bowl. Whisk cornstarch and remaining 2 tablespoons sherry together in second bowl.

3. Heat oil, garlic, pepper flakes, and cumin mixture in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat until garlic is just beginning to brown, 1 minute. Add onion, cover, and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 2 to 3 minutes. Add bell peppers, cover, and cook until crisp-tender, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer vegetable mixture to bowl.

4. Add sherry–soy sauce mixture and shrimp to skillet and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until shrimp are just cooked through, 3 to 5 minutes.

5. Whisk sherry-cornstarch mixture to recombine and add to skillet; increase heat to high and cook, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened, 1 to 2 minutes. Return vegetable mixture to skillet, add half of cilantro, and toss to combine. Transfer to serving dish, top with remaining cilantro, and serve.

Tuscan Shrimp and Beans

Shrimp and bright flavors transform cannellini beans from winter to all-weather fare.

BY STEVE DUNN

In Italy, Tuscans living in rural areas were once referred to as *mangiafagioli*, or "bean eaters," a reference to their consumption of economical bean dishes. The most traditional preparation is an ultrasimple wintry one in which dried cannellini beans are simmered with herbs and garlic until tender and then drizzled with olive oil for serving. But recently I came across a dish making the rounds on cooking blogs that pairs cannellini with shrimp, a combination that adds up to a nice springtime stew. Most of the recipes go something like this: Warm several cups of cooked beans in olive oil with a little of their cooking liquid. Meanwhile, sear a pound of shrimp separately, sauté some onion and garlic, and stir in chopped tomatoes. Add the shrimp and some shredded fresh basil, and spoon the mixture over the warmed beans.

I loved the sweet-savory pop of flavor from the shrimp in these versions, but that flavor was confined to the shrimp themselves rather than integrated into the dish. I wanted to bolster that seafood flavor so it permeated the beans, too. I also wanted the dish to be fast, so I decided from the outset to use a couple of cans of cannellini beans rather than dried beans. Since it wasn't yet tomato season, I also determined that I would use canned tomatoes instead of the fresh ones that many recipes called for. For ease, and because they maintain their shape due to the addition of calcium chloride, I would use the diced kind.

My next decision was to borrow a trick from our Shrimp Scampi (January/February 2016) recipe and make a 10-minute concentrated stock from the shrimp shells, which are packed with the savory compounds we associate with shrimp flavor. This required nothing more than browning the shells in oil (which further boosts the flavor they contribute), simmering them in a little bit of water, and straining them before discarding them. I then warmed the beans in this shrimpy liquid for a few minutes.

This change helped make the dish seem more integrated, but I wanted still more complex seafood flavor. The fix was threefold. First, in the same pan I'd used to make the stock, I sautéed two minced anchovies along with other simple aromatics and seasonings; it's an ingredient we often turn to when we want to add deep savoriness to dishes both seafood and otherwise. Second, I added the shrimp stock back to the pan along with the canned tomatoes and then simmered the beans in this mixture for about 20 minutes, which not only concentrated the seafood flavor even more but also helped meld all the flavors. Third, instead of searing the shrimp separately, I poached them—brined first to season them and help them stay juicy—in the bean mixture over low heat during the final few minutes of cooking. The shrimp flavored the beans, and the beans also insulated the shrimp from direct heat so that they stayed plump and moist.

I freshened up the stew's rich seafood flavor with a bit of lemon zest and juice and made one final tweak: adding the liquid from one can of beans, which contained just enough starchy body so that the stew's consistency was lightly thickened and almost creamy—ideal for eating from a spoon or scooping up with a piece of crusty bread.

Deeply flavorful and on the table in less than half an hour, this was the kind of quick dinner I could whip up on a weeknight and the kind I want to tuck into on a lazy Sunday. I was officially a mangiafagioli, too.

Look: It's Simple
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/apr17

TUSCAN SHRIMP AND BEANS

SERVES 4 TO 6

We prefer untreated shrimp, but if your shrimp are treated with added salt or preservatives like sodium tripolyphosphate, skip brining in step 1 and increase the salt to ½ teaspoon in step 3. Serve with crusty bread.

- 2 tablespoons sugar
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound large shell-on shrimp (26 to 30 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed, shells reserved
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled, halved lengthwise, and sliced thin
- 2 anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 (15-ounce) cans cannellini beans (1 can drained and rinsed, 1 can left undrained)
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained
- ¼ cup shredded fresh basil
- ½ teaspoon grated lemon zest plus 1 tablespoon juice

1. Dissolve sugar and 1 tablespoon salt in 1 quart cold water in large container. Submerge shrimp in brine, cover, and refrigerate for 15 minutes. Remove shrimp from brine and pat dry with paper towels.

2. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add shrimp shells and cook, stirring frequently, until they begin to turn spotty brown and skillet starts to brown, 5 to 6 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and carefully add 1 cup water. When bubbling subsides, return skillet to medium heat and simmer gently, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Strain mixture through colander set over large bowl. Discard shells and reserve liquid (you should have about ¼ cup). Wipe skillet clean with paper towels.

3. Heat 2 tablespoons oil, onion, garlic, anchovies, pepper flakes, ¼ teaspoon salt, and ⅛ teaspoon pepper in now-empty skillet over medium-low heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened, about 5 minutes. Add 1 can drained beans, 1 can beans and their liquid, tomatoes, and shrimp stock and bring to simmer. Simmer, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes.

4. Reduce heat to low, add shrimp, cover, and cook, stirring once during cooking, until shrimp are just opaque, 5 to 7 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and stir in basil and lemon zest and juice. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to serving dish, drizzle with remaining 1 tablespoon oil, and serve.

Poaching the shrimp in a concentrated stock along with the beans enhances the flavor of both.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Pan-Seared Salmon Steaks

Giving salmon steaks the brush-off was the key to success.

BY STEVE DUNN

Salmon steaks have a lot going for them. Because neither side of a steak has skin, its fleshy surface area is greater than that of a fillet, promising plenty of crisp exterior to contrast with the silky interior. Also, whereas a fillet has a thick end and a tapered end, which can lead to uneven cooking, a steak is uniformly thick, which, with some creative tying, can deliver a more evenly cooked piece of fish.

I set about forming a salmon steak into a shape that would not only promote even cooking but also make it structurally sound. Using a paring knife, I removed the spine bones and interior membrane, which made room to peel back the skin from one of the belly flaps and tuck the flap into the gap I'd created. I wrapped the second flap around the first and used kitchen twine to secure the salmon into a medallion—an elegant step up from the common fillet.

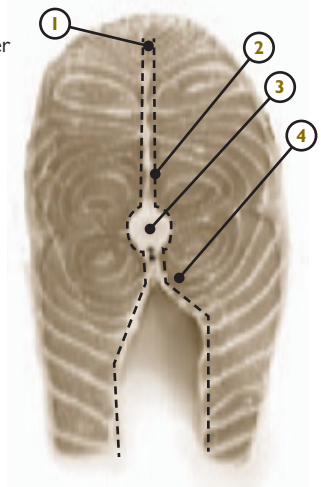
A 15-minute brine helped keep the salmon juicy when cooked over medium-high heat in an oiled nonstick skillet, and the steaks developed a moderate crust as long as I patted them dry after brining. But I wasn't entirely satisfied with the color and texture of the medallions' crust. Perhaps a coating of flour would help? A quick dredge made the crust crispier, but coverage was spotty. How about finer cornstarch? Simply shaking off the excess left too much starch on the fish and produced an unpleasantly thick coating, so I used a pastry brush to gently sweep away the excess so that only a translucent dusting remained. These medallions emerged with perfectly even and beautifully crisp browned exteriors encasing moist, buttery flesh. To accompany these top-notch medallions, I crafted a vibrant tarragon sauce that would complement the rich salmon.

Cornstarch helps produce a crisp, golden crust on both sides of the salmon steaks.

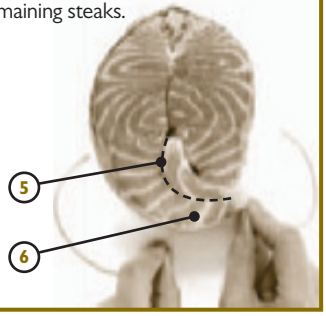
STEP BY STEP Prepping Salmon Steaks

To ensure that our salmon steaks cook evenly, we remove the cartilage and spine, shape the steaks into medallions, and tie them with kitchen twine to help keep the flaky flesh intact as it cooks.

1. Place 1 salmon steak on counter with belly flaps facing you. Locate white line at top of salmon steak.
2. Using paring knife, cut along 1 side of white line, around spine, then along membrane inside belly flap. Repeat process on other side of white line.
3. Using kitchen shears, cut out spine and membrane; discard.
4. Run your fingers along each steak where spinal structure was removed to locate any pinbones; remove pinbones using tweezers.



5. Remove 1½ inches of skin from 1 flap of steak. Tuck skinned portion into center of steak.
6. Wrap other flap around steak and tie with kitchen twine. Repeat with remaining steaks.



See Steve Tie One On
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/oct17

PAN-SEARED SALMON STEAKS

SERVES 4

You can serve the salmon steaks topped with our Tarragon Chimichurri (recipe follows), if desired. Crisco Blends is the test kitchen's favorite vegetable oil.

- Salt and pepper
- 4 (8- to 10-ounce) salmon steaks, ¾ to 1 inch thick
- ¼ cup cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- Lemon wedges

1. Dissolve ¼ cup salt in 2 quarts cold water in large container. Submerge salmon in brine and let stand at room temperature for 15 minutes. Remove salmon from brine and pat dry with paper towels.

2. Follow instructions in "Prepping Salmon Steaks."

3. Lightly season both sides of salmon with salt and pepper. Spread cornstarch in even layer on large plate. Lightly press both sides of salmon into cornstarch. Using pastry brush, remove excess cornstarch.

4. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Place salmon in skillet and cook until first side is browned, about 3 minutes. Flip salmon and cook until second side is browned, 3 minutes. Continue to cook, flipping salmon every 2 minutes, until centers are still translucent when checked with tip of paring knife and register 125 degrees, 2 to 6 minutes longer. Transfer salmon to serving platter, discard twine, and serve with lemon wedges.

TARRAGON CHIMICHURRI

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

California Olive Ranch Everyday Extra Virgin Olive Oil is our favorite supermarket extra-virgin olive oil.

- ½ cup minced fresh parsley
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh tarragon
- 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- Salt and pepper

Combine all ingredients in bowl and season with salt and pepper to taste.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Linguine with Seafood

No matter how much shellfish you pack into the pot, the pasta in dishes such as *linguine allo scoglio* often doesn't taste at all like the sea. We wanted to change that.

BY STEVE DUNN

Italian seafood pastas such as *frutti di mare* and *pescatore* promise noodles teeming with shellfish and saturated with clean, briny-sweet flavor. And while many versions are chock-full of shrimp, clams, mussels, lobster, scallops, squid, or any combination thereof, I've yet to eat one in which the pasta actually tastes much like the sea. The shellfish flavor tends to be locked up in the pieces of seafood themselves rather than awash throughout the dish. Together with the typical tomato-based sauce, these dishes resemble nothing more than pasta drenched in marinara and punctuated by the occasional bite of seafood.

Most recently I came across this problem in a bowl of *linguine allo scoglio*, another mixed shellfish–and-pasta classic that's named for the rocky Italian seashores where seafood is abundant (*scoglio* means "rock"). Tangled in the noodles were shell-on mussels and clams, shrimp, and squid, as well as cherry tomatoes, garlic, and fresh herbs. The sauce was white wine–based, which gave me hope that the seafood flavor might come through more clearly here than it does in tomato-based preparations. But instead the pasta barely tasted like seafood and was relatively dry, as the thin sauce had slipped right off the linguine and puddled at the bottom of the bowl. Worse, the mussels, shrimp, and squid were dense and rubbery, obviously having toughened while waiting for the longer-cooking clams to pop open.

Fresh tomatoes, loads of garlic, and parsley keep the flavors in this classic pasta dish clean and bright.

Overcooked seafood would be easy enough to fix with a strategic cooking method. But for this dish, I also had my sights set on a light-bodied sauce that clung nicely to the noodles and infused them with the flavor of the sea.

Shellfish Sequence

I ignored recipes that suggested sautéing or simmering the shrimp, clams, mussels, and squid together in a pot until every piece was cooked through, since that would surely lead to the rubbery results I'd had before. But I didn't want to tediously cook one type of shellfish at a time, transferring each to a bowl as it finished cooking. I had to figure out how long it would take each type of seafood to cook, add the longest-cooking item first, and stagger the additions of the others.

First I sautéed minced garlic and red pepper flakes in a Dutch oven over moderately high heat, which would get the sauce base going. In went the clams, which popped open after about 8 minutes, followed midway through cooking by the mussels. With no hard, protective shells, shrimp and squid cook very quickly, so I lowered the flame and added them to the pot. They plumped nicely in about 4 minutes and 2 minutes, respectively—but would have toughened if I hadn't kept a close watch on them. Down the road, I'd see if there was an even gentler way to cook them, but for now, I had at least established a sequence.

Clamming Up

Left behind in the pot were the aromatics and the liquor shed by the cooked shellfish, which would fortify my sauce. It wasn't much, though, so I borrowed a technique we've used in other shrimp preparations and made a quick stock with the shells by browning them in a skillet and simmering them with wine. In this case, I finished building the sauce by adding lots of chopped parsley, a dash of fresh thyme, and about ¾ pound of whole cherry tomatoes; as the sauce simmered, the tomatoes collapsed into a pulp that added body to the sauce. Meanwhile, I boiled the linguine in a separate pot. I then tossed the cooked seafood into the sauce and poured it over the drained pasta.

The seafood was well cooked, but the sauce was still thin in both body and seafood flavor. To kick it up another notch, I skipped the shrimp broth and instead added a bottle of clam juice and four minced anchovies. If that sounds like it would be unpleasantly fishy, trust me that it's not; we often use an anchovy or two to add rich, savory flavor in both seafood and nonseafood preparations, and mincing them to a fine paste ensures that they meld seamlessly.

Adding a spoonful of tomato paste along with the anchovies and simmering the liquid until it had reduced by about one-third yielded much richer, rounder flavor—but only marginally better body. When I poured the sauce over the linguine, it still slipped right through to the bottom of the bowl.

Marrying Early

That's when I realized I hadn't implemented one of the oldest Italian pasta-cooking tricks in the book: parboiling the pasta until it's just shy of al dente, draining it, and simmering it directly in the sauce to finish cooking. Doing so not only allows the pasta to soak up the flavor of the sauce but the starches it sheds during cooking also thicken the liquid. (I made sure to reserve some of the starchy pasta cooking water in case I needed to adjust the consistency of the sauce before serving.) At last, the sauce was viscous enough to cling to the strands.

I was about to declare my recipe finished when I got a forkful of squid that was a tad rubbery. So

No More Spotty Seafood Flavor

Even when a bowl of pasta is teeming with shellfish, the seafood flavor is typically isolated rather than infused throughout the dish. To change that, we made a clam juice–based sauce and added four minced anchovies with the aromatics. We also finished cooking the pasta in the sauce to let it soak up the seafood flavor.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

RECIPE SHORTHAND The Scoglio Sequence

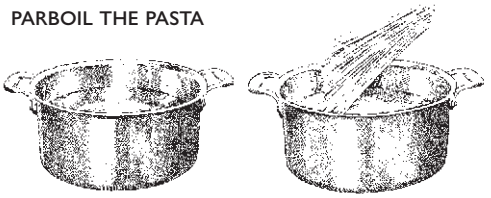
Perfectly cooking pasta, sauce, and four kinds of shellfish at the same time was complicated—and often ended badly. We got around this by precooking some of the components and adding other components near the end of cooking. With the right order of operations, our version of *linguine allo scoglio* is much easier to prepare.

PRECOOK THE CLAMS AND MUSSELS

Cook clams | Add mussels | Set clams and mussels aside

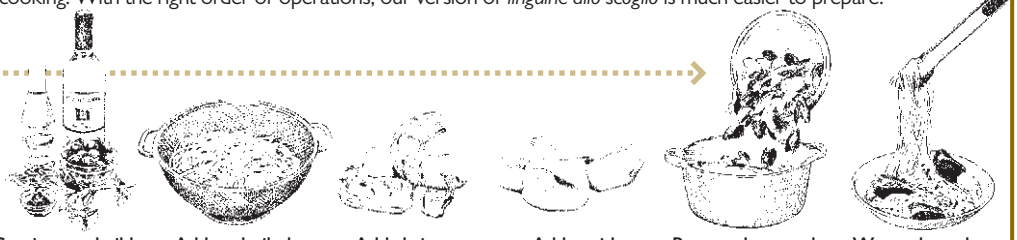
We give the clams and the mussels a head start by cooking them first over medium-high heat. Their liquor is the base for the sauce.

PARBOIL THE PASTA



Boil water for pasta | Cook pasta for 7 minutes

We parboil the linguine and add it to the sauce when it's just shy of al dente. That way, it soaks up flavor while giving up starch that lends body to the sauce.



Continue to build sauce in pot used to cook clams and mussels | Add parboiled pasta to pot | Add shrimp to pot | Add squid to pot | Return clams and mussels to pot | Warm through and serve

Adding the shrimp and squid to the pot just before the pasta turns al dente keeps them from overcooking.

After returning the clams and mussels to the pot, we let the dish stand, covered, for a couple of minutes to warm through before serving.

were the shrimp, I realized with another bite. Both had overcooked as they'd sat in the warm bowl, which got me thinking that I could add them to the sauce along with the pasta rather than precook them with the clams and mussels. After I'd let the pasta simmer in the sauce for about 2 minutes, I lowered the heat and added the shrimp and a lid. About 4 minutes later, I followed with the squid.

Now plump and tender, the shrimp and squid were perfect. To freshen up the flavors before serving, I tried one more batch in which I added lemon zest, halved cherry tomatoes, and more parsley along with the squid, plus a drizzle of olive oil and a squeeze of lemon juice. Every bite was bright, fresh, perfectly cooked, and—most important—packed with seafood flavor from top to bottom.

Simplest Shellfish in the Pot

If you've never cooked with squid, you should try it. It's inexpensive, cooks in minutes, and is typically sold precleaned. If you want rings, simply slice the bodies crosswise. If tentacles are available, buy some and add them to your dish.

If you can't find fresh squid, many supermarkets carry frozen squid packaged in a block of whole bodies. To use part of a frozen block, wrap the block in a kitchen towel and press it against the edge of a counter or table to break it.

FROZEN SQUID

LINGUINE WITH SEAFOOD (LINGUINE ALLO SCOGLIO)

SERVES 6

For a simpler version of this dish, you can omit the clams and squid and increase the amounts of mussels and shrimp to 1½ pounds each; you'll also need to increase the amount of salt in step 2 to ¾ teaspoon. If you can't find fresh squid, it's available frozen (thaw it before cutting and cooking) at many supermarkets and typically has the benefit of being precleaned. Bar Harbor makes our favorite clam juice.

- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 12 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 pound littleneck clams, scrubbed
- 1 pound mussels, scrubbed and debearded
- 1¼ pounds cherry tomatoes, half of tomatoes halved, remaining tomatoes left whole
- 1 (8-ounce) bottle clam juice
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 1 cup minced fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 4 anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound linguine
- 1 pound extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound), peeled and deveined
- 8 ounces squid, sliced crosswise into ½-inch-thick rings
- 2 teaspoons grated lemon zest, plus lemon wedges for serving

1. Heat ¼ cup oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add garlic and pepper flakes and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add clams, cover, and cook, shaking pan occasionally, for 4 minutes. Add mussels, cover, and continue to cook, shaking pan occasionally, until clams and mussels have opened, 3 to 4 minutes longer. Transfer clams and mussels to bowl, discarding any that haven't opened, and cover to keep warm; leave any broth in pot.

2. Add whole tomatoes, clam juice, wine, ½ cup parsley, tomato paste, anchovies, thyme, and ½ teaspoon salt to pot and bring to simmer over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to medium and cook, stirring occasionally, until tomatoes have started to break down and sauce is reduced by one-third, about 10 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring often, for 7 minutes. Reserve ½ cup cooking water, then drain pasta.

4. Add pasta to sauce in Dutch oven and cook over medium heat, stirring gently, for 2 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low, stir in shrimp, cover, and cook for 4 minutes. Stir in squid, lemon zest, halved tomatoes, and remaining ½ cup parsley; cover and continue to cook until shrimp and squid are just cooked through, about 2 minutes longer. Gently stir in clams and mussels. Remove pot from heat, cover, and let stand until clams and mussels are warmed through, about 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste and adjust consistency with reserved cooking water as needed. Transfer to large serving dish, drizzle with remaining 2 tablespoons oil, and serve, passing lemon wedges separately.

See the Sequence
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/aug17

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Weeknight Bolognese

Half a dozen meats and hours of pot watching make a lush, deeply savory version of this Italian ragu. We wanted those results with fewer ingredients in half the time.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Six years ago we published a recipe for *ragu alla Bolognese*, the lavish, long-cooked meat sauce named for the northern Italian city from which it hails. It's an "ultimate" version, loaded up with not just ground beef but also ground pork, veal, pancetta, mortadella, and chicken livers. The meats simmer gently with a *soffritto* (softened chopped onion, carrot, and celery), broth, wine, and a goodly amount of tomato paste for about 1½ hours, by which time the sauce is silky, deeply savory, and thick enough that a wooden spoon leaves a trail when dragged along the bottom of the pot. When tossed with eggy ribbons of tagliatelle or pappardelle, it's about as satisfying as a bowl of pasta can get.

Because Bolognese is a long-cooked sauce, it's the perfect project for a winter weekend when I don't mind lingering in the kitchen. But I often don't have the time or patience to make a proper version. That's when I wish I could whip up a streamlined sauce that would closely approximate the meaty depth and richness of the real deal. In fact, I've tried a few recipes called "quick" or "simple" Bolognese that cut the number of meats down to just one (ground beef) and come together in no more than an hour, but none was worth repeating. The most common flaw of these recipes was that they were too tomatoey and acidic—more like meaty marinara than true Bolognese, which actually contains relatively little tomato. Most also lacked the traditional sauce's velvety consistency and ultrasavory flavor; in other words, they tasted like the shortcut sauces they were.

Was it possible to have it both ways—a rich, complex-tasting meat sauce that didn't require half a dozen meats and an afternoon of pot watching? I was about to find out.

Rich, meaty, and deeply savory, our sauce has all the appeal of a long-cooked Bolognese with about an hour's work.

Where's the Beef?

I wanted to use ground beef—and only ground beef—as the meat in my sauce. But instead of searing it hard to develop deep color and flavor, which would turn it dry and pebbly, I tossed 1 pound of 85 percent lean ground beef with a little water and baking soda. Odd as it sounds, this has been our routine first move when braising ground beef since we discovered that the alkaline baking soda can raise the meat's pH, helping it retain moisture (without affecting the sauce's flavor).

While the beef soaked, I sautéed finely chopped carrot, onion, and celery in a Dutch oven with a little oil and butter until much of their moisture had evaporated. Then came the tomato component—paste, not canned tomatoes, since I wanted to add savory depth to the sauce and not bright, fruity acidity. I cooked the paste until it developed a rusty hue, an indication that it had caramelized, and then added the meat, which I cooked just until it lost its raw pink color. In went some red wine to deglaze the pot, followed by a cup of beef broth. Some cooks would add dairy at this point; depending on who you ask, it's either an essential component, lending further richness and supposedly tenderizing the long-cooked meat, or it has no place in the sauce whatsoever. I opted not to, lest the dairy mute the meat's flavor. Instead, I simply simmered the mixture briefly to evaporate some of the liquid before reducing the heat and letting the sauce gurgle gently for about 30 minutes until it thickened up a bit; I then tossed it with the boiled pasta.

This sauce, while not bland, wasn't nearly as meaty-tasting as Bolognese should be. It was also greasy, but that was an easy fix: I switched to 93 percent lean ground beef. Ordinarily, such lean meat can be tough, but the baking soda treatment kept the beef moist and tender.

Annie Shows You How
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/feb17

SHOPPING **Not All Egg Noodles Are Created Equal**

Our recipe calls for dried tagliatelle, an Italian egg pasta that's the classic choice for Bolognese. Dried pappardelle, a wider Italian egg pasta, is a fine substitute. Do not use short egg noodles, such as those from Pennsylvania Dutch or Manischewitz, in this recipe. Their smooth surfaces are far less effective at gripping sauce than the rough-hewn, porous surfaces of good-quality Italian pasta (from brands such as De Cecco and Bionaturae). Only such traditionally made pasta will soak up enough liquid from our sauce to give it the right consistency.

BUY THIS
Strands of good-quality Italian egg pasta have a rough-hewn, highly absorbent surface.

DON'T BUY THIS
Most non-Italian egg noodles are smoother and less absorbent than Italian egg pasta.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Big Savory Flavor in a Hurry

Here's how we gave our shortcut Bolognese as much depth as the real deal.

AROMATIC FLAVOR BASE

Instead of searing the ground beef, which renders it dried out and pebbly, we create a savory flavor base by browning finely chopped pancetta, aromatic vegetables, and tomato paste.

CONCENTRATED BEEF BROTH

Reducing 4 cups of broth to 2 cups adds meaty depth to the sauce without adding too much extra liquid.

LOTS OF PARMESAN

In addition to passing grated Parmesan for serving, we stir ½ cup directly into the sauce to take advantage of its umami richness.

But what could I do to beef up the flavor? I was still reluctant to brown the ground meat, so I tried another unusual technique we've used in recipes for gravy and shepherd's pie: deeply browning the aromatic vegetables. I sautéed the carrot, onion, and celery for about 10 minutes, which gave me a visibly dark, rich flavor base, and then I finished building the sauce. It was meatier for sure—but still not meaty enough to be called Bolognese.

At this point, I reconsidered my initial ban on other meats. I didn't have to go whole hog, but it would be easy enough to add back something like pancetta, which is widely available and often used in small quantities to flavor Italian braises and sauces. The key would be chopping it very fine so that there would be a lot of surface area for browning and so it could thoroughly integrate into the sauce. I processed 6 ounces in the food processor, and while I was at it, I threw in the aromatic vegetables, too, again to maximize surface area for browning and to save myself the knife work. Once the mixture was paste-like, I spread it into a thin layer in the pot and cooked it.

This was the best-tasting sauce to date, but I had one other ingredient to try: Parmesan cheese. Garnishing each serving with a couple of spoonfuls is the classic way to season Italian pasta dishes with an extra jolt of salty, tangy richness, so why not add some directly to the pot? Sure enough, when I stirred a generous ½ cup into the sauce along with the broth, the final sauce was complex and seriously savory. It wasn't no-holds-barred Bolognese, but it was a convincingly close second.

Through Thick and Thin

The sauce tasted great and boasted a thick, velvety consistency that I thought would coat the tagliatelle beautifully. But instead the noodles sucked up all the liquid, leaving the sauce dry and scant.

The problem was that the rough surface of tagliatelle soaks up a lot of liquid. I needed to make the sauce looser so that by the time the tagliatelle absorbed the liquid, the sauce's consistency would tighten up just enough. I would need to scale up the liquid volume without diluting the sauce's now-meaty flavor. I was able to easily accomplish this by reducing 4 cups of beef broth down to 2 cups, which took just 15 minutes and could be done while the beef soaked in the baking soda solution and the vegetables browned.

When I added the concentrated broth to the sauce, I feared I had increased the amount of liquid too much: The sauce looked thin even after cooking for 30 minutes—not a consistency I'd equate with Bolognese. It wasn't until I tossed the sauce with the noodles and they soaked up just enough of the liquid that the sauce looked appropriately thick and clung beautifully to the pasta (see "Looks Wrong, But It's Right").

Barely an hour had passed before I was sitting down to a bowl of tagliatelle Bolognese with a savory depth and richness that rivaled long-cooked versions but came together in about half the time.

WEEKNIGHT TAGLIATELLE WITH BOLOGNESE SAUCE

SERVES 4 TO 6

If you use our recommended beef broth, Better Than Bouillon Roasted Beef Base, you can skip step 2 and make a concentrated broth by adding 4 teaspoons paste to 2 cups water. To ensure the best flavor, be sure to brown the pancetta-vegetable mixture in step 4 until the fond on the bottom of the pot is quite dark. The cooked sauce will look thin but will thicken once tossed with the pasta. Tagliatelle is a long, flat, dry egg pasta that is about ¼ inch wide; if you can't find it, you can substitute pappardelle. Substituting other pasta may result in a too-wet sauce.

- 1 pound 93 percent lean ground beef
- 2 tablespoons water
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- Salt and pepper
- 4 cups beef broth
- 6 ounces pancetta, chopped coarse
- 1 onion, chopped coarse
- 1 large carrot, peeled and chopped coarse
- 1 celery rib, chopped coarse
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 cup dry red wine
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup), plus extra for serving
- 1 pound tagliatelle

1. Toss beef with water, baking soda, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in bowl until thoroughly combined. Set aside.

2. While beef sits, bring broth to boil over high heat in large pot (this pot will be used to cook pasta in step 6) and cook until reduced to 2 cups, about 15 minutes; set aside.

3. Pulse pancetta in food processor until finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses. Add onion, carrot, and celery and pulse until vegetables are finely chopped and mixture has paste-like consistency, 12 to 15 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

4. Heat butter and oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. When foaming subsides, add pancetta-vegetable mixture and ¼ teaspoon pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid has evaporated, about 8 minutes. Spread mixture in even layer in bottom of pot and continue to cook, stirring every couple of minutes, until very dark browned bits form on bottom of pot, 7 to 12 minutes longer. Stir in tomato paste and cook until paste is rust-colored and bottom of pot is dark brown, 1 to 2 minutes.

5. Reduce heat to medium, add beef, and cook, using wooden spoon to break meat into pieces no larger than ¼ inch, until beef has just lost its raw pink color, 4 to 7 minutes. Stir in wine, scraping up any browned bits, and bring to simmer. Cook until wine has evaporated and sauce has thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir in broth and Parmesan. Return sauce to simmer; cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer for 30 minutes (sauce will look thin). Remove from heat and season with salt and pepper to taste.

6. Rinse pot that held broth. While sauce simmers, bring 4 quarts water to boil in now-empty pot. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until al dente. Reserve ¼ cup cooking water, then drain pasta. Add pasta to pot with sauce and toss to combine. Adjust sauce consistency with reserved cooking water as needed. Transfer to platter or individual bowls and serve, passing extra Parmesan separately.

Looks Wrong, But It's Right

The cooked sauce will be thin, but resist the urge to reduce it further. Once you add the tagliatelle—so long as it's a good-quality product—the sauce will thicken perfectly.

TEMPORARILY THIN

A good-quality Italian egg pasta will help the loose sauce thicken to the proper consistency.

Easiest-Ever Macaroni and Cheese

We set out to make a smooth, creamy, cheesy sauce without the bother of a béchamel or custard. Making the whole dish in just 20 minutes was a bonus.

BY ANDREA GEARY

I've always made mac and cheese the traditional way, and though the final product is comforting and delicious, getting there is a bit of a slog: I first cook flour in melted butter, whisk in milk, and simmer until the sauce, known as a béchamel, thickens. It's this béchamel that allows me to then add flavorful aged cheeses, such as extra-sharp cheddar, which are prone to breaking down and separating into a greasy, lumpy mess when heated (more later on why some cheeses "break"). Sometimes I add eggs for an even richer, more custardy result. Finally, I combine the cheese sauce with cooked macaroni, transfer it to a buttered baking dish, top it with bread crumbs, and bake it until it's bubbly. Creamy and cheesy? Yes. Fast? Definitely not.

So when I heard of an ultramodern recipe for the creamiest, cheesiest macaroni and cheese ever, I was curious. When I heard that it was also the fastest ever, I knew I had to try it. Modernist Cuisine, a research group at the forefront of the molecular gastronomy movement, devised a four-ingredient recipe said to have an extraordinarily smooth texture without relying on a béchamel. The key? An ingredient called sodium citrate, which isn't as scary as it sounds. It's an additive that's used as an emulsifier or preservative in foods such as gelatin desserts, jam, ice cream, and candy. Its downside is that it's a mail-order item—and therefore a nonstarter for the quick, pantry-ready recipe I hoped to produce. But I did get my hands on some just to see how it works. Following the Modernist recipe, I dissolved a tiny bit of sodium citrate in water, which I then brought to a simmer. Next, I used an immersion blender to incorporate handfuls of shredded crumbly, mature cheddar cheese (though subsequent tests showed that simply whisking did the job just as well)—a true test of the smoothing properties of the sodium citrate because the more aged and dry a cheese is, the more likely it is to break.

Watch: It's Amazing
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/apr17

We cook the macaroni in water and milk and then stir two types of shredded cheese directly into the pot.

Dubious as I'd been, this sauce was remarkably creamy and homogeneous. I stirred it into cooked elbow macaroni, tasted it, and had to admit: It wasn't just fast (coming together in just 5 minutes)—it really was the smoothest and cheesiest, too.

In fact, with no milk, flour, or eggs to dilute it, this sauce was actually too cheesy and salty for me; I'd have to tame it a bit or I wouldn't be able to eat a whole serving. And though I loved the quick prep time, I missed that crispy top that you get on a baked mac and cheese. But these issues were easily fixable. The real hurdle would be making a quick, smooth, richly flavored batch of macaroni and cheese without using sodium citrate.

Ugly Breakup

Back to why cheese breaks when heated: Cheese is an emulsion of fat and water bound up in a protein gel. When it's exposed to heat, the fat liquefies. As it gets even hotter, the protein network begins to break apart, the emulsion breaks down, the fat and water begin to separate out, and the cheese begins to melt and flow. Then the protein molecules find each other again and begin to regroup, this time in clumps or strings rather than in that tidy gel formation. The result is melted cheese with a pasty, lumpy texture and pools of fat.

Most cooks prevent breaking the same way I did in my classic mac and cheese: by adding flour in the form of a béchamel. When combined with melting cheese, the starch granules in the flour release elongated threads of amylose, which then wrap around the proteins, preventing them from squeezing out fat and recombining into unpleasant curds. But making a béchamel adds work.

Sodium citrate works differently. It doesn't simply adhere to the cheese proteins; it changes them. When you add it to a cheese sauce, the calcium ions in the cheese proteins are replaced with sodium ions. This changes the structure of the protein in such a way that the protein itself becomes a stabilizing gel, holding the fat and water together so the sauce remains supersmooth.

In fact, the glossy flow of the sauce made with sodium citrate reminded me of the molten American cheese on a cheeseburger, and it turned out that this was no coincidence. So-called process cheeses, like American and Velveeta, contain "emulsifying salts" to keep them smooth when melted (see "Why We Can Skip the Béchamel").

So if I used process cheese instead of my usual cheddar, could I skip the sodium citrate? While I boiled macaroni in one saucepan, I whisked 2 cups of shredded American cheese into 1 cup of simmering milk in another saucepan, where it melted smoothly to form a sauce. I stirred the sauce into the drained macaroni and, to simulate the crispy top of a baked macaroni and cheese, sprinkled some toasted, buttered bread crumbs (made from white sandwich bread) on top.

Fast and Fuss-Free

Our macaroni and cheese isn't just quick—it cooks entirely on the stovetop. And instead of using separate pots to boil the macaroni and to make a cheese sauce, we do both simultaneously in the same vessel.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

SCIENCE Why We Can Skip the Béchamel

Most versions of macaroni and cheese achieve a smooth consistency by starting with a béchamel, the classic sauce made by combining a flour-and-fat paste with milk. When combined with aged cheese, which is prone to breaking, the starches in the béchamel release elongated threads of amylose, which then wrap around the cheese's casein proteins, preventing them from squeezing out fat and recombining into curds. By using American cheese, we're able to skip the béchamel. Thanks to its emulsifying salts, American cheese stays smooth when melted and acts as a stabilizing agent for aged cheeses such as the extra-sharp cheddar in our recipe.

SHARP CHEDDAR ALONE = GRAINY

Without any stabilizing agent, the protein network in cheese breaks down when heated, fat breaks out, and proteins regroup in clumps. Aged (and thus drier) cheese is even more prone to breaking.

SHARP CHEDDAR + AMERICAN = SMOOTH

American cheese contains emulsifying salts that replace calcium ions in dairy with sodium ions, stabilizing the cheese sauce so that it doesn't form curds and fat stays emulsified.

Crumb topping aside, it looked exactly like macaroni and cheese made from a box mix. The sauce was almost unnaturally shiny, but it sure was smooth. The flavor was as bland as one would expect, and the pairing of buttered bread crumbs and American cheese made it taste like a grilled cheese sandwich.

But this test showed that the emulsifying salts in process cheese were more than sufficient to prevent my quick cheese sauce from breaking. The trick would be to use a more flavorful cheese and supplement with enough process cheese to keep the sauce smooth.

One-Pot Wonder

I went back to the extra-sharp cheddar I'd started with and tested it with various ratios of American cheese. A 1:1 ratio of cheddar to American was sufficient to maintain the smooth texture of the sauce, but it still tasted a touch bland, so I doctored it with a bit of Dijon mustard and a dash of cayenne pepper. I mixed the sauce with the cooked and drained macaroni, transferred it to a serving dish, and sprinkled the top with a new version of the crumb topping.

To minimize the grilled cheese sandwich associations, I substituted panko bread crumbs for the sandwich bread, and instead of toasting the crumbs in butter, I used olive oil. A bit of grated Parmesan sprinkled onto the still-warm crumbs reinforced the cheesy flavor of the dish and added some extra crunch.

The dish was everything I wanted: creamy, cheesy, and fast. But it occurred to me that I could make it even faster. The next time around, I cooked the macaroni in a mere 1½ cups of water and the 1 cup of milk I was already using in the sauce. After about 7 minutes, the macaroni was fully cooked, but instead of draining it, I simply stirred in the American cheese, mustard, and cayenne. Then I removed the saucepan from the heat and stirred in the cheddar until it was just distributed throughout. I let it sit, covered, so the cheese could melt gently in the residual heat while I made the topping. A final stir and a sprinkling of crumbs and I was done.

I was so delighted with the results that I immediately set about making a slightly more sophisticated version that calls for Gruyère and blue cheese in place of the cheddar. I'll welcome the variety because, with a recipe this easy and fast, there's a lot of macaroni and cheese in my future.

SIMPLE STOVETOP MACARONI AND CHEESE

SERVES 4

Barilla makes our favorite elbow macaroni. Because the macaroni is cooked in a measured amount of liquid, we don't recommend using different shapes or sizes of pasta. Use a 4-ounce block of American cheese from the deli counter rather than presliced cheese.

- 1½ cups water
- 1 cup milk
- 8 ounces elbow macaroni
- 4 ounces American cheese, shredded (1 cup)
- ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard
- Small pinch cayenne pepper
- 4 ounces extra-sharp cheddar cheese, shredded (1 cup)
- ⅓ cup panko bread crumbs
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese

1. Bring water and milk to boil in medium saucepan over high heat. Stir in macaroni and reduce heat to medium-low. Cook, stirring frequently, until macaroni is soft (slightly past al dente), 6 to 8 minutes. Add American cheese, mustard, and cayenne and cook, stirring constantly, until cheese is completely melted, about 1 minute. Off heat, stir in cheddar until evenly distributed but not melted. Cover saucepan and let stand for 5 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, combine panko, oil, ⅛ teaspoon salt, and ⅛ teaspoon pepper in 8-inch nonstick skillet until panko is evenly moistened. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until evenly browned, 3 to 4 minutes. Off heat, sprinkle Parmesan over panko mixture and stir to combine. Transfer panko mixture to small bowl.

3. Stir macaroni until sauce is smooth (sauce may look loose but will thicken as it cools). Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to warm serving dish and sprinkle panko mixture over top. Serve immediately.

GROWN-UP STOVETOP MACARONI AND CHEESE

Increase water to 1¾ cups. Substitute ¾ cup shredded Gruyère cheese and 2 tablespoons crumbled blue cheese for cheddar.

SHOPPING American Cheese

BUY A BLOCK

Only American cheese from the deli case will do.

Though it's hardly an exemplar of America's cultured dairy achievements, American cheese—the key to our sauce's remarkably velvety texture—is real cheese. It's what the U.S. Food and Drug Administration calls "pasteurized process cheese," made by combining one or more mild cheeses with dairy, water, and emulsifying salts that keep its texture smooth when melted. We buy a 4-ounce block from the deli counter, which is easy to shred for the sauce.

There are two products you want to avoid, both of which are typically sold in packages of individually wrapped slices. The first are products such as Kraft Singles, which are technically considered American cheese since they contain 51 percent real cheese but are bland and contain added whey that made our cheese sauce too thick. The second is known as "imitation cheese food." These slices aren't cheese at all; they're a vegetable oil–based product loaded with stabilizers and thickeners and are more chemically related to plastic than to cheese. In our cheese sauce, they weren't just bland; they didn't even melt and instead formed large orange clumps.

SAY NO TO SINGLES

The added whey in cheese products such as Kraft Singles made the sauce too thick.

PASS ON THE IMITATION CHEESE

Products that list oil and starch among their primary ingredients don't even melt.

Meatless "Meat" Sauce

We wanted it quick. We wanted it easy. Most of all, we wanted it to be as hearty and satisfying as a meaty red sauce.

BY LAN LAM

Though I didn't grow up in an Italian family, I can still appreciate the appeal of a bowl of pasta dressed with tomatoey meat sauce. The sauce is rich and savory, clings well to just about any noodle shape, and can be thrown together quickly with basic ingredients such as ground beef, canned tomatoes, onion, garlic, and seasonings. That's why I make it so often.

The thing is, sometimes I want a meatless version instead, either because I'm hosting vegetarian guests or, increasingly, because I'm trying to eat less meat. And the more I think about it, the more I realize that what I crave most about a quick meat sauce like this isn't the flavor of the meat itself, since this type of sauce doesn't taste particularly beefy. It's the rich, savory flavor and hearty, unctuous body that I want. Do you really need meat to achieve the look and feel—and even the savoriness—of a good meat sauce? I was about to find out.

This thick, hearty sauce pairs well with any pasta shape.

Build the Base

The typical Italian American meat sauce gets most of its savory depth from browning the ground beef. As the beef cooks, it releases juices that reduce and form a flavor-packed fond on the bottom of the pot. From there, you remove and reserve the beef and cook the onion, garlic, and seasonings (such as oregano and red pepper flakes) in the rendered fat, which adds to the flavor base. You then add canned tomatoes and the browned beef to the pot and simmer the sauce long enough to tenderize the meat a bit and allow the flavors to meld.

Finding a savory stand-in for the ground beef was an obvious place to start, and mushrooms were my first instinct. They're a popular meat alternative because they're an excellent source of both glutamic acid and nucleotides, molecules packed with savory umami flavor. Plus, their cell walls are made of a heat-stable substance called chitin, so instead of breaking down and turning to mush when cooked, they retain some satisfying meat-like chew.

Look: No Meat Required
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/june17

That explained why so many of the vegetarian "meat" sauce recipes I tried called for mushrooms, but in most cases I found their earthy flavor too dominant; I wasn't trying to make a mushroom sauce, after all. However, a modest amount of mushroom presence would be a good thing as long as I balanced it with other components.

I ruled out more assertively flavored varieties, including porcini and shiitake, in favor of earthy but more neutral-tasting cremini, and I kept the amount to a judicious 10 ounces. To quickly chop them into ground meat–size bits, I blitzed them in a food processor. From there, I sautéed them in extra-virgin olive oil with a bit of salt; the oil would mimic the richness of rendered beef fat, and the salt would both season the mushrooms and pull water from them so that it could evaporate for faster browning. Once the mushrooms had developed some color, I added an onion (also chopped in the food processor) and a healthy scoop of tomato paste, another umami booster. When the onions were translucent and the paste had darkened to a deep rust red (a sign that its sugar had caramelized and its flavor had intensified), I added garlic, dried oregano, and red pepper flakes; stirred in the tomatoes; and simmered the sauce for about 20 minutes.

Tossed with some pasta, this early batch looked thin and tasted one-dimensional, but it was undeniably savory. What I needed was a partner for the mushrooms that would provide the sauce with some bulk and flavor balance.

Fill 'er Up

I began to scour cookbooks and blogs for other ingredient ideas, steering clear of meat fakers such as tempeh and seitan. Instead, I compiled a list of vegetables, grains, and nuts that might mimic the hearty, lush consistency of ground beef without revealing themselves too obviously: cauliflower, eggplant, walnuts, cashews, lentils, and bulgur.

But the list quickly shortened. The nuts took the better part of an hour to become fully tender, even after I broke them up in the food processor. And the bulgur grains absorbed so much water that the sauce looked and tasted like a wheaty porridge. Lentils didn't look or taste right in an Italian American–style sauce, eggplant had to be roasted to break down, and chopped cauliflower lost votes for its sulfurous aroma.

Chickpeas were the most promising candidate. Canned ones would be just fine for this quick sauce; they softened nicely after a few pulses in the food

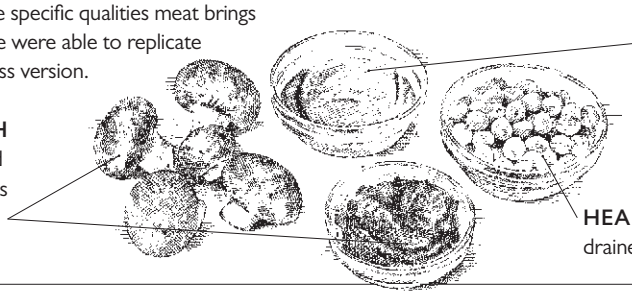
A Speedy Process

To make this recipe as quick as possible, most of the "knife work" takes place in a food processor. Even better, you don't have to wash the processor bowl between uses.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Getting to "Meaty" Without Meat

By zeroing in on the specific qualities meat brings to a meat sauce, we were able to replicate them in our meatless version.



processor and just 15 minutes of cooking. The only drawback was that they overthickened the sauce, so I tried rinsing them after chopping to remove as much of their excess starch as possible. When that didn't help enough, I tried adding another can of crushed tomatoes, but it contained too much pulp and not enough liquid and made the sauce too tomatoey. Ultimately, I added a couple of cups of vegetable broth along with the crushed tomatoes, which loosened the sauce without diluting the flavor. For an authentic finish, I stirred in chopped fresh basil.

The pantry staples made it quick. The food processor made it easy. And when my colleagues asked if they could take home the leftovers, I suspected that this sauce might become just as popular as the meat kind.

MEATLESS "MEAT" SAUCE WITH CHICKPEAS AND MUSHROOMS

MAKES 6 CUPS; ENOUGH FOR 2 POUNDS PASTA

Make sure to rinse the chickpeas after pulsing them in the food processor or the sauce will be too thick. Our favorite canned chickpeas are from Pastene, our favorite crushed tomatoes are from SMT, and our favorite tomato paste is from Goya.

- **10 ounces cremini mushrooms, trimmed**
- **6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**
- **Salt and pepper**
- **1 onion, chopped**
- **5 garlic cloves, minced**
- **1¼ teaspoons dried oregano**
- **¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes**
- **¼ cup tomato paste**
- **1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes**
- **2 cups vegetable broth**
- **1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas, rinsed**
- **2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil**

1. Pulse mushrooms in two batches in food processor until chopped into ⅛- to ¼-inch pieces, 7 to 10 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. (Do not clean workbowl.)

2. Heat 5 tablespoons oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add mushrooms and 1 teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until mushrooms are browned and fond has formed on bottom of pot, about 8 minutes.

3. While mushrooms cook, pulse onion in food processor until finely chopped, 7 to 10 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. (Do not clean workbowl.) Transfer onion to pot with mushrooms and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is soft and translucent, about 5 minutes. Combine remaining 1 tablespoon oil, garlic, oregano, and pepper flakes in bowl.

4. Add tomato paste to pot and cook, stirring constantly, until mixture is rust-colored, 1 to 2 minutes. Reduce heat to medium and push vegetables to sides of pot. Add garlic mixture to center and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in tomatoes and broth; bring to simmer over high heat. Reduce heat to low and simmer sauce for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.

5. While sauce simmers, pulse chickpeas in food processor until chopped into ¼-inch pieces, 7 to 10 pulses. Transfer chickpeas to fine-mesh strainer and rinse under cold running water until water runs clear; drain well. Add chickpeas to pot and simmer until sauce is slightly thickened, about 15 minutes. Stir in basil and season with salt and pepper to taste. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 2 days or frozen for up to 1 month.)

Pasta Pointers

Boiling pasta in salted water is a straightforward kitchen task, but you can improve your results with these simple tricks.

1 Use Plenty of Water—or Stir Often

As pasta boils, it leaches starches into the cooking water, which can cause the noodles to stick together. The easiest way to cut down on sticking is to boil pasta in a generous amount of water—4 quarts per pound of dried pasta—to dilute the starches. However, if you don't have a pot large enough for all the water, you can reduce the water by half and stir the pasta frequently during cooking.

2 Salt the Water

Salting the cooking water ensures that seasoning gets into the pasta, not just on it. Add 1 tablespoon of salt to 4 quarts of water (or 1½ teaspoons to 2 quarts), making sure to stir well so that the salt will dissolve.

3 Skip the Oil

Since it merely sits on top of the cooking water, adding a splash of olive oil to the pot before adding the pasta doesn't prevent the pasta from sticking together as it cooks—though it may help keep the water from boiling over. To prevent the pasta from sticking together, simply stir it for a minute or two after adding it to the boiling water.

4 Check for Doneness Often

We recommend ignoring the cooking times listed on packaging, which are almost always too long and result in mushy, overcooked pasta. Tasting the pasta is the best way to check for doneness. We prefer pasta cooked al dente, meaning that it has a bit of resistance in the center when bitten.

5 Reserve Some Water

Before draining the pasta, reserve about ½ cup of the cooking water, which is flavorful, somewhat salty, and starchy. It can be used to loosen a thick sauce without diluting the sauce's body or flavor as much as plain water would.

Faked It But Didn't Make It

We found plenty of ground beef alternatives in the vegetarian "meat" sauces we tried, but most of them were busts.

NUTS
Took 45 minutes to soften

LENTILS
Tasted too earthy

BULGUR
Produced wheaty porridge

EGGPLANT
Required preroasting

CAULIFLOWER
Gave off sulfurous aroma

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Introducing Risi e Bisi

Brothier than risotto but thicker than soup, this Venetian classic requires a not-so-gentle touch.

BY STEVE DUNN

Venetians have a centuries-old tradition of dishing up *risi e bisi* (rice and peas) every April 25, St. Mark's Day, to celebrate spring's first peas and to honor the importance of rice production in the Veneto region. Thinner than a traditional risotto yet thicker than soup, the dish's unique consistency and fresh flavors make it the ideal ambassador for the season: a light and vibrant—yet still satisfying—escape from heavier winter fare.

The classic version is made with arborio rice and fresh spring peas along with onion, garlic, Parmesan cheese, and pancetta. Most recipes adhere to the long-established risotto method of vigorously stirring broth into the rice in multiple additions. Extra broth is then poured in at the end to create something looser than a creamy risotto.

Since my goal was not to create a rich, velvety consistency, I was fairly certain I could jettison the laborious stirring routine and simply cook the dish more like a soup. I was right. I sautéed finely chopped pancetta, onion, and garlic until the meat rendered its fat and the onion turned translucent; added the rice; poured in hot broth all at once; brought the mixture to a boil; and then let it simmer, adding the peas and Parmesan last.

I then focused on the peas. Since fresh pea season is fleeting at best, I'd have to rely on the frozen kind. Stirring them in thawed at the end of cooking, just to warm them through, was key to preserve their texture and verdant color. I also sought out petite peas, which were noticeably sweeter and more tender than full-size peas.

As for the broth, recipes are divided on whether to use chicken or vegetable. I conducted a few tests, ultimately finding that chicken broth diluted with water struck just the right balance of savoriness and lightness. Unfortunately, the consistency of the broth itself was too thin. I tried adding a few pats of butter, but this masked the dish's delicate flavors.

INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT

PETITE PEAS

Petite, or baby, peas boast a sweeter flavor and a less starchy texture than their larger counterparts, which have tougher skins and mealier interiors.

SO SWEET

Risi e bisi is the no-fail alternative to risotto.

I realized that my hands-off approach was freeing little starch from the rice. Maybe I needed to stir the rice after all? Indeed, aggressively whisking just before adding the peas and Parmesan loosened just enough starch to lightly thicken the broth.

And with that, I gave this simple supper a final nod to spring, adding a spritz of lemon juice and a sprinkle of minced fresh parsley.

RISI E BISI

SERVES 4 TO 6

We use frozen petite peas here, but regular frozen peas can be substituted, if desired. For the proper consistency, make sure to cook the rice at a gentle boil. Our favorite arborio rice is from RiceSelect.

- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1½ cups water
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 ounces pancetta, chopped fine
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup arborio rice
- 2 cups frozen petite peas, thawed
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup), plus extra for serving
- 3 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice, plus lemon wedges for serving
- Salt and pepper

1. Bring broth and water to boil in large saucepan over high heat. Remove from heat and cover to keep warm.

2. Cook oil and pancetta in Dutch oven over medium-low heat until pancetta is browned and rendered, 5 to 7 minutes. Add onion and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 4 to 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add rice and stir to coat, about 1 minute.

3. Add 5 cups broth mixture, increase heat to high, and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and boil gently until rice is tender but not mushy, about 15 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes to ensure that rice is gently boiling.

4. Remove pot from heat and whisk rice vigorously until broth has thickened slightly, 15 seconds. Stir in peas, Parmesan, parsley, and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Adjust consistency with remaining ½ cup broth mixture as needed. Serve, passing extra Parmesan and lemon wedges separately.

Getting the Right Consistency

The consistency of *risi e bisi* is thinner than risotto but thicker than soup: It's lightly thickened yet still fluid. The proper texture is easy to achieve by using a 5:1 ratio of liquid to rice and vigorously whisking toward the end of cooking to free enough starch from the rice to give the broth body.

See the Proper Technique
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/june17

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Chinese Smashed Cucumbers

For a refreshing new take on cucumber salad, put down your knife and pick up a skillet.

BY KEITH DRESSER

My longtime definition of cucumber salad—cool, crisp slices tossed with a tangy vinaigrette or a sour cream dressing—was recently upended when, at a Sichuan restaurant, I was presented with a plate of large, craggy, skin-on cucumber pieces sparingly coated with dressing. The cukes had a crunchy, almost pickle-like texture and hinted at garlic and sesame, with mild acidity and touches of sweetness and salinity. The simple preparation proved to be an ideal accompaniment to the rich, spicy food.

The dish, called *pai huang gua*, is drop-dead easy to make. Smash the cukes with a skillet or rolling pin (or, as is traditional, with the flat side of a Chinese cleaver). Once they're smashed, tear them into rough pieces and briefly salt them to expel excess water. Finally, dress the chunks with a quick vinaigrette of soy sauce, vinegar, minced garlic, and sesame oil.

Why smash the cukes? I found a couple of reasons. The first was speed. When I treated equal amounts of smashed cucumbers versus chopped cucumbers with salt and measured the amount of liquid that each batch exuded, the smashed cucumbers were crisp and had lost about 5 percent of their water weight after only 15 minutes. It took the chopped cucumbers four times as long to shed the same amount of water.

Toasted sesame seeds add crunch and a touch of richness to the otherwise lean dish.

The second benefit was textural. Smashing breaks up the vegetable in a haphazard way that exposes more surface area than chopping or slicing, so more vinaigrette can adhere. A colleague compared dressing smooth cut cucumbers to spilling water on a laminate floor—virtually nothing was absorbed. The smashed cucumbers, on the other hand, acted like a shag carpet, sucking up almost every drop.

As for the best type of cuke, I dismissed American cucumbers; their thick, wax-coated skins were too tough. That left nearly seedless English cucumbers, pickling cucumbers, or small Persian cucumbers. All had thin, crisp skins, but the pickling type can have lots of seeds and the Persian type lacked a thick layer of flesh and was therefore missing the refreshing crispness of the English, my ultimate choice.

Regarding the dressing, soy sauce, garlic, and toasted sesame oil provided a complex base that I accented with granulated sugar. But what really made the sauce special was Chinese black vinegar, which is made by fermenting rice (see "Chinese Black Vinegar").

And there I had it: an all-new (and more interesting) take on cucumber salad.

TECHNIQUE

THE NEATEST WAY TO SMASH CUCUMBERS

Cut the cucumbers into thirds and place them in a zipper-lock bag before gently pounding them with a small skillet or rolling pin.

Keith Smashes Them
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/aug17

SMASHED CUCUMBERS (PAI HUANG GUA)

SERVES 4

We recommend using Chinese *Chinkiang* (or *Zhenjiang*) black vinegar in this dish for its complex flavor. If you can't find it, you can substitute 2 teaspoons of rice vinegar and 1 teaspoon of balsamic vinegar. A rasp-style grater makes quick work of turning the garlic into a paste. Toast the sesame seeds in a dry skillet over medium heat until fragrant (about 1 minute) and then remove the pan from the heat so the seeds won't scorch.

- 2 (14-ounce) English cucumbers
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt
- 4 teaspoons Chinese black vinegar
- 1 teaspoon garlic, minced to paste
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon sesame seeds, toasted

1. Trim and discard ends from cucumbers. Cut each cucumber crosswise into three equal lengths. Place pieces in large zipper-lock bag and seal bag. Using small skillet or rolling pin, firmly but gently smash cucumbers until flattened and split lengthwise into 3 to 4 spears each. Tear spears into rough 1- to 1½-inch pieces and transfer to colander set in large bowl. Toss cucumbers with salt and let stand for at least 15 minutes or up to 30 minutes.

2. While cucumbers sit, whisk vinegar and garlic together in small bowl; let stand for at least 5 minutes or up to 15 minutes.

3. Whisk soy sauce, oil, and sugar into vinegar mixture until sugar has dissolved. Transfer cucumbers to medium bowl and discard any extracted liquid. Add dressing and sesame seeds to cucumbers and toss to combine. Serve immediately.

Chinese Black Vinegar

Black vinegar is made primarily from rice and wheat bran and is aged in earthenware crocks to develop complexity. Products labeled "black vinegar" range greatly in flavor. We prefer vinegars labeled *Chinkiang* (or *Zhenjiang*), which are similar from brand to brand.

MALTY, SMOKY FLAVOR

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Southern Corn Fritters

In our quest for fritters with fresh corn flavor, crispy exteriors, and pillow-soft centers, we learned that less is more.

BY STEVE DUNN

Ask a Northerner about corn fritters and you're sure to get, well, an earful: They'll describe crispy-on-the-outside, tender-on-the-inside dumplings dotted with fresh corn, deep-fried in a pot of oil, drizzled with honey or maple syrup, and served as a sweet treat. Southerners, on the other hand, will talk about fritters formed into patties and skillet-fried in a modest amount of oil. These contain cheese, herbs, and/or chiles and, accompanied by a dollop of creamy sauce, are served as a side dish or appetizer. As a Yankee, I have an affinity for the drenched-in-maple-syrup variety, but for this recipe I decided to focus my energies on the southern type.

To start, I dove into the world of southern corn fritters, researching dozens of recipes before settling on a handful to try in the test kitchen. The results ranged from fragile, barely there patties made with only whipped egg whites and fresh corn kernels to thick, stodgy disks in which corn seemed to be an afterthought. Versions with too many extra ingredients lost their corn soul, whereas those with too few were boring and bland. I wanted just enough batter to hold a patty shape and form a crispy exterior and a tender interior popping with sweet and savory corn flavor.

Heating the oil until it is shimmering before cooking the fritters ensures that they turn out crispy but not greasy.

Mix Master

The first order of business was to order a bushel of corn and get to work on creating a batter that would give me a structurally sound fritter. I began by whisking together an ultrasimple mixture of just 2 tablespoons of flour, a beaten egg, baking powder, the kernels from two ears of corn, and some salt and pepper. The first thing I noticed was that the liquid-y batter just barely coated the corn kernels. I forged ahead, gently frying 2-tablespoon portions in ½ cup of vegetable oil—just enough to cover the bottom of a 12-inch skillet—until all the nooks and crannies of the fritters were evenly golden brown.

The result? Bland, cakey disks featuring one smooth side and a flip side pebbled with overcooked kernels. The thin batter spread too much in the skillet, settling into a uniform crust on the bottom of the fritter and leaving all the kernels exposed to the heat when I flipped it. Without any insulating batter, the bare kernels overbrowned and turned tough and chewy.

For the next go-round, I ditched the leavener since it was contributing to the unwelcome cakey texture. I also bumped up the amount of flour to ⅓ cup, hoping that more would thicken the batter enough to support the kernels and keep them suspended. It worked, but the extra gluten made the fritters slightly tough. To the next batch I added cornmeal; alas, it only made the fritters cornbread-esque.

Then I got a better idea: How about creating a fresh corn puree that might thicken the batter without making the fritters cakey or heavy? I stripped the kernels from two cobs and blitzed them in the food processor into a chunky, starchy puree. I then stirred the puree together with just ¼ cup of flour, an egg, salt, and pepper. Finally, I folded in the kernels from two more ears of corn. Sure enough, this lightly thickened batter fully enrobed the corn, keeping the kernels suspended in the finished fritter. What's more, pureeing some of the kernels liberated their flavor, boosting the patties' overall corniness. The downside was that processing the kernels had freed so much of their milky liquid that the fritters were somewhat wet and custardy. To correct that problem, I tried cutting back on the amount of corn puree I was adding, but that resulted in less fresh corn flavor.

For my next attempt, I cooked the pulp in a skillet to rid it of moisture and lightly brown it, which helped develop complexity. With this concentrated puree, the fritters had soft and tender—not gooey and wet—interiors.

Lightly browning the corn puree had worked so well that I wondered if I should briefly sauté the whole kernels I was adding as well. It would be easy to do right before cooking the puree. Sure enough, this simple step gave the kernels a less sweet, more roasty profile.

Failed Fritters

Our initial tests taught us that a proper balance of corn, batter, and flavorings was key.

An egg white batter has too much corn and no substance.

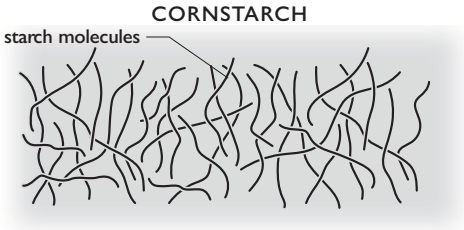
A thick, doughy batter produces a stodgy, heavy fritter.

Bold mix-ins such as chiles and cheddar cheese mask corn flavor.

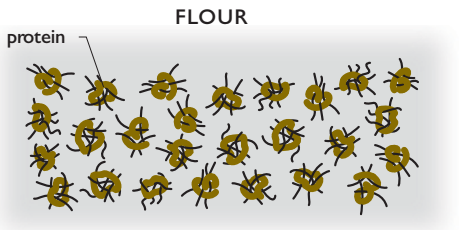
PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

For Crispier Fritters, Try a Little Cornstarch

When our flour-based fritters turned out limp, we solved the problem by adding cornstarch: Its microscopic starch granules hydrate and swell into strand-like shapes in the batter and then swell up further when the batter hits the hot oil. As moisture evaporates during frying, the swollen starch granules lock into place, forming a brittle network with lots of holes. The upshot? Lacier, crispier fritters.



Cornstarch granules absorb water and swell, transforming into strand-like starch molecules. During cooking, the water evaporates and the strands link up, forming a lacy, crispy network.



In wheat flour, proteins act like rubber bands around the starch granules, restricting water absorption so that fewer starch strands develop. Fritters made with only flour were limp, not crispy.

Fritter Finesse

I wondered if I could do even more to balance the corn's sweetness, so I evaluated potential seasonings. I didn't want to add much, as simple corn goodness was my goal. I found that a couple of tablespoons of grated Parmesan brought just the right salty-umami counterpoint. I also settled on a pinch of cayenne for depth and some minced chives for color and earthy grassiness.

The only aspect of my fritters that I still wasn't crazy about was their exteriors, which tended toward limp rather than crispy. I knew that adding more flour would only toughen the fritters. Coating them with panko bread crumbs crisped up their exteriors—so much that the coating distracted from the tender kernels. Frying the fritters over higher heat or for a longer period only burned them in spots. I even played with taking the "fry" out of the fritters (the word "fritter" is derived from the French word for frying, *friture*) by cutting way back on the oil, but that rendered them dry and unevenly cooked.

TECHNIQUE

PRESS FOR BETTER TEXTURE

Pressing each portion of batter into a thin disk as soon as we drop it into the hot oil ensures that the fritters are evenly cooked and not gummy inside.

Finally, a colleague wondered if cornstarch might help. After a series of tests, I settled on stirring 1 tablespoon into the batter. This delivered fritters with a delicate crunch at their lacy edges. (For information on what the cornstarch did, see "For Crispier Fritters, Try a Little Cornstarch.")

My testing came to a close after I'd created a couple of complementary sauces for my fritters, one of which included a little maple syrup in a nod to their northern cousins. The other was flavored with roasted red peppers, lemon, and garlic. While these tasty corn patties may not be my first fritter love, they've certainly earned a prominent place in my heart.

CORN FRITTERS

MAKES 12 FRITTERS

Serve these fritters as a side dish with steaks, chops, or poultry or as an appetizer with a dollop of sour cream or our Maple-Chipotle Mayonnaise or Red Pepper Mayonnaise (recipes follow), if desired.

- 4 ears corn, kernels cut from cobs (3 cups)
- 1 teaspoon plus ½ cup vegetable oil
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup finely minced chives
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten

1. Process 1½ cups corn kernels in food processor to uniformly coarse puree, 15 to 20 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl halfway through processing. Set aside.

2. Heat 1 teaspoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add remaining 1½ cups corn kernels and ⅛ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring frequently, until light golden, 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer to medium bowl.

3. Return skillet to medium heat, add corn puree, and cook, stirring frequently with heatproof spatula, until puree is consistency of thick oatmeal (puree clings to spatula rather than dripping off), about 5 minutes. Transfer puree to bowl with kernels and stir to combine. Rinse skillet and dry with paper towels.

4. Stir flour, 3 tablespoons chives, Parmesan, cornstarch, cayenne, ¼ teaspoon salt, and ⅛ teaspoon pepper into corn mixture until well combined. Gently stir in egg until incorporated.

5. Line rimmed baking sheet with paper towels. Heat remaining ½ cup oil in now-empty skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Drop six 2-tablespoon portions batter into skillet. Press with spatula to flatten into 2½- to 3-inch disks. Fry until deep golden brown on both sides, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Transfer fritters to prepared sheet. Repeat with remaining batter.

6. Transfer fritters to large plate or platter, sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon chives, and serve immediately.

MAPLE-CHIPOTLE MAYONNAISE

MAKES ⅔ CUP

For the fullest maple flavor, use maple syrup labeled "Grade A, Dark Amber."

- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup
- 1 tablespoon minced canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce
- ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard

Combine all ingredients in small bowl.

RED PEPPER MAYONNAISE

MAKES ABOUT 1¼ CUPS

Letting the minced garlic sit in the lemon juice mellows the garlic's flavor. Dunbars Sweet Roasted Peppers are the test kitchen's favorite.

- 1½ teaspoons lemon juice
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¾ cup jarred roasted red peppers, rinsed and patted dry
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 2 teaspoons tomato paste
- Salt

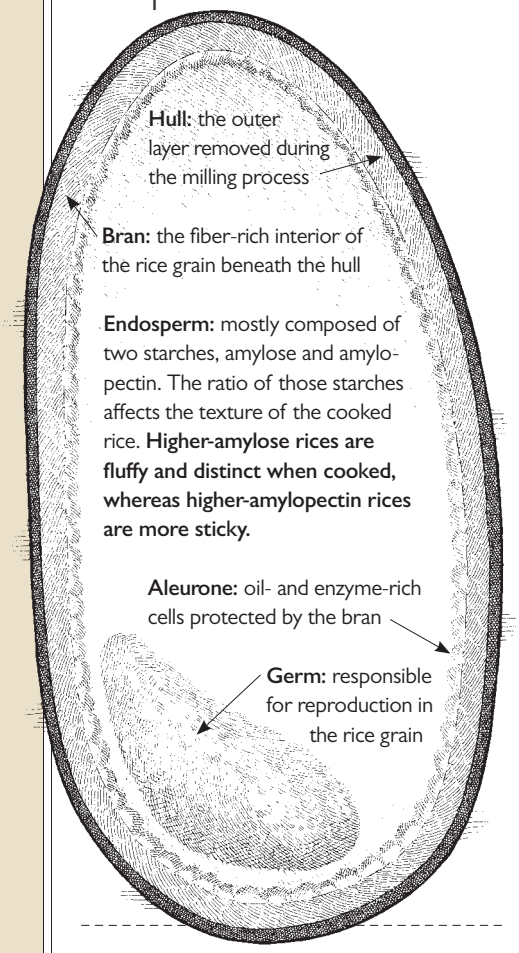
Combine lemon juice and garlic in small bowl and let stand for 15 minutes. Process red peppers, mayonnaise, tomato paste, and lemon juice mixture in food processor until smooth, about 15 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Season with salt to taste. Refrigerate until thickened, about 2 hours.

Watch the Fritters Fry
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/aug17

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

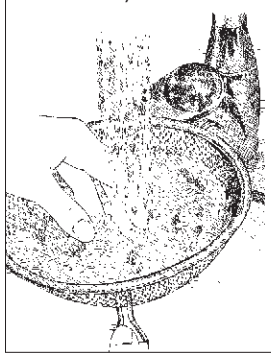
A Cook's Guide to Rice

The world of supermarket rice options has grown in recent years, but the same old problem remains: how to cook it perfectly. BY ELIZABETH BOMZE AND KEITH DRESSER



WHEN—AND WHEN NOT—TO RINSE

Rinsing white rice removes excess surface starch that would otherwise absorb water and swell, causing the grains to stick together.
DO rinse for pilaf, steamed rice, and rice salad, where you want separate, distinct grains.
DON'T rinse for applications such as risotto or rice pudding; we found that rinsing compromises the desirably sticky, creamy consistency.
DON'T bother rinsing brown rice. With the bran layer intact, there is no exterior starch to wash away.



➢ Method: Rinse rice in fine-mesh strainer under cold running water until water runs clear. (To check if water is starchy, capture some in bowl. If water is cloudy, keep rinsing and check again.)

ABOUT RICE

Brown versus white: All rice starts out as brown rice, which is made up of the endosperm, germ, aleurone, bran, and hull or husk. Brown rices have simply been hulled and cleaned; since their bran layers are intact, they take longer to cook, boast nuttier flavor and more distinct chew, and cook up less sticky and/or creamy compared with equivalent white varieties. White rices are hulled and milled to remove the bran, aleurone, and germ.

SIZE

Long-, medium-, and short-grain are three loosely defined categories of brown and white rices based on the grains' length-to-width ratio. This ratio and the rice's starch composition (see illustration at left) determine whether the rice cooks up fluffy, sticky, or somewhere in between.

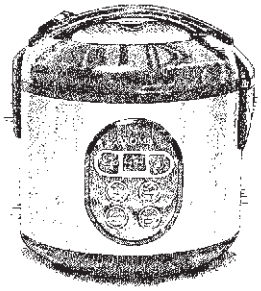
Long-Grain
Includes conventional long-grain rice as well as aromatic basmati and jasmine rices.
Starch: About 22% amylose, 78% amylopectin
Typical Applications: Steamed, pilaf, pudding, biryani, fried rice

Medium-Grain
Includes conventional and specialty rices such as Italian Arborio, Spanish Valencia, and Bomba.
Starch: About 18% amylose, 82% amylopectin
Typical Applications: Risotto (Arborio), paella (Valencia and Bomba), rice bowl (conventional)

Short-Grain
Includes conventional short-grain and sushi rices
Starch: About 15% amylose, 85% amylopectin
Typical Applications: Rice bowl, sushi, fried rice

Our Favorite Rice Cooker

Aroma 8-Cup Digital Rice Cooker and Food Steamer ($29.92)
Why we like it: produces perfectly tender-chewy white, brown, and sushi rice; comes with useful features such as a digital timer that lets the cook know when the rice is nearly ready, a clear audio alert, and a delayed-start function; inexpensive and takes up only a small amount of counter space; inner lid pops out for easy cleanup



OUR FAVORITE RICES

The recipes cited in this section are available for free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com.

Lundberg Organic Long Grain White Rice ($5.59 for 2 lb)
Why we like it: Tasters enjoyed this product's "smooth and distinct" grains, which offered "a little chew without being chewy." The rice smelled and tasted "nutty," "buttery," and "toasty."
Try it in: Cuban-Style Black Beans and Rice (CooksIllustrated.com/blackbeansandrice)

Lundberg Organic Brown Long Grain Rice ($3.79 for 2 lb)
Why we like it: Tasters said its grains were "plump" and "almost springy," as well as "distinct and pleasantly chewy." Its "buttery," "nutty," and "earthy" flavors were more distinct than those of other rices.
Try it in: Brown Rice with Peas, Feta, and Mint (CooksIllustrated.com/brownricewithpeas)

RiceSelect Arborio Rice ($7.99 for 2 lb, 4 oz)
Why we like it: Sampled in Parmesan risotto, this Texas-grown rice won over tasters for its "creamy, smooth" grains and "good bite."
Try it in: Almost Hands-Free Risotto with Chicken and Herbs (CooksIllustrated.com/risottowithchicken)

Tilda Pure Basmati Rice ($7.99 for 4 lb)
Why we like it: It's a true basmati—meaning it's grown in India or Pakistan and meets standards for aroma, aging, grain dimension, amylose content, and grain elongation during cooking. It has particularly graceful, aromatic grains.
Try it in: Rice and Pasta Pilaf (CooksIllustrated.com/ricepilaf)

Dynasty Jasmine Rice ($4.59 for 2 lb)
Why we like it: Its "clean" flavor with a "great finishing hit of jasmine" and "tender, distinct grains" earned this rice our highest praise, even when it was covered with rich curry. Its sweet, popcorn-like aroma qualifies it as the purest form of jasmine, called *Hom Mali* ("good smelling"). Packages containing no less than 92 percent Hom Mali are stamped with a green seal from Thailand's Department of Foreign Trade.
Try it in: Indonesian-Style Fried Rice (CooksIllustrated.com/indonesianfriedrice)

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

FOUR METHODS FOR COOKING LONG-GRAIN RICE

These basic methods can be dressed up by tossing the rice with butter or extra-virgin olive oil, minced herbs, and/or finely grated citrus zest.

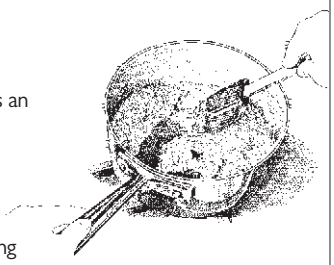
ABSORPTION/STEAMING (FOR WHITE RICE)

Simmering rice slowly in a measured amount of liquid, covered, until tender and liquid is absorbed, is the standard way to cook it.

Combine 1 cup rinsed rice, 1½ cups liquid, and ½ teaspoon salt in saucepan. Bring to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer until tender, 18 to 20 minutes. Let stand off heat, covered with folded clean dish towel and lid, for 10 to 15 minutes. Fluff with fork and serve. Yield: 3 cups.

To cook 1 cup of medium- or short-grain white rice: Reduce liquid to 1¼ cups and cooking time to 16 to 20 minutes. **Yield:** 2¾ cups.

PILAF (FOR WHITE RICE)



Sautéing rice in butter or oil with onion before adding liquid is an effortless way to enrich rice's flavor.

1. Heat 2 teaspoons butter or oil in saucepan over medium heat. Add ½ cup finely chopped onion and cook until softened, about 3 minutes. Add 1 cup rinsed rice and cook, stirring occasionally, until chalky and opaque, about 3 minutes.
2. Add 1½ cups liquid and ½ teaspoon salt, increase heat, and bring just to boil. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer until liquid is absorbed and rice is tender. Let stand off heat, covered with folded clean dish towel and lid, for 10 to 15 minutes. Fluff with fork and serve. **Yield:** 3¼ cups

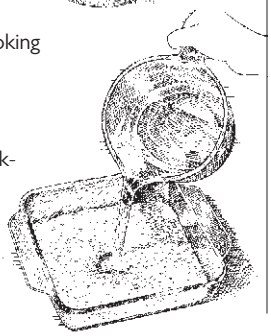
PASTA/BOIL (FOR BROWN RICE)

Boiling rice in lots of salted water is a speedy way to cook it.

1. Bring 3 quarts water to rapid boil. Add 1 cup rice and 2½ teaspoons salt, reduce heat to low, and simmer until tender, 25 to 30 minutes.
2. Drain and serve. Yield: 3¼ cups

To cook 1 cup of medium- or short-grain brown rice: Reduce cooking time to 22 to 27 minutes. **Yield:** 2¾ cups.

OVEN/ABSORPTION (FOR BROWN RICE)



Cooking brown rice in a measured amount of water in a covered baking dish in the oven can cook it more evenly than in a pot on the stove, especially if the pot lacks a tight-fitting lid and heavy bottom.

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Spread 1½ cups rice in 8-inch square baking dish.
2. Bring 2⅓ cups water and 2 teaspoons butter or vegetable oil to boil in covered saucepan. Add ½ teaspoon salt and pour over rice. Cover tightly with double layer of aluminum foil. Bake until tender, about 1 hour. Let stand for 5 minutes, uncover, fluff with fork, and serve. **Yield:** 5 cups

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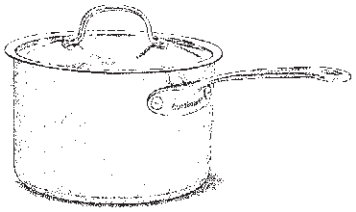
YOU CAN—AND SHOULD—FREEZE RICE

Raw brown rice should be stored in a zipper-lock bag in the freezer to prevent oxidation from turning its oil-rich bran and germ rancid; be sure to use it within six months. Cooked rice can also be frozen. Simply spread the cooked rice (we tested long-grain brown and white varieties) on a rimmed baking sheet and let it cool completely. Transfer the cooled rice to a zipper-lock bag and lay it flat to freeze. There's no need to thaw it before use.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL COOKING

Producing evenly cooked rice via the absorption method depends on the grains soaking up just enough liquid, so we use particular tools and precise methods to ensure perfect results.

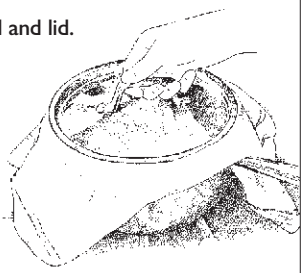


1. Pick the right pan.
Our favorite pan for making rice is a sturdy, heavy-bottomed saucepan with a tight-fitting lid. To ensure that a saucepan is big enough for the rice grains to cook evenly, dump in the raw grains; if the layer of rice is deeper than 1½ inches, switch to a larger saucepan.

2. Go low.
After bringing the liquid to a boil and covering the saucepan, turn down the heat to a bare simmer. If more than a wisp or two of steam escapes, the heat is too high.

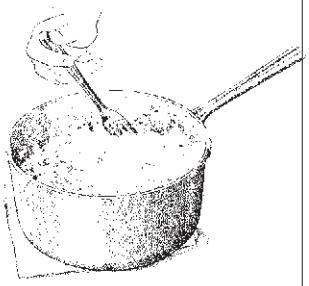
3. Don't stir.
The rice will release extra starch, and grains may break.

4. Keep a lid on it.
To avoid releasing moisture, don't start checking for doneness until near the end of the recommended cooking time.



5. Cover it with a clean dish towel and lid.
Off the heat, remove the lid, cover the saucepan with a folded clean dish towel, and replace the lid. The towel will absorb excess moisture that would make the grains mushy.

6. Give it a rest.
Letting the rice stand for 10 to 15 minutes off the heat (covered with a towel and lid) allows the starch granules to firm up so they won't break.



7. Fluff it with a fork.
The small tines of a fork gently separate the grains without breaking or crushing them.

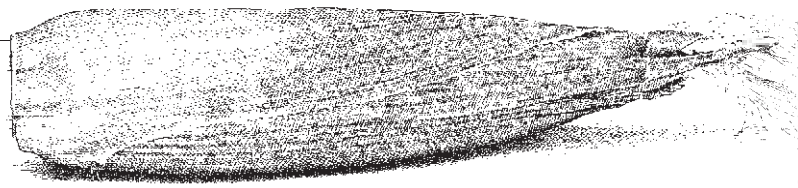
Want to Double the Rice? Don't Double the Water

Despite what many recipes suggest, rice-to-water ratios can't be scaled up proportionally when multiplying a recipe for steamed or pilaf-style rice. After a series of tests, we confirmed that rice absorbs water in a 1:1 ratio, no matter the volume. For example, in our rice pilaf recipe, which calls for 1½ cups of rice and 2¼ cups of water, the rice absorbed 1½ cups of water. The remaining ¾ cup of water evaporated. **But here's the catch:** The amount of water that evaporates doesn't double when the amount of rice is doubled. In fact, we found that when doubling a batch of rice using the same conditions as we'd used for a single batch, the same quantity of water evaporated. Hence, simply doubling the recipe leads to mushy rice because there is an excess of water. **The bottom line:** When multiplying a rice recipe that uses the absorption or pilaf method, the ratio of raw rice to water should always be 1:1, plus the amount of water that will evaporate. To figure out how much will evaporate, subtract the amount of rice from the total volume of water in the original recipe and add that amount to the 1:1 volume of water.

Our Guide to Fresh Corn

Here's how to make the most of summer's best crop, from shucking to storing to knowing when boiled corn is perfectly cooked. BY ELIZABETH BOMZE AND KEITH DRESSER

SHOP SMART



DO AN EAR CHECK

To see if corn is at its best, you don't need to peel back the husk and silk (which makes ears less desirable for other shoppers). Instead, gently press on the kernels through the husk; they should feel tightly packed, plump, and firm. The silk should look white and clean, and the husk should be green and pliable and closely wrapped around the ear.

FOUR MYTHS, BUSTED

MYTH: KERNEL COLOR INDICATES SWEETNESS.

FACT: The color of the kernels is not related to the corn's sweetness.

The color of corn is an indication of its carotene content, not its sugar content. Furthermore, many of the corn varieties found in supermarkets today have sugar contents approaching 35 percent. That's almost three times sweeter than the varieties of corn sold decades ago, and it's true whether you buy ears that are yellow, white, or bicolor.

WHITE CORN = BICOLOR CORN = YELLOW CORN

MYTH: COLD TEMPERATURES CAN DAMAGE CORN.

FACT: While corn plants are sensitive to chilling injury, harvested ears of corn actually benefit from cold storage.

The colder the storage temperature, the better—as long as the corn doesn't freeze. That's because cold temperatures, along with humidity, slow the rate at which the corn's sugar turns to starch; the moist air of a refrigerator also transfers heat from the corn to the environment more efficiently than dry air does and prevents the kernels from drying out. Our preferred way to store corn is to place the unhusked ears in a wet paper bag, place the wet bag in a plastic shopping bag, and refrigerate them for up to two days.

MYTH: FRESH CORN TASTES GOOD ONLY THE DAY IT IS PICKED.

FACT: These days, most varieties of fresh corn will taste good for at least several days.

While older varieties of corn would convert about half their sugar to starch within 24 hours of being picked, that conversion occurs more slowly in the supersweet varieties sold at most markets today. Some start to lose their sweetness four days after being picked while others stay sweet for seven days.

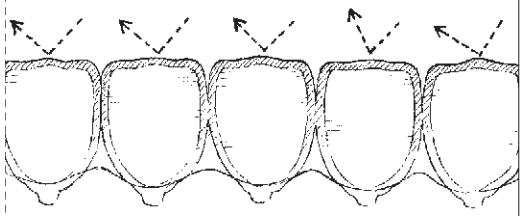
NEWER VARIETIES OF CORN STAY SWEET FOR DAYS

SWEET > > > > > > > > > > > > > > STARCHY

MYTH: ADDING MILK, SUGAR, OR SALT TO THE COOKING WATER CAN IMPROVE CORN'S FLAVOR.

FACT: Flavoring the cooking water doesn't make a difference.

In taste tests, we couldn't tell the difference between corn cooked in water and corn cooked in a combination of water and milk. Likewise, corn cooked in water that had been seasoned with sugar or salt tasted no different from corn cooked in plain water. In tests we found that the only way seasonings migrate into the kernels is by first being absorbed by the cob, and that takes far too long to be feasible. Bottom line: You're better off seasoning corn at the table.



THICK SKIN

A corn kernel's skin is virtually impenetrable to seasonings such as salt, sugar, and milk.

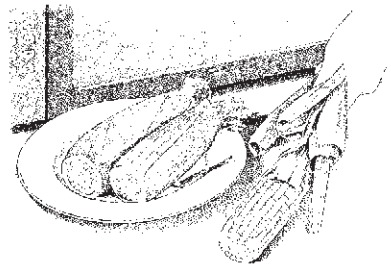
TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

DON'T SHUCK IN ADVANCE

Some markets and farm stands allow you to shuck the corn on site. Do this only if you plan to eat the corn that day, since the exposed kernels will be prone to drying out.

EASIEST-EVER WAY TO SHUCK

Odd as it might sound, we've found that the easiest way to shuck corn is to briefly microwave it and then shake it, which makes the husk and silk slide right off. The cob will heat up a bit, but the kernels won't be cooked.

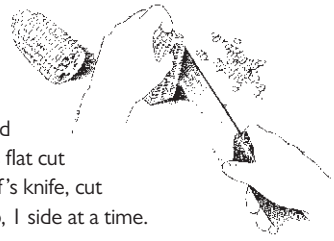


Cut off stalk end of cob just above first row of kernels. Microwave 3 or 4 ears at a time on plate for 30 to 60 seconds. Hold each ear by uncut silk end; shake up and down until cob slips free, leaving behind husk and silk.

HOW TO STRIP KERNELS

With a Knife

Halving the cob and standing the pieces on the cut side prevents them from sliding around the cutting surface.



Cut cob in half crosswise, then stand each half on its flat cut end. Using chef's knife, cut kernels off cob, 1 side at a time.

With a Corn Stripper

Shaped like a computer mouse, the **OXO Good Grips Corn Stripper** ($11.99) features a sharp, tooth-like blade that removes several rows of kernels at a time, which fall neatly into the attached cup. Cut kernels are poured out of the top of the cup, and the device snaps apart for easy cleaning. It's no faster or more effective than a chef's knife, but it's safer and mess-free.

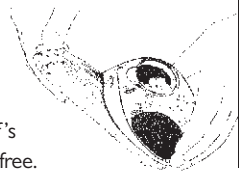
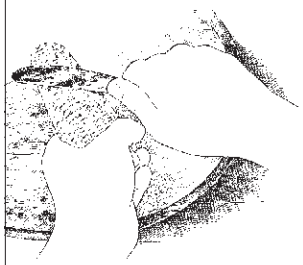


ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

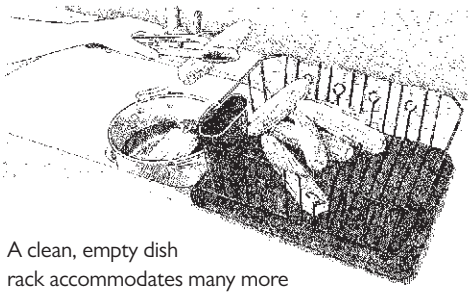
HOW TO MILK CORN

Corn "milk" is the term for the sweet pulp and juices that are left behind when kernels are stripped from the cob. Many recipes call for capturing this liquid to add to dishes such as soups and chowders, risotto, or polenta. But don't bother freezing it—we found that its fresh flavor faded noticeably.



Hold stripped corn cob over bowl and firmly scrape up and down all sides of cob with back of butter knife.
Yield: About 1 tablespoon corn milk per ear

DISH RACK–DRAINED CORN



A clean, empty dish rack accommodates many more ears of corn than a colander. Put the ears into the dish rack as you remove them from the pot.

SAVE THE COBS FOR CORN STOCK

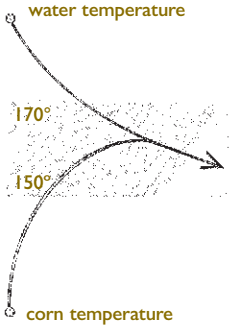
Briefly simmering stripped corn cobs can produce a surprisingly flavorful stock that can enrich polenta, cornbread, and vegetable soups. It also freezes well.
➢ **Method:** Cut 8 corn cobs into quarters. Place in large saucepan with 2 quarts water, bring to simmer, and cook for 15 minutes. Strain liquid through fine-mesh strainer. Yield: About 7½ cups

FOOLPROOF BOILED CORN

SERVES 4 TO 6

Bringing the water to a boil, shutting off the heat just before adding the corn, and then covering the pot ensures that the corn's temperature will rise to between 150 and 170 degrees—the sweet spot where its starches have gelatinized but little of its pectin has broken down. The result: perfectly sweet, snappy kernels every time.

As the corn heats, the water cools, and their temperatures equalize at around 160°, ensuring perfect results every time.



- **6 ears corn, husks and silk removed**
- **Unsalted butter, softened**
- **Salt and pepper**
- **1 recipe Chili-Lime Salt (optional) (recipe follows)**

1. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large Dutch oven. Turn off heat, add corn to water, cover, and let stand for at least 10 minutes or up to 30 minutes.

2. Transfer corn to large platter and serve immediately, passing butter, salt (or Chili-Lime Salt, if using), and pepper separately.

CHILI-LIME SALT

MAKES 3 TABLESPOONS

The mixture can be refrigerated for up to one week.

- **2 tablespoons kosher salt**
- **4 teaspoons chili powder**
- **¾ teaspoon grated lime zest**

Combine all ingredients in small bowl.

GRILLED CORN WITH BASIL-LEMON BUTTER

SERVES 4 TO 6

Charring the ears over a hot fire before transferring them to a disposable aluminum pan to continue cooking with the herb butter flavors the corn without causing flare-ups. We recommend using a disposable aluminum pan that measures at least 2¾ inches deep.

Butter

- **6 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened**
- **2 tablespoons minced fresh basil**
- **1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley**
- **1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest, plus lemon wedges for serving**
- **½ teaspoon salt**
- **¼ teaspoon pepper**

Corn

- **8 ears corn, husks and silk removed**
- **2 tablespoons vegetable oil**
- **Salt and pepper**
- **1 (13 by 9-inch) disposable aluminum pan**

1. FOR THE BUTTER: Combine all ingredients in small bowl. Transfer butter mixture to disposable pan.

2. FOR THE CORN: Brush corn evenly with oil and season with salt and pepper to taste.

3. Cook corn over hot fire, turning occasionally, until lightly charred on all sides, 5 to 9 minutes. Transfer corn to disposable pan and cover tightly with aluminum foil.

4. Place disposable pan on grill and cook corn, shaking pan frequently, until butter is sizzling, about 3 minutes. Remove pan from grill and remove foil, allowing steam to escape away from you. Serve with lemon wedges, spooning butter in pan over individual ears.

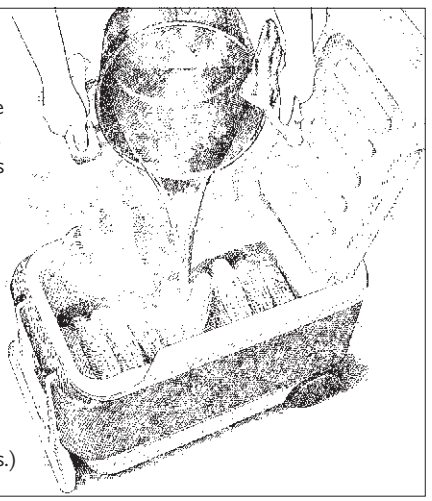
THE BEST WAY TO FREEZE CORN

Corn, which is botanically a cereal grain, freezes better than most vegetables because it is low in water and relatively high in starch and cellulose (which strengthens the kernels' cell walls). Both starch and cellulose also make the kernels less susceptible to damage by ice crystal formation.

Commercial manufacturers blanch corn before freezing it, but when we froze batches of blanched and unblanched kernels for one month, we didn't find any flavor differences between them. What did matter: drying the kernels well and freezing them in a single layer before bagging them for long-term freezer storage. This step ensured that no ice crystals formed on the surface and that the kernels didn't stick together once frozen.
➢ **Method:** Spread kernels on dish towel–lined rimmed baking sheet and pat dry. Remove towel from sheet, spread kernels into even layer, and freeze for 1 hour. Transfer kernels to zipper-lock bag, press out air, seal bag, and return to freezer.

BOILED CORN FOR A CROWD

Our recipe for Foolproof Boiled Corn works best when cooking six ears. But what if you're cooking corn for a crowd? After discovering a method online for cooking as many as 24 ears of corn at a time in a large cooler, we tested the process and came up with our own method. Thanks to its insulation, the cooler will also keep the corn hot for hours—without continuing to cook it.
➢ **Method:** Place up to 24 husked ears in 50-quart cooler, pour enough boiling water over corn to cover by 1 inch, and close cooler lid for 45 minutes. Serve. (Corn can be held in water for up to 2 hours.)



How to Roast Bell Peppers

Once you experience the sweeter, smokier taste of home-roasted bell peppers—not to mention how quick and easy they are to make—you'll never go back to the jarred kind.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Do-it-yourself kitchen projects might be fun, but they can also be an extravagant use of money and time. I've tried making things such as sausage and cheese at home, but because my versions weren't objectively better than what I could have bought, I considered most of these projects net losses. A notable exception? Roasted bell peppers.

The roasted bell peppers you buy in a jar are acceptable, but they have significantly less flavor than bell peppers you roast yourself. The dusky, muted color of the homemade kind is evidence that the skins have been thoroughly charred before being peeled away. That's important because it's the charring that imbues the flesh with a rich, complex sweetness and a subtle but pervasive smokiness. Their velvety texture purees beautifully for soups and dips and makes a nice addition to salads. And if superior quality isn't enough to convince you, how about this? Home-roasted bell peppers cost less than jarred, and the process is so quick that it's a stretch to call it a "project."

The basic method: Cook the bell peppers until their skins char and start to lift away from the softening flesh. Enclose them in a bag or sealed bowl to steam for a bit, and then peel away the skins and discard them. Finally, remove the stems, cores, ribs, and seeds.

But how do you cook a bell pepper? It turned out that actually roasting it, by placing a whole bell pepper on a baking sheet in the oven, was the worst way. It took about 45 minutes in a 450-degree oven for the skin to char, by which time the moisture trapped in the bell pepper had turned to steam, causing the flesh to become not just soft but mushy. Finally, it was hard to peel off the skin without tearing the delicate flesh, and removing the slippery, wet ribs and seeds was tedious.

I switched to an elemental approach and placed whole bell peppers directly over the flames of both a grill and a gas burner. It took only about 15 minutes for the intense, targeted heat to char the skin, which meant that the bell peppers were tender but still meaty. They also tasted great. But dealing with the cooked innards was just as annoying as before, and not all cooks have a gas cooktop or a grill.

Next up: the broiler. To accommodate their height, I had to place the bell peppers pretty far away from the element, which meant that the heat wasn't very intense. The bell peppers required 30 minutes of monitoring and turning to char, and by that time they were too soft for anything but soup. But I could see that broiling wasn't the problem; it was the fact that the bell peppers were whole. Cutting the bell peppers before broiling would have a few benefits: I'd be able to remove the cores, ribs, and seeds before cooking, which is easier; I'd be able to place the pieces closer to the element for quicker cooking; and the steam wouldn't cook the bell peppers from the inside out.

For even browning, I used a cutting technique that produced one long, flat strip and two rounds per bell pepper. I laid the pieces on a baking sheet lined with greased aluminum foil to prevent sticking and placed the sheet 5 inches from the broiler, where the bell peppers charred in about 12 minutes. For easy cleanup, I steamed the bell peppers in a pouch fashioned from the foil on which they'd been cooked.

These bell peppers were perfectly browned, and their skins peeled away easily after steaming. They had just the lush, tender texture I wanted; they tasted sweet, mellow, and smoky; and they had taken less than 30 minutes to prepare.

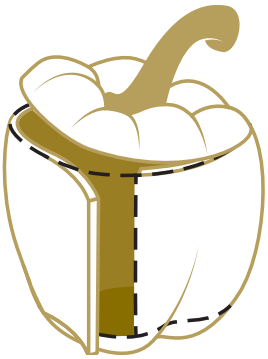
To finish, I developed a few recipes to showcase them—a walnut dip; a peperonata topping for bread, fish, or chicken; and a salad with white beans and arugula. But really, these bell peppers are great on almost anything: sandwiches, scrambled eggs, pasta, pizza. Or just a fork.

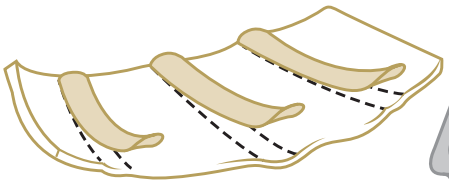
Clockwise from top left: With a batch of roasted bell peppers at the ready, you're just minutes away from a Middle Eastern dip; a colorful, smoky-sweet addition to salads; or a topping for fish or other proteins.

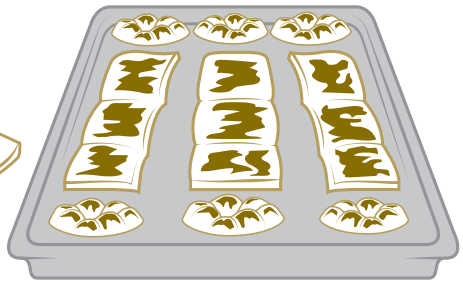
PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

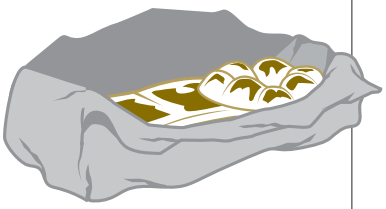
Roasted Bell Peppers MAKES 1½ CUPS

Cooking times will vary depending on the broiler and the thickness of the bell pepper walls, so watch the bell peppers carefully as they cook. Green bell peppers retain some bitterness even when roasted and so are best used as a complement to sweeter red, yellow, and orange bell peppers.









1. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and spray with vegetable oil spray. Slice ½ inch from tops and bottoms of 3 large bell peppers (about 1½ pounds). Gently remove stems from tops. Twist and pull out each core, using knife to loosen at edges if necessary. Cut slit down 1 side of each bell pepper.

2. Turn each bell pepper skin side down and gently press so it opens to create long strip. Slide knife along insides of bel peppers to remove remaining ribs and seeds.

3. Arrange bell pepper strips, tops, and bottoms skin side up on prepared sheet and flatten all pieces with your hand. Adjust oven rack 3 to 4 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Broil until skin is puffed and most of surface is well charred, 10 to 13 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through broiling.

4. Using tongs, pile bell peppers in center of foil. Gather foil over bell peppers and crimp to form pouch. Let steam for 10 minutes. Open foil packet and spread out bell peppers. When cool enough to handle, peel bell peppers and discard skins. (Bell peppers can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

ARUGULA, ROASTED BELL PEPPER, AND WHITE BEAN SALAD

SERVES 4

This salad is most attractive when made with bell peppers of various colors. We like to use small white beans, such as Great Northern or navy, in this recipe. Because green bell peppers contribute some bitterness, do not use more than one. Pair with crusty bread for a light meal.

- ⅓ cup red wine vinegar
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 2 tablespoons minced shallot
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1½ cups roasted bell peppers, cut into 2 by ½-inch strips
- 1 (15-ounce) can small white beans, rinsed
- ⅓ cup pitted kalamata olives, chopped coarse
- 5 ounces (5 cups) arugula

1. Whisk vinegar, oil, parsley, shallot, salt, and pepper together in large bowl. Add bell peppers, beans, and olives and stir gently until well coated. Set aside for 15 minutes to allow flavors to meld.

2. Set aside 1½ cups bell pepper mixture. Add arugula to remaining bell pepper mixture in large bowl and toss to combine. Transfer to platter. Top with reserved bell pepper mixture and serve.

PEPERONATA WITH ROASTED BELL PEPPERS

MAKES 1¾ CUPS

Because green bell peppers contribute some bitterness, do not use more than one. Serve warm or at room temperature as a topping for chicken, fish, polenta, or crusty bread.

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ small onion, cut into ½-inch pieces
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 4 garlic cloves, minced to paste
- 1½ cups roasted bell peppers, cut into ½-inch pieces
- ⅓ cup golden raisins
- ¼ cup capers, rinsed
- ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- Pinch cayenne pepper

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in 10-inch skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and salt and cook, stirring frequently, until onion is softened, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Remove skillet from heat and stir in bell peppers, raisins, capers, parsley, vinegar, cayenne, and remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Transfer to bowl and serve. (Peperonata can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

ROASTED RED BELL PEPPER AND WALNUT DIP (MUHAMMARA)

MAKES 1½ CUPS

We prefer red bell peppers in this dip. Any type of lean cracker may be used for the crumbs. Crush the crackers in a zipper-lock bag with a rolling pin. Serve with pita bread or crudités or use as a sandwich spread.

- 1 cup roasted red bell peppers, chopped coarse
- ½ cup walnuts, toasted
- ⅓ cup cracker crumbs
- 3 scallions, chopped coarse
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 4½ teaspoons pomegranate molasses
- 4 teaspoons lemon juice
- 1½ teaspoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper

Process all ingredients in food processor until uniform coarse puree forms, about 15 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl halfway through processing. Transfer to bowl and serve. (Dip can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

Char Well and Don't Rinse

Roasted bell peppers need to get nicely blackened, since the charred skins transfer smoky flavor to the flesh. To preserve that flavor, don't rinse the bell peppers after peeling them. We found that rinsed bell peppers had a watery, washed-out taste. If tiny bits of skin remain, it's better to leave them on than to rinse.

Observe the Char
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/aug17

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Best Summer Tomato Gratin

Starting with the freshest tomatoes is only the first step. Success also depends on the bread you use and how you treat it.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Some think it's sacrilege to cook a perfect summer tomato, but I disagree. Cooking intensifies the tomato's natural flavor, and it's an excellent way to use great tomatoes at the time of year when there are plenty of them around. That's why tomato gratin (sometimes called scalloped tomatoes), a classic dish that serves this very purpose, has always appealed to me. It combines fresh tomatoes with bread—typically sandwich bread or bread crumbs—to soak up all the juices released as the tomatoes cook, and it's topped off with Parmesan for both flavor and contrasting texture. Sugar, garlic, and herbs are typically the only other additions, lending a subtle flavor boost.

The problem is that most versions suffer from mushy, pasty bread as well as tomatoes that are undercooked, overly sweet from too much added sugar, or overcooked and broken down to a sauce-like consistency. Others aren't very cohesive, particularly those that simply layer slices of tomatoes and top them with bread rather than mixing chunks of tomatoes together with the bread.

Precooking the tomatoes on the stovetop concentrates their flavorful juices, and cooking our gratin start to finish in the skillet keeps it simple.

My ideal: a cohesive casserole featuring concentrated tomato flavor and distinct pieces of tomato and bread—not a mushy, saucy mess. I wanted it to have a soft and tender interior, much like a bread pudding, but I also wanted to find a way to lend it some textural contrast.

Juice on the Loose

The first step was choosing the right bread. After a few quick tests using first sandwich bread and then bread crumbs, I discovered that these disintegrated too quickly, causing that unappealing mushy texture. Next I tried an ordinary supermarket baguette, thinking its ample crust would help. This was better but still not great. It was only when I hunted down a good-quality artisan-style baguette that things really improved. Its thicker, shatteringly crisp crust and chewy crumb were far better at soaking up juices without falling apart, and any bits peeking above the tomatoes offered contrast and crunch. I took two more steps to prevent the bread from getting too soggy: I cut it into large ¾-inch chunks, and then I toasted them in a skillet with plenty of olive oil, which would have the benefit of giving this otherwise lean dish some richness as well as balancing the tomatoes' acidity.

Once the cubes of bread were nice and golden, I set them aside and prepared the tomatoes. I cored 3 pounds of ripe, juicy specimens from the farmers' market and cut them into ¾-inch pieces, like the bread, to help them stay intact. I combined them with the bread chunks in a baking dish along with salt, pepper, and a modest 2 teaspoons of sugar—just enough to bring out the tomatoes' sweetness. I then sprinkled Parmesan over the top and baked the gratin in a 350-degree oven until the topping was golden and the tomatoes bubbly.

This first attempt left a fair bit to be desired. The bread was certainly much better now that I was using a crusty baguette, and the tomatoes had just the right texture—softened but not turned to sauce. But overall, the consistency was too thin and watery from the abundant tomato juices, which also caused the bread to be softer than I wanted.

For my next test, after toasting the bread cubes, I added the tomatoes and cooked everything in the skillet for 10 minutes to drive off some of the tomatoes' juices. I was about to spoon it all into a baking dish when it occurred to me that there was no need—the skillet would serve just as well as a baking dish. I simply sprinkled on the cheese and slid the whole thing into the oven.

Less Mush, More Crunch

This was another step in the right direction, but there were still some tomato juices pooling in the pan, the baguette chunks were still a bit too squishy, and there wasn't enough textural contrast. What if I set the bread aside before adding the tomatoes to the pan and folded it back in just before transferring the skillet to the oven? This would lessen the time it sat in the juices, so it wouldn't turn mushy. And for more crunchy contrast, I toasted another cup of bread, bringing the total to 4 cups, so that I'd have enough to scatter over the surface before sprinkling on the Parmesan.

The Gratin Takes Shape
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/aug17

Bag up the Right Baguette

BREAD WINNER

An artisan-style baguette, with its resilient open crumb and chewy texture, can soak up the juices without falling apart, and its crisp crust offers textural contrast.

SOFT LOSER

Commercial baguettes from the supermarket have a fine, even crumb and a soft crust that won't hold up once soaked with tomato juices.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

The results were perfect: My gratin had a soft, tender interior and a nicely crunchy, flavorful topping. For a boost of flavor, I browned some thinly sliced garlic in the skillet before adding the tomatoes. And with a sprinkle of chopped basil over the top of the gratin once it came out of the oven, I had a fresh take on tomato gratin that showcased the very best of summer tomatoes.

BEST SUMMER TOMATO GRATIN

SERVES 6 TO 8

For the best results, use the ripest in-season tomatoes you can find. Supermarket vine-ripened tomatoes will work, but the gratin won't be as flavorful as one made with locally grown tomatoes. Do not use plum tomatoes, which contain less juice than regular round tomatoes and will result in a dry gratin. For the bread, we prefer a crusty baguette with a firm, chewy crumb. You can serve the gratin hot, warm, or at room temperature.

- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 6 ounces crusty baguette, cut into ¾-inch cubes (4 cups)
- 3 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 3 pounds tomatoes, cored and cut into ¾-inch pieces
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1½ ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (¾ cup)
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Heat ¼ cup oil in 12-inch ovensafe skillet over medium-low heat until shimmering. Add bread and stir to coat. Cook, stirring constantly, until bread is browned and toasted, about 5 minutes. Transfer bread to bowl.

2. Return now-empty skillet to low heat and add remaining 2 tablespoons oil and garlic. Cook, stirring constantly, until garlic is golden at edges, 30 to 60 seconds. Add tomatoes, sugar, salt, and pepper and stir to combine. Increase heat to medium-high and cook, stirring occasionally, until tomatoes have started to break down and have released enough juice to be mostly submerged, 8 to 10 minutes.

3. Remove skillet from heat and gently stir in 3 cups bread until completely moistened and evenly distributed. Using spatula, press down on bread until completely submerged. Arrange remaining 1 cup bread evenly over surface, pressing to partially submerge. Sprinkle evenly with Parmesan.

4. Bake until top of gratin is deeply browned, tomatoes are bubbling, and juice has reduced, 40 to 45 minutes; after 30 minutes, run spatula around edge of skillet to loosen crust and release any juice underneath. (Gratin will appear loose and jiggle around outer edges but will thicken as it cools.)

5. Remove skillet from oven and let stand for 15 minutes. Sprinkle gratin with basil and serve.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

TOMATO PRIMER

BUY LOCAL

A locally grown tomato isn't subjected to the rigors of travel and is more flavorful because it's allowed to ripen on the vine.

Buying the Best

Buying tomatoes at the height of summer is the first step toward getting juicy, flavorful fruit. Here are a few other shopping guidelines.

GO FOR LOCAL

The best way to ensure that you get a flavorful tomato is to buy a locally grown one. Why? First, the shorter the distance the tomato has to travel, the riper it can be when it's picked. Second, commercial high-yield production can strain the tomato plant, resulting in tomatoes without enough sugars and other flavor compounds to make them tasty. Third, to withstand the rigors of machine harvesting and long-distance transport, commercial varieties are bred to be sturdier, with thicker walls and less of the jelly and seeds that give a tomato most of its flavor.

TRY AN HEIRLOOM

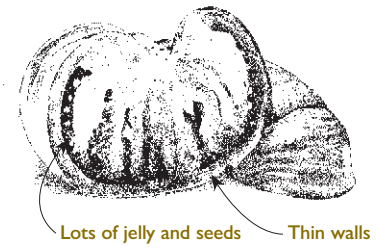
Grown for decades from naturally pollinated plants and seeds that haven't been hybridized (unlike commercial varieties), heirlooms are some of the best local tomatoes you'll find.

LOOKS AREN'T EVERYTHING

Oddly shaped tomatoes are fine (only commercial tomatoes have been bred to be perfectly symmetrical). Even cracked skin is OK, but avoid tomatoes that are bruised, overly soft, or leaking juice. Choose tomatoes that smell fruity and feel heavy.

Anatomy of a Flavorful Tomato

The best-tasting tomatoes tend to have thin walls, which leaves more room for the most flavorful part of the tomato: the jelly that surrounds the seeds, which is three times richer in savory glutamates than the flesh is. Some sources recommend removing the seeds to avoid their bitter taste, but we haven't found that they negatively affect flavor.



Worthy Tomato Tool

A knife works well to core a tomato, but our favorite corer is inexpensive ($2.99) and cuts prep time in half—handy when you're making our gratin or working with large quantities for stuffing, canning, or sauce.

NORPRO TOMATO CORE IT

Go Ahead and Refrigerate Ripe Tomatoes

Standard wisdom dictates that ripe tomatoes shouldn't be refrigerated. In theory, this is because cold kills their flavor-producing enzymes and ruins their texture by causing cells to rupture. But recently, numerous cooking blogs have challenged this thinking, so we decided to conduct our own tests.

Over two summers, we acquired heirloom and farmers' market tomatoes that had never been refrigerated (most supermarket tomatoes are refrigerated during storage and/or transport). Once they were ripe, we halved some tomatoes and left others whole. We then refrigerated one set and left the second set at room temperature, storing them until they started to degrade. We stored the whole tomatoes loose and the cut tomatoes either in airtight containers or wrapped in plastic wrap. We then sampled the refrigerated and unrefrigerated tomatoes plain at room temperature and in batches of gazpacho and cooked tomato sauce.

Some tasters noted that the cut tomatoes in the plain tasting had picked up off-flavors in the refrigerator, but once the tomatoes had been cooked, tasters could not tell the difference between the samples. The flavor of whole tomatoes was unaffected by refrigeration. Plus, refrigerating them prolonged their shelf life by five days. Cut tomatoes didn't last more than a day at room temperature, but they held fine for up to two days in the refrigerator.

In the future, we'll move both cut and whole ripe tomatoes to the refrigerator to prolong their shelf life. To keep them from picking up off-flavors, we'll put them in an airtight container, which works better than plastic wrap at keeping out odors. –L.L.

New England Baked Beans

The transformation of a few humble ingredients into a rich, deeply flavorful dish is a tradition worth continuing. But does it have to take all day?

BY ANNIE PETITO

In early New England, Puritans baked bread in communal ovens on Saturdays. When the last loaf was pulled from the hearth, the town baker collected bean pots and set them to cook in the residual heat. After bubbling away all afternoon, the beans were served for supper; leftovers were on the table again for breakfast on Sunday. It all worked out to be quite convenient, as cooking was forbidden from sundown on Saturday through sundown on Sunday as part of Sabbath customs.

Today, baked beans are still all about patience: Recipes call for 6, 8, or even 10 hours of cooking to transform modest ingredients—dried beans, smoky pork, bittersweet molasses, mustard, and sometimes onion and brown sugar—into a pot of creamy, tender beans coated in a lightly thickened, sweet, and savory sauce. Delicious, indeed. But must they take so long? I wanted to create the best possible version of this American classic but hopefully without hours and hours of cooking.

Chunks of salt pork add meatiness to the sweet, earthy beans.

Bean Basics

White navy beans, which boast a mild flavor and a dense, creamy texture, are typically used for New England baked beans. Step one was to soak them overnight in salty water—an adjustment we make to the usual plain-water soak because we've learned that sodium weakens the pectin in the beans' skins, reducing the number of ruptured beans. That's a good thing, since when beans burst, they spill their starchy innards, creating a sticky, unappealing texture. Soaked beans also cook faster than unsoaked and seem to absorb water more evenly, so the result is creamier.

To my pot of drained, brined beans, I added some standard flavorings: a cup each of molasses and dark brown sugar, plus dry mustard, black pepper, and a bay leaf. For the pork element, some cooks use bacon, but traditionalists swear by salt pork, and I agreed: It would add meaty depth without the distracting smokiness of bacon. Sticking to the ultrasimple old-fashioned approach, I skipped browning and tossed a few raw chunks of salt pork straight into the pot, where their fat would melt into the beans.

Now, about the long cooking time. The test kitchen has plenty of recipes in which dried beans are fully cooked after simmering in water for only an hour. Baked beans take longer because adding acid to the mix via brown sugar and molasses firms the cell structure of legumes and slows down their cooking—but by how much?

To find out, I added enough water to cover the beans by a couple of inches. Then, to jump-start the cooking process, I brought the pot to a boil on the stovetop before placing a lid on it and transferring it to a 300-degree oven. It took 3 hours for the beans to turn perfectly creamy. Longer cooking times, it seemed, were just a holdover from the low-temperature hearth cooking of yesteryear.

Holding back the acidic brown sugar and molasses until the beans had softened could save time, but would there be a flavor sacrifice? I added the molasses and brown sugar to separate batches of beans after 15, 30, and 45 minutes of cooking, tracking how much longer the beans took to soften once the acidic ingredients were added. The results were eye-opening: Adding the molasses and brown sugar at 45 minutes resulted in tender beans in just over an hour, while the 15- and 30-minute batches took twice as long.

The problem was that the longer I waited to add the flavorings, the less they penetrated, leaving the beans pale and bland. Even the batches where the ingredients were added just 15 minutes into simmering didn't compare to the deeply bronzed beans flavored from the get-go. (For more information, see "A Shortcut That Wasn't Worth It.") I would have to live with a 3-hour cooking time—still quite a bit shorter than what most recipes call for.

Simple Tweaks

My next tests involved thickening the sauce, which was too soupy. I eventually determined that covering the beans by just ½ inch of water at the start would keep them submerged during cooking and still create a more viscous sauce. But I wanted it even more reduced. Removing the lid for the last hour of cooking helped the sauce cook down just below the beans, creating an attractive browned crust on top and a rich, velvety liquid underneath.

I also needed to adjust the beans' overt sweetness. I cut the molasses in half and reduced the brown sugar to just 2 tablespoons. I also threw a halved yellow onion into the pot. Tasters loved the mild, partly sweet, partly savory note it lent the beans as it softened in the oven (no need to sauté it beforehand).

The beans were now really good, but I felt they needed just a bit more character, so I stirred in a tablespoon of umami-rich soy sauce. My tasters (even the traditionalists) approved of the way it elevated the flavor.

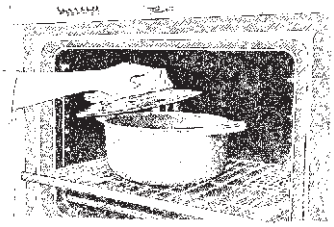
Finally, to capture every last bit of goodness, I made sure to scrape the fond from the pot's inside edge and stirred it into the beans. Tender, creamy, hearty, and glazed in a lightly sweet sauce, these baked beans had it all—in a modest amount of time.

Behold the Baking Beans
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/feb17

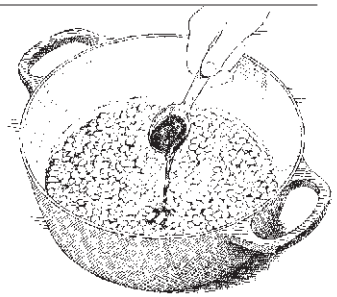
PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

KEY STEPS | CUT BACK ON TIME, NOT FLAVOR

1. USE LESS WATER
Four cups of water cooks down into a thick, savory sauce in 3 hours.



2. UNCOVER POT
Removing the lid for the last hour of cooking helps the sauce rapidly reduce.



3. ADD FLAVOR BOOST
Soy sauce replicates the depth produced by longer cooking times.

NEW ENGLAND BAKED BEANS

SERVES 4 TO 6

You'll get fewer blowouts if you soak the beans overnight, but if you're pressed for time, you can quick-salt-soak your beans. In step 1, combine the salt, water, and beans in a large Dutch oven and bring them to a boil over high heat. Remove the pot from the heat, cover it, and let it stand for 1 hour. Drain and rinse the beans and proceed with the recipe.

- Salt
- 1 pound (2½ cups) dried navy beans, picked over and rinsed
- 6 ounces salt pork, rinsed, cut into 3 pieces
- 1 onion, halved
- ½ cup molasses
- 2 tablespoons packed dark brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons dry mustard
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1 bay leaf

1. Dissolve 1½ tablespoons salt in 2 quarts cold water in large container. Add beans and let soak at room temperature for at least 8 hours or up to 24 hours. Drain and rinse well.

2. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Combine beans, salt pork, onion, molasses, sugar, soy sauce, mustard, pepper, bay leaf, ¼ teaspoon salt, and 4 cups water in large Dutch oven. (Liquid should cover beans by about ½ inch. Add more water if necessary.) Bring to boil over high heat. Cover pot, transfer to oven, and cook until beans are softened and bean skins curl up and split when you blow on them, about 2 hours. (After 1 hour, stir beans and check amount of liquid. Liquid should just cover beans. Add water if necessary.)

3. Remove lid and continue to cook until beans are fully tender, browned, and slightly crusty on top, about 1 hour longer. (Liquid will reduce slightly below top layer of beans.)

4. Remove pot from oven, cover, and let stand for 5 minutes. Using wooden spoon or rubber spatula, scrape any browned bits from sides of pot and stir into beans. Discard onion and bay leaf. (Salt pork can be eaten, if desired.) Let beans stand, uncovered, until liquid has thickened slightly and clings to beans, 10 to 15 minutes, stirring once halfway through. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve. (Beans can be refrigerated for up to 4 days.)

RECIPE TESTING ## A Shortcut That Wasn't Worth It

Our baked beans cook for 3 hours—quicker than many recipes but still a time investment. We wondered if we could shorten the simmering time by adding the molasses and brown sugar after we started cooking the beans, since these acidic ingredients firm up the cell structure of the beans and prolong cooking time. While the beans became tender more quickly, they also were progressively lighter in flavor and color. Only when the molasses and brown sugar were added at the start of cooking did the beans fully absorb their flavors.

ADDED AT THE START: FULL FLAVOR

ADDED AFTER 30 MINUTES: MODERATE FLAVOR

ADDED AFTER 45 MINUTES: MILD FLAVOR

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE (TOP), JAY LAYMAN (RIGHT)

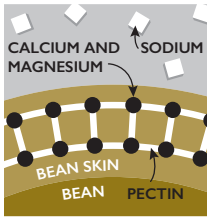
Bean Basics

CHECKING BEANS FOR DONENESS

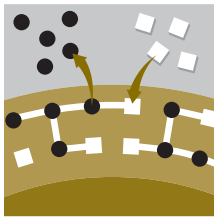
Not sure if your beans are done? Blow on them. The skins of properly cooked beans will wrinkle and curl back when you blow.

HOW BRINING SOFTENS BEANS

The pectin molecules in bean skins are tightly bound by calcium and magnesium ions. When beans are soaked in salted water, sodium replaces some of these ions, causing the pectin to weaken and leading to skins that are less likely to burst during cooking.



TOUGH SKIN
At the start of brining, the pectin molecules in the skin are tightly bound by calcium and magnesium ions.



SOFTER SKIN
Sodium ions replace the calcium and magnesium ions, weakening the pectin, for skin that's less prone to bursting.

HARD WATER? BRINE YOUR BEANS.

Cooking beans in hard water (which has a relatively high mineral content) purportedly can cause them to cook up with tougher skins and firmer interiors than beans cooked in soft water. To confirm this, we compared batches of navy beans soaked and cooked in soft tap water from our Brookline, Massachusetts, offices; in moderately hard water from the nearby town of Natick; and in distilled water with calcium chloride added to approximate what the U.S. Geological Survey defines as hard water (121 to 180 mg/L calcium carbonate).* After an hour, we found that beans cooked in hard water had noticeably tougher skins and firmer interiors than the soft-water batch, while those cooked in moderately hard water had slightly tougher skins.

We repeated this experiment, this time brining and then cooking the beans in each type of water. After an hour, we found that they all softened with minimal differences among them.

BOTTOM LINE: If your water is hard, all the more reason to brine your dried beans before cooking.

*Note: Calcium carbonate is not very soluble in water, so we used calcium chloride, adjusting the amount to equal the calcium carbonate concentration in hard water.

A New Cauliflower Gratin

Who says a gratin needs to be stodgy and rich to be satisfying? The unique attributes of cauliflower put a fresh spin on this old standby.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Cauliflower gratin should be a lighter alternative to the rich, starchy classic made with potatoes. Yet most of the recipes I've tried model themselves on that heavy, potato-based template: Cauliflower florets (which have been either boiled or steamed first) are arranged in a baking dish and inevitably buried under a stodgy, flour-thickened, cheesy cream sauce. I had an entirely different dish in mind: a cauliflower gratin with tender florets covered in a velvety sauce that boasted clean cauliflower flavor and was satisfying without the heft.

A light, crispy Parmesan-panko topping gives our gratin texture and flavor while a sprinkling of chives adds color.

Trim and Fit

I started by figuring out the best way to prepare the florets. Cauliflower florets with some of their stem left on look pretty but cook unevenly because the stem is more dense than the floret. Fortunately, I had an easy way to trim the stems and create same-size florets. I first removed the core from the head of cauliflower and then cut the head into ½-inch-thick slabs. This made it easy to trim the stems, leaving flat florets about 1½ inches tall. These florets would cook evenly and, because of their flat shape, would also layer neatly in the gratin dish. I found that it took a full two heads' worth of cauliflower to fill a standard 13 by 9-inch baking dish.

Precooking the florets is typical of most recipes and for good reason; cooking them through from start to finish in the sauce would take far too long. In fact, the actual goal of baking the casserole is not to cook the cauliflower but to marry the flavors of sauce and cauliflower. But what was the best method of precooking them? Boiling the delicate florets was too aggressive; the jostling made them fall apart. I also gave roasting a try. While this approach imparted a nice toasted, nutty flavor, once I combined the florets with the sauce (a placeholder version for now) and baked the dish for about 15 minutes, I found that the nuttiness detracted from the clean flavor profile I wanted—not to mention that the browned pieces muddied the gratin's appearance. And so I settled on the gentle technique of steaming. I simply loaded my cauliflower florets into a steamer basket and cooked them in a pot over simmering water until a paring knife slipped in and out of them with no resistance.

Witness Cauliflower's Duality
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/feb17

Cauliflower Power

It was time to move on to the bigger challenge: the sauce. I continued to search for recipes that didn't call for heavy or rich thickeners, such as a béchamel or lots of eggs, and at last found a few unique approaches to try. One featured a sauce made simply of cream thinned with chicken broth in a 2:1 ratio. It sounded lighter than the flour- or egg-thickened sauces, but sadly it was too thin (and too chicken-y). Another skipped liquids altogether and opted to combine the florets with just cheese and spices, plus a bread-crumb topping. The flavor was clean like I wanted, but the dish didn't come together into a cohesive gratin.

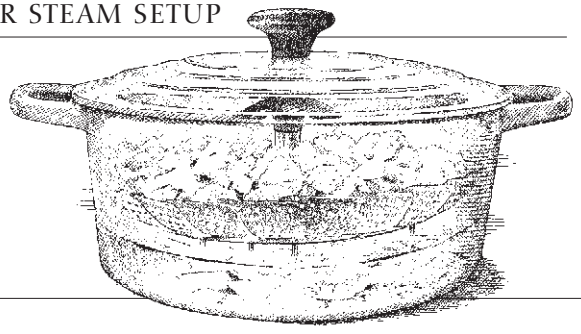
Out of ideas, I began browsing cauliflower recipes beyond gratins. A dish from chef Dan Barber of Blue Hill at Stone Barns in New York caught my eye. It featured pan-roasted cauliflower nestled in a sauce made of nothing more than cauliflower cooked in milk and water and then pureed with some of the cooking liquid. His recipe takes advantage of the fact that, unlike most vegetables, cauliflower is relatively low in fiber, particularly the insoluble fiber that is resistant to breaking down. This gives cauliflower the unique ability to blend into an ultracreamy puree without any cream (see "The Silky Side of Cauliflower").

What if cauliflower became my sauce, too? It would be creamy but not too rich, with the benefit of adding another layer of the starring vegetable's flavor. Furthermore, it occurred to me that I wouldn't need to buy a third head; I could likely use the stems and cores I had been throwing out. Even if I augmented these scraps with a couple of cups of florets, I would still have plenty of florets for the casserole.

I simmered the stem-core-floret mixture in a few cups of water until soft, and then I poured the pot's

TECHNIQUE | DOUBLE-DECKER STEAM SETUP

To minimize the number of pots needed and to maximize the efficiency of the recipe, we place the cauliflower stems and cores and other sauce ingredients in the bottom of the Dutch oven to simmer and arrange the steamer basket with the florets on top before adding the lid.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

TECHNIQUE | MAKING THE MOST OF THE CAULIFLOWER

We use two entire heads of cauliflower in our gratin. The florets make up the bulk of the dish while the cores and stems (and a small portion of florets) create the sauce. Here's the most efficient way to cut up the vegetable to allow for more evenly cooked florets.

1. PREP CORE Cut out each core, halve it lengthwise, and slice it thin crosswise. Reserve for sauce.

2. CUT SLABS Slice each head into ½-inch-thick slabs.

3. PREP STEMS Cut stems from slabs to create flat, 1½-inch-tall florets. Slice stems thin and reserve with sliced cores for sauce.

contents into a blender and pureed them until silky-smooth. I poured this sauce over the steamed florets layered in the dish and baked the gratin just until the sauce bubbled around the edges.

I was off to a good start, but the sauce was a bit thin and (not surprisingly, given that the cooking liquid was water) tasted too lean. Adding a little cornstarch improved the consistency. As for amping up the richness without muting flavor or making the sauce too heavy, I found that 6 tablespoons of butter added to the simmering cauliflower and water—this was the simplest approach, and it all would get blended together anyway—improved matters greatly, and the butter's sweet flavor complemented the cauliflower perfectly.

But there was still room for a little more depth and creaminess. I feared that adding cheese might move the sauce into the heavy, gloppy category, but I was happy to discover that ½ cup of grated Parmesan, which I added to the blender, lent a complementary salty richness without weighing the dish down. For more complexity, I added dry mustard, cayenne, and nutmeg. Tossing the florets with the puree so they were fully and evenly coated before they went into the baking dish ensured that there was sauce in every bite.

Stacked in My Favor

At this point, all my gratin needed was a classic bread-crumb-and-cheese topping for some texture, flavor, and color, so I toasted panko bread crumbs in butter until they were golden and then tossed them with some Parmesan. A sprinkling of minced chives over the finished gratin enlivened its appearance.

Before I was done, I made one more improvement for efficiency's sake. Did I really need two pots, one to steam the florets and one to simmer the sauce? For my next test, I put the stem-core-floret mixture, water, and butter in a Dutch oven and arranged my steamer basket, filled with the bulk of the florets, right on top of the mixture before adding the lid. When the florets in the basket were cooked through, I removed the basket and replaced the lid so the sauce mixture could continue to simmer. My double-decker setup was a success.

With that, I had an easy cauliflower gratin that was good enough to require a second helping and light enough to guarantee that there'd be room for it.

MODERN CAULIFLOWER GRATIN

SERVES 8 TO 10

When buying cauliflower, look for heads without many leaves. Alternatively, if your cauliflower does have a lot of leaves, buy slightly larger heads—about 2¼ pounds each. This recipe can be halved to serve 4 to 6; cook the cauliflower in a large saucepan and bake the gratin in an 8-inch square baking dish.

- 2 heads cauliflower (2 pounds each)
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup panko bread crumbs
- 2 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (1 cup)
- Salt and pepper
- ½ teaspoon dry mustard
- ⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch dissolved in 1 teaspoon water
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh chives

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees.

2. Pull off outer leaves of 1 head of cauliflower and trim stem. Using paring knife, cut around core to remove; halve core lengthwise and slice thin crosswise. Slice head into ½-inch-thick slabs. Cut stems from slabs to create florets that are about 1½ inches tall; slice stems thin and reserve along with sliced core. Transfer florets to bowl, including any small pieces that may have been created during trimming, and set aside. Repeat with remaining head of cauliflower. (After trimming you should have about 3 cups of sliced stems and cores and 12 cups of florets.)

3. Combine sliced stems and cores, 2 cups florets, 3 cups water, and 6 tablespoons butter in Dutch oven and bring to boil over high heat. Place remaining florets in steamer basket (do not rinse bowl). Once mixture is boiling, place steamer basket in pot, cover, and reduce heat to medium. Steam florets in basket until translucent and stem ends can be easily pierced with paring knife, 10 to 12 minutes. Remove steamer basket and drain florets. Re-cover pot, reduce heat to low, and continue to cook stem mixture until very soft, about 10 minutes longer. Transfer drained florets to now-empty bowl.

4. While cauliflower is cooking, melt remaining 2 tablespoons 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 let cool. Once cool, add ½ cup Parmesan and toss to combine.

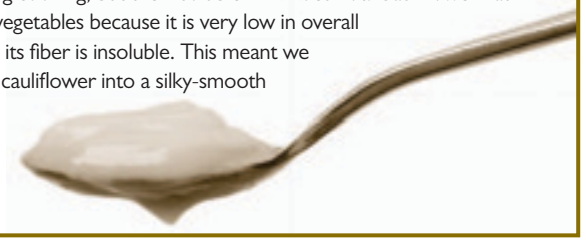
5. Transfer stem mixture and cooking liquid to blender and add 2 teaspoons salt, ½ teaspoon pepper, mustard, nutmeg, cayenne, and remaining ½ cup Parmesan. Process until smooth and velvety, about 1 minute (puree should be pourable; adjust consistency with additional water as needed). With blender running, add cornstarch slurry. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Pour puree over cauliflower florets and toss gently to evenly coat. Transfer mixture to 13 by 9-inch baking dish (it will be quite loose) and smooth top with spatula.

6. Scatter bread-crumb mixture evenly over top. Transfer dish to oven and bake until sauce bubbles around edges, 13 to 15 minutes. Let stand for 20 to 25 minutes. Sprinkle with chives and serve.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Follow recipe through step 5, refrigerating gratin and bread-crumb mixture separately for up to 24 hours. To serve, assemble and bake gratin as directed in step 6, increasing baking time by 13 to 15 minutes.

SCIENCE ## The Silky Side of Cauliflower

All vegetables contain both soluble and insoluble fiber—the soluble kind fully breaks down during cooking, but the insoluble kind does not. Cauliflower has a leg up on other vegetables because it is very low in overall fiber, and only half its fiber is insoluble. This meant we could easily puree cauliflower into a silky-smooth sauce—no need to weigh our gratin down with lots of cream.



The Easiest Carrot Side Dish

It's time to get reacquainted with a neglected cooking method.

BY ANDREA GEARY

We all should eat more carrots. They're nutritious, inexpensive, and available year-round, and their cheery color brightens any plate. But if eating carrots means roasting them for 45 minutes or grating a pile of them for a salad, most of us are unlikely to prepare them often. That's why I decided to make something that, at first blush, seems deeply unfashionable: boiled carrots.

Before you scoff, let me extol the virtues of boiling. First, it requires minimal equipment: saucepan, lid, and burner. Second, it's fast—about 25 percent faster than steaming. That's because boiling water transfers heat to the carrots faster than steam does, thus breaking down pectin more quickly so the carrots soften more quickly. And the clincher? Salt in the cooking water seasons the carrots as they cook, which makes them tastier than carrots that have received a superficial postcook sprinkle.

But is a recipe required for something as simple as boiled carrots? Pretty sure I could just wing it, I brought 2 cups of water (minimal water would mean minimal time wasted) and ½ teaspoon of salt to a boil and added 1 pound of peeled, trimmed carrots that I had cut into chunky rods. Seven minutes later, I drained them. The carrots were beautifully tender throughout, but they were also underseasoned and boring. A simple recipe would be helpful after all.

First, the seasoning. I recalled a culinary instructor who used to stride through the kitchen bellowing, "Cooking water should be salty! Salty like the SEA!" He never explained it, but it turns out there's a scientific reason: Boiling vegetables in unsalted water causes them to lose some of their natural salts and sugars (read: flavor). Boiling them in water that has the same salt concentration as seawater, about 3 percent, helps the vegetables retain that flavor. As a bonus, vegetables cooked in heavily salted water soften more quickly than those cooked in unsalted water. (This is because the sodium ions in salt displace some of the calcium ions that give strength to the vegetable's pectin network.)

Carrots cooked in a 3 percent solution (1 tablespoon salt to 2 cups water) were a little too salty for me, but the science was right: The high salt concentration boosted the flavor and decreased the cooking time by more than a minute. I compromised with 2 cups of water, 2 teaspoons of salt, and a 6-minute cooking time.

From there, I developed four flavor variations that could be matched with different types of meals.

Boiling is a faster cooking method than steaming, and it allows you to season the carrots as they cook.

Each variation had either butter or oil to provide a bit of sheen and richness and help the flavorings cling and either citrus juice or vinegar to balance the carrots' natural sweetness. Some chopped fresh herbs (I chose chives, cilantro, parsley, or mint) countered the carrots' earthiness, and a bit of spice added interest.

Have you heard about the latest fashion in vegetables? It's boiled carrots.

BOILED CARROTS WITH LEMON AND CHIVES

SERVES 4

For even cooking, it is important that the carrot pieces are of similar size. This recipe was developed using carrots with a diameter between 1 and 1½ inches at the thick end. If you are using larger carrots, you may have to cut them into more pieces.

- 1 pound carrots, peeled
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice, plus extra for serving
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh chives

1. Cut carrots into 1½- to 2-inch lengths. Leave thin pieces whole, halve medium pieces lengthwise, and quarter thick pieces lengthwise.

2. Bring 2 cups water to boil in medium saucepan over high heat. Add carrots and salt, cover, and cook until tender throughout, about 6 minutes (start timer as soon as carrots go into water).

3. Drain carrots and return them to saucepan. Add butter, lemon juice, and pepper and stir until butter is melted. Stir in chives. Season with extra lemon juice to taste, and serve.

BOILED CARROTS WITH CUMIN, LIME, AND CILANTRO

Substitute extra-virgin olive oil for butter; ½ teaspoon grated lime zest plus 1 teaspoon lime juice for lemon juice; ½ teaspoon cumin seeds, crushed (use mortar and pestle or spice grinder to crush) for pepper; and cilantro for chives.

BOILED CARROTS WITH FENNEL SEEDS AND CITRUS

Substitute extra-virgin olive oil for butter; ½ teaspoon fennel seeds, crushed (use mortar and pestle or spice grinder to crush) for pepper; and parsley for chives. Add ½ teaspoon grated orange zest to carrots with lemon juice.

BOILED CARROTS WITH MINT AND PAPRIKA

Substitute sherry vinegar for lemon juice, ½ teaspoon paprika for pepper, and mint for chives.

TECHNIQUE | MAKE IT SALTY

Boiling the carrots in very salty water has a number of benefits: It seasons them, allows them to retain more of their own natural sugars and salt for even better flavor, and—most interesting—speeds up cooking. How? The sodium ions in salt displace some of the calcium ions that give strength to the carrots' pectin network, weakening it and allowing the carrots to soften more quickly.

Look: Easiest Is Best
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/feb17

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

How to Cook Baby Bok Choy

This vegetable's clean, mild flavor is an asset. We don't muddy it with browning.

BY SANDRA WU

Too many American home cooks, bok choy, a mainstay in Chinese restaurants, is a bit mysterious. A member of the cabbage family, it's an appealing two-fer. Its crisp, mild-tasting stalks retain some of their texture when cooked, while the leaves wilt and soften. But how do you cook a vegetable with two such disparate parts?

When it comes to the larger heads of mature bok choy, cooking the leaves and stems separately is one solution. But with baby bok choy, it's really a shame to separate the two parts since one of this smaller version's assets is that it offers a lot of visual appeal on the plate when served whole or halved. The stalks of the younger variety are slightly more tender, but it's still not a cinch to deliver perfect crisp-tender stalks and wilted but not mushy leaves. I decided to see what I could do.

I started with a pound of baby bok choy, which meant eight small heads. I considered cooking whole heads but changed my mind when grit remained in the nooks and crannies even after cleaning. To make it easier to clean them, I settled on halving the heads, which would also allow for faster cooking.

First, I tried a simple pan-seared approach—cooking the bok choy in a skillet until the leaves had wilted—but the stems didn't fully cook through by the time the leaves were tender. I also found that I didn't love the browning the bok choy picked up, as it muddied the vegetable's flavor.

I suspected that a stint of steaming at the start might ensure more even, thorough cooking of the stems with no browning. The vegetables were a tight fit in the pan at first, but after a few minutes of covered cooking (with some water thrown in to provide enough steam), the leaves began to wilt and cook down. I removed the lid and cooked the bok choy a bit longer; by the time the liquid had evaporated, the stems had just the right texture. Adding minced garlic gave me a simple version perfect for any meal.

For a couple of variations showcasing flavorful sauces, I came up with some combinations for the base flavors (soy sauce with chili-garlic sauce and oyster sauce with sesame oil) and varied the aromatics (using ginger instead of garlic in one of the variations). A mere ½ teaspoon of cornstarch gave both of the sauces just the right consistency. I now had a clutch of sautéed baby bok choy options that were easy to prepare, full of flavor, and an attractive addition to any plate.

Bok Choy Basics
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/apr17

For crisp-tender stems and leaves that are wilted but not mushy, we steam and then sauté.

SAUTÉED BABY BOK CHOY

SERVES 4

If using heads larger than 2 ounces each, quarter them instead of halving. We spin the bok choy dry after washing to avoid adding too much water to the pan.

- 4 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 8 small heads baby bok choy (1½ to 2 ounces each), halved, washed thoroughly, and spun dry
- 2 tablespoons water
- ¼ teaspoon salt

1. Combine 1 teaspoon oil and garlic in small bowl; set aside.

2. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add bok choy and water and immediately cover. Cook, covered, shaking pan occasionally, for 2 minutes. Remove lid, toss bok choy, and then push bok choy to sides of skillet. Add garlic mixture to center and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 20 seconds. Stir garlic mixture into bok choy, sprinkle with salt, and continue to cook, stirring constantly, until all water has evaporated, stems are crisp-tender, and leaves are wilted, 1 to 2 minutes longer. Transfer to platter and serve.

SAUTÉED BABY BOK CHOY WITH CHILI-GARLIC SAUCE

Kikkoman Soy Sauce is the test kitchen's favorite.

Whisk 1 tablespoon soy sauce, 1 tablespoon chili-garlic sauce, 1 teaspoon sugar, and ½ teaspoon cornstarch together in small bowl. Before transferring cooked bok choy to platter, add soy sauce mixture to skillet and cook, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened and coats bok choy, about 15 seconds. Omit salt.

SAUTÉED BABY BOK CHOY WITH OYSTER SAUCE AND GINGER

Omit 1 garlic clove and add 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger to garlic-oil mixture in step 1. Whisk 2 tablespoons oyster sauce, 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil, and ½ teaspoon cornstarch together in small bowl. Before transferring cooked bok choy to platter, add oyster sauce mixture to skillet and cook, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened and coats bok choy, about 15 seconds. Omit salt.

TECHNIQUE

HOW TO CLEAN BOK CHOY

Bok choy's tightly layered stems can retain a lot of grit. To thoroughly clean them, swish the halved heads in three changes of water. Spinning them dry avoids adding too much water to the pan.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

How to Grill Cauliflower

Char, caramelization, and smoke bring new dimension to this versatile vegetable.

BY ANNIE PETITO

In the vegetable world, cauliflower is like Superman. Well, maybe it's more like his alter ego, Clark Kent. Initially, you might think it mild-mannered or bland. But when thrown into a hot oven, the vegetable is transformed, gaining a crisp, browned exterior; a tender interior; and sweet, nutty flavor. In the summer, though, I spend most of my time outside by the grill. Could I get the same results there?

Since small florets would be likely to fall through the cooking grate, I tried prepping the cauliflower other ways. The simplest treatment was to leave the head whole, but it took more than an hour to cook through. And without exposure to direct heat, the interior tasted sulfurous and steamed. Cutting the cauliflower head crosswise gave me uniform slabs with ample surface for charring, but I could get only a couple of slabs from one head, since the end pieces just crumbled into florets. In the end, I opted to cut the cauliflower through the core into six large wedges. The wedges yielded a good amount of surface area for browning, and the intact core provided a handle I could use to flip the wedges.

But once the wedges were on the grill, the exteriors browned and dried out before the interiors became tender. That's because cauliflower is so dense that it takes a while to cook through. Precooking was in order, so I turned to the microwave.

I arranged the wedges in a single layer on a plate so they would cook evenly and simply inverted a large bowl over the plate to trap steam. After 15 minutes of microwaving, the wedges had softened nicely. Now all I'd have to do was put the wedges on the grill just long enough to pick up color and smoky flavor. I patted them dry and transferred them to a medium-hot grill until they developed some crisp char all over—just a few minutes per side.

My cauliflower wedges were tender and nicely browned, but one issue lingered: seasoning. With all the nooks and crannies, it was difficult to evenly season the wedges with salt. Luckily, the answer was simple: I stirred together a solution of 2 cups of water and ¼ cup of salt along with 2 tablespoons of sugar (added to encourage browning). I then dunked the wedges in the solution before microwaving them.

Watch It Step by Step
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/oct17

Large wedges are easy to handle on the grill and provide three sides to pick up flavorful browning.

To garnish the wedges, I developed a recipe for the Middle Eastern spice-nut blend called *dukkah*. But even with just a drizzle of olive oil, a sprinkle of chives, and a squeeze of lemon, the cauliflower was a true hero on the plate.

GRILLED CAULIFLOWER

SERVES 4 TO 6

Look for cauliflower with densely packed florets that feels heavy for its size. Using tongs or a thin metal spatula to gently flip the wedges helps keep them intact. This dish stands well on its own, but to dress it up, serve it sprinkled with 1 tablespoon of Pistachio Dukkah (recipe follows).

- 1 head cauliflower (2 pounds)
- ¼ cup salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh chives
- Lemon wedges

1. Trim outer leaves of cauliflower and cut stem flush with bottom. Cut head through core into 6 equal wedges so that core and florets remain intact.

2. Whisk 2 cups water, salt, and sugar in medium bowl until salt and sugar dissolve. Holding wedges by core, gently dunk in salt-sugar mixture until evenly moistened (do not dry—residual water will help cauliflower steam). Transfer wedges, rounded side down, to large plate and cover with inverted large bowl. Microwave until cauliflower is translucent and tender and paring knife inserted in thickest stem of florets (not into core) meets no resistance, 14 to 16 minutes.

3. Carefully (bowl and cauliflower will be very hot) transfer cauliflower to paper towel–lined plate and pat dry. (Microwaved cauliflower can be held at room temperature for up to 2 hours.)

4. Brush cut sides of wedges with 1 tablespoon oil. Place cauliflower, cut side down, on grill over medium-high heat and cook, covered, until well browned with spots of charring, 3 to 4 minutes. Using tongs or thin metal spatula, flip cauliflower and cook second cut side until well browned with spots of charring, 3 to 4 minutes. Flip again so cauliflower is sitting on rounded edge and cook until browned, 1 to 2 minutes.

5. Transfer cauliflower to large platter. Drizzle with remaining 1 tablespoon oil, sprinkle with chives, and serve with lemon wedges.

PISTACHIO DUKKAH

MAKES ABOUT ⅓ CUP

This Middle Eastern spice blend can be sprinkled on a plate of extra-virgin olive oil and served as a dip for bread or sprinkled over soups, grain dishes, or bean salads as a garnish. If you do not own a spice grinder, you can process the spices in a mini food processor.

- 1½ tablespoons sesame seeds, toasted
- 1½ teaspoons coriander seeds, toasted
- ¾ teaspoon cumin seeds, toasted
- ½ teaspoon fennel seeds, toasted
- 2 tablespoons shelled pistachios, toasted and chopped fine
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper

Process sesame seeds in spice grinder or mortar and pestle until coarsely ground; transfer to bowl. Process coriander seeds, cumin seeds, and fennel seeds in now-empty grinder until finely ground. Transfer to bowl with sesame seeds. Stir pistachios, salt, and pepper into sesame mixture until combined. (Dukkah can be refrigerated for up to 1 month.)

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Napa Cabbage Slaws

Could we maintain napa cabbage's delicate texture but not end up with a soupy slaw?

BY KEITH DRESSER

While traditional green cabbage has long been the favorite for making coleslaw, napa cabbage is a great alternative. Its crinkly, thin leaves have a more tender texture and a sweeter flavor that can put a new spin on the picnic classic. While our traditional slaw recipes call for salting the cabbage to draw out excess liquid and soften the dense leaves, I wanted to retain napa cabbage's delicate texture. I found that even a brief salting made the shreds too limp, so I decided to skip it. But simply tossing the shredded cabbage with dressing didn't work either; I ended up with a waterlogged, bland slaw. It turns out that what gives napa cabbage its appealing tenderness—thinner, weaker cell walls—is also a liability. It will leach twice as much water as regular cabbage.

To handle the extra moisture, I needed to make a more potent dressing. I mixed up a bracing dressing of 3 parts vinegar to 1 part oil. But when I tossed the shredded cabbage with this mixture, I was surprised to find that the slaw still tasted too watered-down and bland. Our science editor told me what was happening: Vinegar was breaking down the cell walls of the cabbage, causing water to escape and the leaves to wilt.

I had an idea: Why not simmer the vinegar before incorporating it into the dressing? This cooked off some of the vinegar's water so that the water leached by the cabbage would then reconstitute it.

With that in mind, I reduced ⅓ cup of vinegar to 3 tablespoons and proceeded as before. After letting the dressed shreds sit for 5 minutes, I had a slaw that was the best yet. However, simmering had driven off some of the vinegar's volatile compounds, so it tasted a bit flat. Reducing the vinegar even further, to 2 tablespoons, and adding 1 tablespoon of fresh vinegar delivered potent, bright flavor.

I was getting close, but the slaw still seemed too lean. Adding more oil to the dressing would only make it greasy, so I considered add-ins, settling on toasted sesame seeds. They lent a nutty richness that didn't weigh down the slaw. Grated carrots contributed earthy sweetness and color while thinly sliced scallions added another layer of flavor.

From here, I created a couple of variations so that I'd have a slaw to pair with almost any meal.

See Our Slaw Solution
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/june17

The key to intense, bright flavor is cooking down some of the vinegar.

NAPA CABBAGE SLAW WITH CARROTS AND SESAME

SERVES 4 TO 6

This slaw is best served within an hour of being dressed. Use the large holes of a box grater to prepare the carrots. Napa Valley Naturals Organic White Wine Vinegar is the test kitchen's favorite white wine vinegar, and Kikkoman Soy Sauce is our favorite soy sauce.

- ⅓ cup white wine vinegar
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon rice vinegar
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 small head napa cabbage, sliced thin (9 cups)
- 2 carrots, peeled and grated
- 4 scallions, sliced thin on bias
- ¼ cup sesame seeds, toasted

1. Bring white wine vinegar to simmer in small saucepan over medium heat; cook until reduced to 2 tablespoons, 4 to 6 minutes. Transfer white wine vinegar to large bowl and let cool completely, about 10 minutes. Whisk in sesame oil, vegetable oil, rice vinegar, soy sauce, sugar, ginger, and salt.

2. When ready to serve, add cabbage and carrots to dressing and toss to coat. Let stand for 5 minutes. Add scallions and sesame seeds and toss to combine. Serve.

NAPA CABBAGE SLAW WITH APPLE AND WALNUTS

Omit sesame oil and increase vegetable oil to 4 teaspoons. Omit soy sauce and ginger. Substitute cider vinegar for rice vinegar. Decrease sugar to 2 teaspoons and increase salt to ¾ teaspoon. Substitute 2 celery ribs, sliced thin on bias, and 1 grated Fuji apple for carrots. Substitute 3 tablespoons minced fresh chives for scallions and ½ cup walnuts, toasted and chopped fine, for sesame seeds.

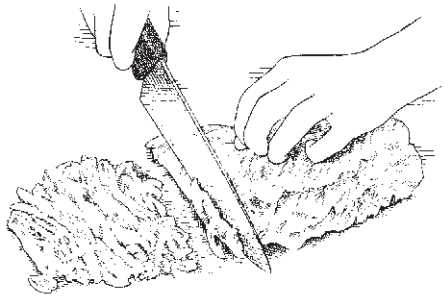
NAPA CABBAGE SLAW WITH JÍCAMA AND PEPITAS

Omit sesame oil and increase vegetable oil to 4 teaspoons. Omit soy sauce. Substitute lime juice for rice vinegar, honey for sugar, and ½ teaspoon ground coriander for ginger. Increase salt to ¾ teaspoon. Substitute 1 seeded and minced jalapeño for ginger. Substitute 6 ounces jícama, peeled and grated, for carrots. Substitute ¼ cup coarsely chopped fresh cilantro for scallions and ½ cup roasted and salted pepitas, chopped fine, for sesame seeds.

TECHNIQUE

HOW TO SLICE NAPA CABBAGE

Unlike the tightly packed heads of regular cabbage, which require coring to release the leaves, napa cabbage leaves come away from the core with just a slight tug.



Trim base. Stack several leaves and cut thin crosswise. Repeat stacking and cutting for entire head.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Quicker Caramelized Onions

The key to quicker caramelized onions is the ingredient we least expected: water.

BY LAN LAM

With nothing more than heat and time, onions can undergo an extraordinary transformation. Sweet and complex caramelized onions can improve everything from soups, dips, and sandwiches to pizzas, casseroles, pastas, and salads. The traditional approach is long, careful cooking over a low flame for upwards of 1¼ hours. There are shortcut recipes that rely on cranking up the heat, but the results are never as richly flavored as the real deal. I've also found that when I cut one of these quick-caramelized strands in half, I reveal a pale, watery interior lurking beneath the brown exterior. I set myself the challenge of finding a way to shave off time and still produce exemplary caramelized onions.

First, I reviewed the science behind the traditional approach: Cooking causes the onions to break down and soften, releasing water, sugars, and proteins. The water evaporates, concentrating flavor. Given heat and time, the sugars and proteins undergo two reactions. One is caramelization, in which sugar molecules recombine into hundreds of new flavor, color, and aroma compounds. The other is Maillard browning, where sugars react with amino acids to produce a different diverse array of flavors and colors.

In the test kitchen we often turn to baking soda to speed up browning. This is because it creates a high-pH (basic) environment, which allows browning reactions to occur more readily. It's also handy for softening vegetables because altering the pH helps weaken their structure. I wanted to speed up both processes, so why not add baking soda here?

I sliced three large onions and added them to a nonstick skillet (its surface would ensure that the fond stuck to the onions, not to the pan) with 2 tablespoons of oil and ⅛ teaspoon of baking soda. After just 45 minutes over a moderate flame, they were impressively browned, sweet, and complex-tasting. In fact, they were much sweeter than any I'd had before. Our science editor explained that the baking soda sped up the conversion of flavorless compounds called inulin into the simple sugar fructose. So while many recipes for caramelized onions call for adding sugar or honey to boost sweetness, there was no need for that in my recipe.

See How It Happens
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/oct17

Clockwise from top left: Our rich, complex-tasting caramelized onions take just 30 minutes to cook. They will enrich a flaky goat cheese and tomato tart, a simple pasta dish, and a quick creamy dip.

But there was a drawback to the baking soda. It caused the onions to break down too much; by the time they were browned, I had a skillet full of onion jam instead of the tender, distinct strands I wanted. To keep the flavor benefits of baking soda without ending up with mush, I added it at the last minute. Doing so, even at the last minute, deepened the color and flavor. But I still had to cook the onions for well over an hour. I'd have to look for other ways to speed things up.

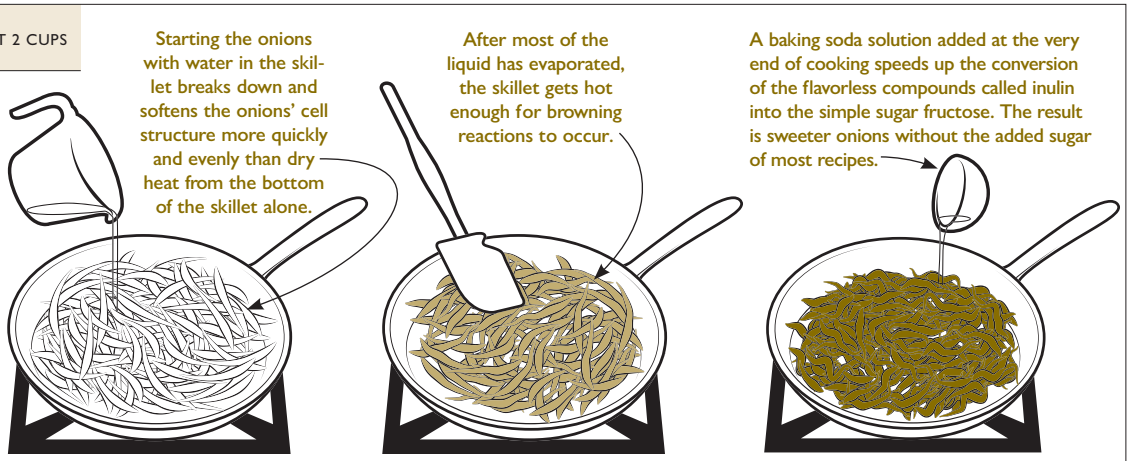
Here's the thought that came to mind. Moisture is usually regarded as the enemy of browning, since food needs to rise above 212 degrees in order to brown, and that can't happen until most of the moisture burns off. But I knew that adding water and covering the skillet could help speed up the cooking without working against me. After all, the first part of the cooking process isn't about browning but rather softening the onions and breaking down their structure. Surrounding the onions with steam (and submerging some of them in the added water) would heat them more quickly and thoroughly than just relying on the heat generated by cooking surface of the skillet alone. When cooked with ¾ cup of water, the onions wilted about 10 minutes faster. I then uncovered the skillet and turned the heat to

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

CARAMELIZED ONIONS MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

We prefer yellow or Spanish onions in this recipe for their complex flavor. Slicing the onions through their root end prevents them from breaking down too much during cooking. Caramelized onions are easily added to most any meal. Try them in an omelet, in a frittata, or with scrambled eggs. They taste fantastic on grilled cheese sandwiches, BLTs, and burgers or thrown into pasta dishes and green salads. Try sprinkling them over bruschetta, focaccia, or pizza. They also can be used to spiff up baked and mashed potatoes, rice, risotto, and polenta.

- **3 pounds onions, halved and sliced through root end ¼ inch thick**
- **¾ cup plus 1 tablespoon water**
- **2 tablespoons vegetable oil**
- **¾ teaspoon salt**
- **⅛ teaspoon baking soda**



1. Bring onions, ¾ cup water, oil, and salt to boil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat. Cover and cook until water has evaporated and onions start to sizzle, about 10 minutes.

2. Uncover, reduce heat to medium-high, and use rubber spatula to gently press onions into sides and bottom of skillet. Cook, without stirring onions, for 30 seconds. Stir onions, scraping fond from skillet, then gently press onions into sides and bottom of skillet again. Repeat pressing, cooking, and stirring until onions are softened, well browned, and slightly sticky, 15 to 20 minutes.

3. Combine baking soda and remaining 1 tablespoon water in bowl. Stir baking soda solution into onions and cook, stirring constantly, until solution has evaporated, about 1 minute. Transfer onions to bowl. (Onions can be refrigerated for up to 3 days or frozen for up to 1 month.)

medium-high. Since browning occurs only where the onions are in direct contact with the hot pan, I gently pressed the softened onions into the bottom and sides of the skillet to allow for maximum contact. I let them sit for about 30 seconds and then stirred them; I repeated the pressing and stirring process for the rest of the cooking time. Repeating this technique thoroughly softened and deeply browned the onions in just 15 minutes; start to finish, the entire cooking time took less than half an hour.

There are countless ways to use these tender, sweet, richly flavored onions, and I came up with just a few: I combined them with sour cream, yogurt, chives, and vinegar for a quick dip; I layered them on puff pastry with tomatoes and goat cheese for an elegant tart; and I tossed them with pasta, pepper, and salty Pecorino. And that's just a start.

CARAMELIZED ONION DIP

MAKES 2 CUPS

The dip can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours before serving.

- **1 cup sour cream**
- **⅔ cup caramelized onions, chopped fine**
- **⅓ cup yogurt**
- **2 tablespoons minced fresh chives**
- **¾ teaspoon distilled white vinegar**
- **Salt and pepper**

Stir together sour cream, onions, yogurt, chives, vinegar, ½ teaspoon salt, and ⅛ teaspoon pepper. Refrigerate dip for at least 1 hour. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

CARAMELIZED ONION, TOMATO, AND GOAT CHEESE TART

SERVES 4

To thaw frozen puff pastry, let it sit either in the refrigerator for 24 hours or on the counter for 30 minutes to 1 hour before using. This recipe can be easily doubled. Bake the two tarts on separate baking sheets on the upper- and lower-middle oven racks, switching and rotating the sheets halfway through baking.

- **1 (9½ by 9-inch) sheet puff pastry, thawed**
- **½ cup caramelized onions**
- **¼ teaspoon minced fresh thyme**
- **6 ounces cherry tomatoes, halved**
- **2 ounces goat cheese, crumbled (½ cup)**
- **Salt and pepper**

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Line baking sheet with parchment paper.

2. Unfold pastry onto lightly floured counter. Roll pastry into 10-inch square. Transfer to prepared sheet. Lightly brush ½-inch border along edges of pastry with water; fold edges of pastry over by ½ inch.

3. Stir together onions and thyme. Spread onion mixture in even layer over pastry, avoiding raised border. Arrange tomatoes and goat cheese evenly over onions. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Bake until pastry is puffed and golden brown, 20 to 24 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking. Transfer tart to cooling rack and let stand for 15 minutes. Transfer to cutting board, slice, and serve.

PASTA WITH CARAMELIZED ONIONS, PECORINO ROMANO, AND BLACK PEPPER

SERVES 4

We recommend preparing this dish with a pasta shape with nooks and crannies that will hold on to the sauce, such as campanelle or cavatappi. Shred the cheese on the large holes of a box grater. Napa Valley Naturals Organic White Wine Vinegar is our taste test winner.

- **1 pound pasta**
- **Salt and coarsely ground pepper**
- **1 tablespoon unsalted butter**
- **2 cups caramelized onions**
- **1½ ounces shredded Pecorino Romano cheese (¾ cup), plus extra for serving**
- **¼ cup chopped fresh parsley**
- **1 tablespoon white wine vinegar**

1. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until al dente. Reserve 1½ cups cooking water, then drain pasta and return it to pot.

2. While pasta cooks, melt butter in 10-inch skillet over medium heat. Add 1 tablespoon pepper and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add onions and ½ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until onions are warmed through, about 4 minutes.

3. Add Pecorino, parsley, vinegar, onions, and 1 cup reserved cooking water to pasta and stir to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, adjusting consistency with remaining reserved cooking water as needed and passing extra Pecorino separately.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Go-To Brussels Sprouts

Have 10 minutes? You can make the best Brussels sprouts that you've ever tasted.

BY ANNIE PETITO

It was a memorable kitchen moment: I had been experimenting with cooking Brussels sprouts on the stovetop when I produced a batch unlike any I'd ever had. Over intense, direct heat, the tiny cabbages developed a deeply caramelized crust that was unusually thick and dark, contributing a rich, nutty sweetness. With their attractively browned cut sides juxtaposed against bright green, tender-but-crisp rounded sides, these sprouts were impossible to resist.

Getting there hadn't been easy: Producing even browning from edge to edge and from sprout to sprout was a challenge, as was getting their dense interiors tender before the exteriors burned. I'd started by halving 1 pound of sprouts to create flat surfaces for browning. I heated a bit of oil in a skillet until smoking and then frantically arranged the sprouts cut sides down, later tossing them about. I had to remove the sprouts from the skillet when they started to burn in spots, but unfortunately, they were still crunchy. Adding a little water to a subsequent batch and covering the pan only made them too soft.

Since a hot skillet wasn't working, what about starting with a cold one? I set an oiled pan full of sprouts, cut sides down, over medium-high heat, covered, for 5 minutes. I then removed the lid and continued to cook the sprouts, without stirring, until they were just tender, which took only a few minutes more.

This was real progress. The cold start allowed the sprouts to heat slowly and release their moisture, so they steamed without additional liquid. Plus, I'd eliminated the hectic arrangement in a hot, oil-slicked skillet. That said, the sprouts' bottoms were somewhat dry, and a few burnt patches remained, especially in their very centers.

I'd been using just a small amount of oil. Would more oil help? Sure enough, a full 5 tablespoons worked wonders. As the sprouts heated, their tightly packed leaves separated and expelled moisture (a requirement for them to get hot enough to brown). This created space for oil to be trapped in the nooks and crannies and to spread from edge to edge for even contact with the skillet. Some oil was also absorbed by pores in the browned leaves rather than just sitting on the surface. The upshot? Gorgeously, evenly browned sprouts that weren't greasy. Rather, they took on a satisfying richness that sprouts typically lack.

Another advantage of this approach was that it was easier and less messy to arrange the sprouts in a dry skillet; I just drizzled the oil on top and it seeped underneath. And if any of the sprouts near the edges of the pan didn't brown as quickly as those in the center, I simply used tongs to reconfigure them.

For even seasoning, we finish the dish by stirring salt combined with lemon juice into the sprouts.

Here was that unforgettable moment: These sprouts boasted brilliant green rounded sides and crisp-tender interiors contrasted by nutty-sweet, crusty façades. To balance the sweetness, I stirred in lemon juice and sprinkled Pecorino Romano on top. They were so good that I came up with a few flavor variations: one with cider vinegar and honey, another with maple syrup and toasted almonds, and a third with pomegranate and pistachios.

SKILLET-ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH LEMON AND PECORINO ROMANO

SERVES 4

Look for Brussels sprouts that are no more than 1½ inches in diameter. Parmesan cheese can be substituted for the Pecorino, if desired.

- 1 pound small (1 to 1½ inches in diameter) Brussels sprouts, trimmed and halved
- 5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup shredded Pecorino Romano cheese

1. Arrange Brussels sprouts in single layer, cut sides down, in 12-inch nonstick skillet. Drizzle oil evenly over sprouts. Cover skillet, place over medium-high heat, and cook until sprouts are bright green and cut sides have started to brown, about 5 minutes.

2. Uncover and continue to cook until cut sides of sprouts are deeply and evenly browned and paring knife slides in with little to no resistance, 2 to 3 minutes longer, adjusting heat and moving sprouts as necessary to prevent them from overbrowning. While sprouts cook, combine lemon juice and ¼ teaspoon salt in small bowl.

3. Off heat, add lemon juice mixture to skillet and stir to evenly coat sprouts. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer sprouts to large plate, sprinkle with Pecorino, and serve.

SKILLET-ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH CIDER VINEGAR AND HONEY

Substitute 2 teaspoons cider vinegar, 2 teaspoons honey, and ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes for lemon juice and omit pepper and Pecorino.

SKILLET-ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH MAPLE SYRUP AND SMOKED ALMONDS

Omit pepper. Substitute 1 tablespoon maple syrup and 1 tablespoon sherry vinegar for lemon juice and ¼ cup smoked almonds, chopped fine, for Pecorino.

SKILLET-ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH POMEGRANATE AND PISTACHIOS

Substitute 1 tablespoon pomegranate molasses and ½ teaspoon ground cumin for lemon juice. Omit pepper. Substitute ¼ cup shelled pistachios, toasted and chopped fine, and 2 tablespoons pomegranate seeds for Pecorino.

Avoiding the Bull's-Eye

When there isn't enough oil in the skillet for even contact, the sprout browns (or even burns) only in the center instead of browning evenly across the cut side. Adding more oil solves the problem.

NOT ENOUGH OIL

See: Sprouts Like No Others

A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Mashed Potato Makeover

For potatoes that are elegant yet easy, we revamp a fussy French classic.

BY LAN LAM

Pommes duchesse are thought to be named for a fictional French aristocrat with a penchant for potatoes: The recipe was dreamed up in the 19th century to encourage consumers to use more of the lowly spuds. The elegantly swirled individual mounds of eggy, buttery, yellow-tinged mashed potatoes with crisp crusts did the trick, and for years the dish remained popular, particularly on holiday menus.

So why aren't pommes duchesse still on every special-occasion table? Well, their retro-luxe look requires a pastry bag, plus a bit of practice. What's more, being rather petite, they cool rapidly. But I had an idea: Maybe baking the potatoes casserole-style would simplify things and help keep them hot.

Traditional recipes call for stirring melted butter, eggs, half-and-half, nutmeg, salt, and pepper into peeled, boiled, and riced potatoes. I settled on 3 egg yolks, 8 tablespoons of melted butter, and ⅔ cup of half-and-half for 3½ pounds of buttery Yukon Golds. Following the test kitchen's mashed-potato protocol, I poured the butter into the spuds first so its fat would coat the potatoes' starch granules and protect them from being overworked and turning gluey.

After smoothing the potatoes into a buttered dish, I poured on a coating of beaten egg white, which is full of proteins that browned nicely after 30 minutes in a 450-degree oven. But the beautiful crust tore from the potatoes' surface when I dug out a spoonful. Worse, the crust was plasticky instead of crisp and light. The culprit? The egg white proteins were linking to form a tough skin. I tried a coating of melted butter instead, which contains very little protein. This casserole's surface crisped but had to be baked for 50 minutes to brown, which seemed excessive.

Holiday bonus: These rich, buttery potatoes can be made in advance and crisped just before serving.

How about a mixture of butter and egg white? After 30 minutes, this batch emerged with a crisp, burnished crust. That's because the fat in the butter acted as a hydrophobic barrier between the egg white's protein molecules, reducing the formation of tough cross-links.

As a final touch, I scored the casserole with a knife, creating plenty of sharp edges to brown. These lush potatoes, with their crisp crust and majestic name, were fit for royalty.

DUCHESS POTATO CASSEROLE

SERVES 8 TO 10

Freshly ground nutmeg contributes heady flavor, so be sure to use it sparingly.

- 3½ pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and sliced ½ inch thick
- ⅔ cup half-and-half
- 1 large egg, separated, plus 2 large yolks
- Salt and pepper
- Pinch nutmeg
- 10 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Grease 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Place potatoes in large saucepan and add cold water to cover by 1 inch. Bring to simmer over medium-high heat. Adjust heat to maintain gentle simmer and cook until paring knife can be slipped into and out of centers of potatoes with no resistance, 18 to 22 minutes. Drain potatoes.

2. While potatoes cook, combine half-and-half, 3 egg yolks, 1¾ teaspoons salt, ½ teaspoon pepper, and nutmeg in bowl. Set aside.

3. Place now-empty saucepan over low heat; set ricer or food mill over saucepan. Working in batches, transfer potatoes to hopper and process. Using rubber spatula, stir in 8 tablespoons melted butter until incorporated. Stir in reserved half-and-half mixture until combined. Transfer potatoes to prepared dish and smooth into even layer.

4. Combine egg white, remaining 2 tablespoons melted butter, and pinch salt in bowl and beat with fork until combined. Pour egg white mixture over potatoes, tilting dish so mixture evenly covers surface. Using flat side of paring knife, make series of ½-inch-deep, ¼-inch-wide parallel grooves across surface of casserole. Make second series of parallel grooves across surface, at angle to first series, to create crosshatch pattern. Bake casserole until golden brown, 25 to 30 minutes, rotating dish halfway through baking. Let cool for 20 minutes. Serve.

TO MAKE AHEAD: At end of step 3, wrap dish in plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 24 hours. To serve, top and score casserole as directed in step 4 and bake in 375-degree oven for 45 to 50 minutes.

TECHNIQUE | ALTERNATIVE POTATO PATTERNS

Scoring it with a knife isn't the only way to help the casserole brown and crisp. Here are three other ideas.

WHORLED Drag tip of chopstick across surface to create swirled design.

ABSTRACT Push round cookie cutter into surface and gently wiggle to widen circle. Repeat with cutters of varying sizes.

SCALLOPED Beginning in corner, press large offset spatula, held at angle, into surface. Repeat, aligning indents to create scalloped pattern.

See How It's Done
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Better Hash Browns

How do you make a crispy, creamy shredded potato cake that isn't greasy and is a cinch to flip? It starts with a cake pan.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Hash browns make people crazy, at least according to esteemed 19th-century domestic science expert Mrs. Sarah Tyson Rorer. In an 1892 lecture, she recounted her research visits to psychiatric hospitals, where the patients appeared to be addicted to the fried potato patties they were served, leading her to conclude that the hash browns had caused the inmates' madness. There's an obvious flaw in Mrs. Rorer's logic, but she wasn't completely mistaken: Hash browns do have the power to unhinge.

There's not even consensus on what hash browns are. Some insist the potatoes are diced; others say shredded. Some claim the potatoes go into the skillet raw, while others say they're cooked first. Hash browns must be fried in a large disk. No, they're formed into individual patties. They never contain onions. They always contain onions.

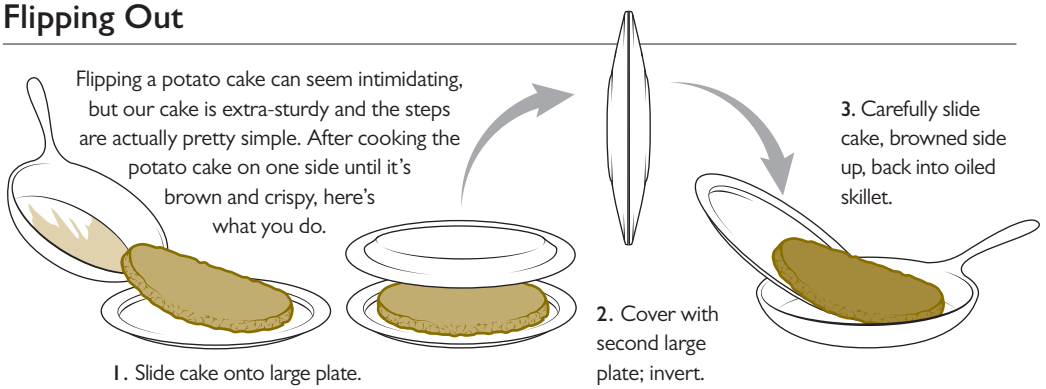
For the purposes of my recipe, hash browns are shredded potatoes fried in a round until crispy and brown on both sides and tender and moist (but not wet) on the inside. The cake is transferred to a plate, cut into wedges, and served. And as far as I'm concerned, they are simply seasoned with salt and pepper—no herbs, no onions.

Molding our hash browns in a cake pan not only makes them easy to handle but also allows you to make them ahead and cook them the next day.

But settling on these guidelines led to a series of questions. How do you flip a mass of shredded, partially cooked potatoes without it falling apart? How do you ensure that the inner potatoes are cooked through at the exact moment that the exterior has turned crispy and golden? And how do you make the hash browns crispy but not greasy?

Such questions might make you wonder if being a bit unbalanced is a prerequisite for making hash browns at home when, after all, they're available at every diner. But diner hash browns are often soggy and anemic. I prefer to elevate a simple homemade breakfast with ingredients that I always have on hand.

Flipping Out



The Big Squeeze

Many recipes call for squeezing the potatoes before frying to remove excess moisture and thus give the cake a crispier outside and fluffier interior. But is it worth it? I made two batches, one with 2½ pounds of shredded russet potatoes that I squeezed dry in a towel and the other with russets that went straight from food processor to skillet. I tossed each batch with a teaspoon of salt and then fried each in a nonstick skillet with ¼ cup of oil, just enough to coat the bottom. To flip the potatoes, I slid the cake onto a plate, inverted it onto another plate, and then slid it back into the skillet with a bit more oil. I did this a second time using Yukon Gold potatoes, a variety with less starch, to see if it made a difference.

All four batches had serious problems. The cakes fell apart when I tried to flip them, and the outsides scorched before the innermost potatoes were fully cooked. All of the samples were underseasoned, and they were also pretty greasy.

The good news was that the squeezing step seemed worthwhile. The potatoes (both varieties) that I had wrung dry produced hash browns with exteriors that were slightly more crispy and brown and interiors that were a bit fluffier than those of the cakes made with unsqueezed potatoes. That said, they were all still a bit gummy and wet. There was also an unforeseen problem: All four batches of potatoes had turned an unappetizing color after shredding; the Yukons were a pinkish brown and the russets a purplish gray.

Saltwater Cure

A coworker had come up against the discoloration problem once, and she found that briefly swishing the shredded potatoes in a saltwater solution kept them pristine. Our science editor explained that when

Keeping the Potatoes Pretty

When potato cells are broken and exposed to the air during grating, an enzymatic reaction leads to discoloration. We prevent this by dunking the shreds in salt water, which inhibits the enzyme. (See "Making Better Hash Browns" to learn about another role the salt water plays in our recipe.)

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

potato cells are broken and exposed to the air during grating, an enzyme called polyphenol oxidase mixes with other compounds in the potatoes, resulting in discoloration. Salt, especially salt in solution, inhibits the enzyme and thus reduces discoloration.

Putting the idea into action, I prepared two batches of salt water made with 4 teaspoons of salt and 2 cups of water. I grated a pound of Yukon Golds and a pound of russets (both were performing equally up to this point) and tossed each in the salt water before wringing them dry. The solution was remarkably effective. Both batches retained their color for more than an hour. Though it was a close call, I settled on Yukon Golds for their buttery, slightly sweet flavor.

The saltwater wash had a couple of additional advantages: The cakes were now seasoned throughout, and the shreds were a bit more cohesive. It turns out that salt decreases the temperature at which potato starch gelatinizes (swells with moisture and bursts). That gelatinized starch acts as a glue that helps the shreds adhere.

Things were looking up, but the cake could have been easier to flip, and the interior was still wet and unevenly cooked. I was not ready to fuss with fully cooking the potatoes by boiling or baking them before frying, but I wondered if a quick stint in the microwave might help.

Stick Together

I transferred a batch of shredded potatoes from their towel to a bowl; after 5 minutes in the microwave, the shreds were steamy and a bit sticky. After 10 minutes they were quite cohesive. I transferred them to the hot skillet and carefully pressed them into a cake.

This batch was easier to flip, and because a lot of moisture had cooked off in the microwave, it also browned more readily. The exterior was crispier, and the inner potatoes were evenly cooked and far less gummy. The only problem? The potatoes had cooked too much and had thus lost the distinctive shredded texture that characterizes hash browns. Inside, they were more like mashed potatoes.

For my next batch, I cooked half the potatoes for 5 minutes, added the remaining potatoes, and then cooked this mixture for another 5 minutes. When I pressed the potatoes into the skillet, the softer, more cooked portion bound the shreds together. This cake had a crispy brown crust and the texture I was after.

But shaping the potatoes into a cake in the hot skillet didn't feel terribly safe, and I wondered if I could make the cake even easier to flip. So instead of transferring the next batch of microwaved potatoes to the skillet, I placed them in a greased 8-inch cake pan. After they had cooled a bit, I pressed them firmly into a smooth disk. After about 20 minutes in the refrigerator the potatoes were completely cool, and I tipped the disk out onto a plate and slid it into the hot skillet.

I discovered that this technique had virtues beyond making the cake easier to handle. This smooth, compact potato cake didn't have as many nooks and crannies, so it wasn't as likely to stick to the skillet, which meant I could fry it in just 2 tablespoons of oil per side, provided I used a conventional stainless-steel skillet instead of a nonstick one (see "When Skipping Nonstick Means Less Oil"). Using less oil also meant that the cake was less greasy. Another bonus: make-ahead potential. I found I could leave the potato cake in its pan in the fridge overnight. In the morning all I had to do was flip it out of the pan and fry it.

Mrs. Rorer probably wouldn't endorse my hash browns recipe, and she might even worry for my mental health, but with a recipe this good, I'd be crazy not to make them.

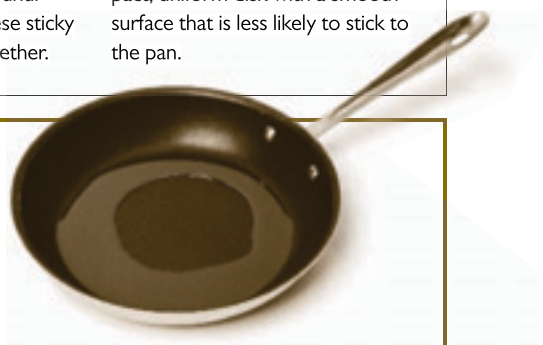
STEP BY STEP | MAKING BETTER HASH BROWNS

Here's how we make a potato cake that isn't greasy or soggy and holds together without added binders.

1. TOSS the potatoes in a saltwater bath, which allows the potato starch to gelatinize more readily when heated and results in a more cohesive cake.

2. SQUEEZE the potatoes to remove excess moisture and then microwave half of them until almost fully cooked. These sticky shreds bind the cake together.

3. PRESS the potatoes into a cake pan to mold them into a compact, uniform disk with a smooth surface that is less likely to stick to the pan.



When Skipping Nonstick Means Less Oil

Because oil beads up in most nonstick pans rather than coating them evenly, we had to use at least ¼ cup of oil per side to ensure an even coating and thus even browning. A conventional skillet required half as much oil to cover its surface and thus produced an evenly browned potato cake that wasn't greasy.

BETTER HASH BROWNS

SERVES 4 TO 6

We prefer using the shredding disk of a food processor to shred the potatoes, but you can use the large holes of a box grater if you prefer.

- **4 teaspoons salt**
- **2½ pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and shredded**
- **¼ teaspoon pepper**
- **¼ cup vegetable oil**

1. Spray 8-inch round cake pan with vegetable oil spray. Whisk 2 cups water and salt in large bowl until salt dissolves. Transfer potatoes to salt water and toss briefly to coat. Immediately drain in colander. Place 2½ cups potatoes in center of clean dish towel. Gather ends together and twist tightly to wring out excess moisture. Transfer dried potatoes to large bowl. Add pepper and toss to combine. Microwave until very hot and slightly softened, about 5 minutes. Place remaining potatoes in towel and wring out excess moisture. Add to microwaved potatoes and toss with two forks until mostly combined (potatoes will not combine completely). Continue to microwave until potatoes are hot and form cohesive mass when pressed with spatula, about 6 minutes, stirring halfway through microwaving.

2. Transfer potatoes to prepared pan and let cool until no longer steaming, about 5 minutes. Using your lightly greased hands, press potatoes firmly into pan to form smooth disk. Refrigerate until cool, at least 20 minutes or up to 24 hours (if refrigerating longer than 30 minutes, wrap pan with plastic wrap once potatoes are cool).

3. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in 10-inch skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Invert potato cake onto plate and carefully slide cake into pan. Cook, swirling pan occasionally to distribute oil evenly and prevent cake from sticking, until bottom of cake is brown and crispy, 6 to 8 minutes. (If not browning after 3 minutes, turn heat up slightly. If browning too quickly, reduce heat.) Slide cake onto large plate. Invert onto second large plate. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons oil until shimmering. Carefully slide cake, browned side up, back into skillet. Cook, swirling pan occasionally, until bottom of cake is brown and crispy, 5 to 6 minutes. Carefully slide cake onto plate and invert onto serving plate. Cut into wedges and serve.

See How It Works

A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/apr17

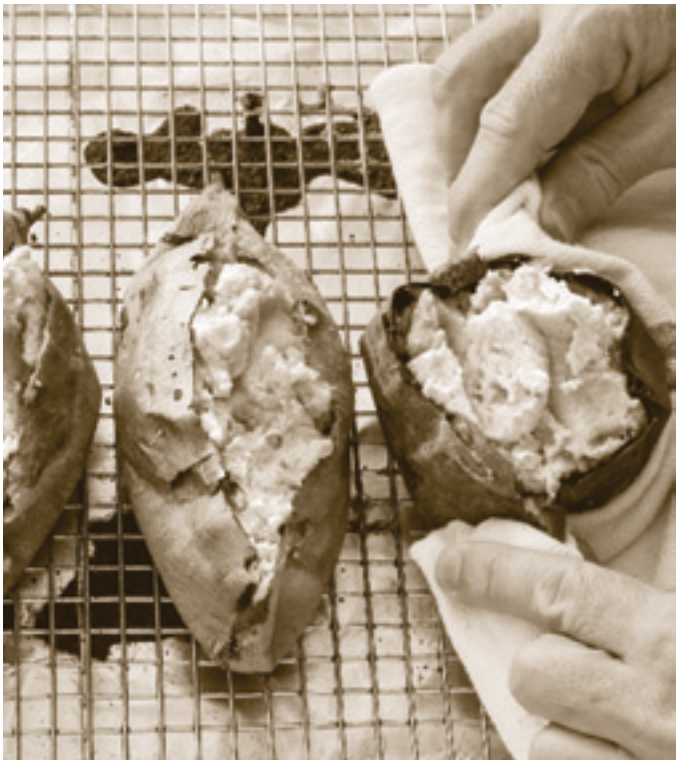
The Best Way to Bake a Sweet Potato

The goal—creamy flesh with deeply complex flavor—is entirely different from what you want in a baked russet. And, as we discovered, so is the cooking method.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Though they share a name, white potatoes and sweet potatoes couldn't be more different. The most familiar sweet potato varieties in American supermarkets, which have rusty orange or red-purple skin and deep orange flesh, come from a different botanical family than white potatoes such as russets and contain far less starch and more sugar. As a result, they cook very differently—a fact that is never more apparent than when preparing a simple baked potato.

Not long ago, we discovered that baking a russet potato in a 450-degree oven for about 45 minutes produced an ideally fluffy interior. But when I followed the same approach using a sweet potato, the interior was dense and watery. Meanwhile, I tried a handful of baked sweet potato recipes and came upon one from chef Michael Solomonov of Philadelphia's Zahav restaurant that revealed how truly extraordinary a baked sweet potato can be. After the spuds had spent about 3 hours in a 275-degree oven, their interiors were not just tender but downright plush, and their flavor was concentrated to the point of tasting caramelized, with hints of molasses. These were unlike any sweet potatoes I'd ever eaten.



Nope, there's no butter in there. Just plush, creamy sweet potato.

But tying up my oven for 3 hours when I wanted to bake sweet potatoes wasn't an option. My aim was to expedite the process (about an hour seemed reasonable) without compromising the exceptional flavor and texture the potatoes got from the longer method.

You Say Potato . . .

The difference in starch content between russet potatoes and orange-fleshed sweet potatoes (the kind that I'll refer to throughout this story) is actually twofold: First, russets contain roughly 21 percent starch versus 15 percent in sweet potatoes. That 6-percent gap is significant because starch absorbs free moisture in the potato as it cooks, so a russet ends up with a drier texture after baking. Second, the starch granules in russets are almost twice as big as those in sweet potatoes; when they swell with water, they eventually force the cells to separate into distinct clumps that result in a texture we perceive as dry. Sweet potatoes have fewer and finer starch granules, so they absorb less water and thus bake up soft and creamy instead of dry.

My question was, when does a baked sweet potato reach the stage when it turns soft and creamy throughout? Per the Zahav approach, I baked three 8-ounce potatoes in a 275-degree oven (I set them on a wire rack in an aluminum foil–lined rimmed baking sheet, knowing that they tend to ooze sugar during baking) and pulled one out every hour to check its temperature and consistency. As expected, the longer a potato cooked, the higher its temperature rose and the more uniformly soft it became. The potato pulled at 1 hour reached about 180 degrees, the 2-hour potato reached about 190 degrees, and the 3-hour potato reached about 200 degrees. Only the potato that cooked for the full 3 hours boasted the creamy, soft consistency and caramelized sweetness I wanted.

Could this mean that all I had to do was figure out the fastest way to get the potatoes to 200 degrees? No, because baking them in a 450-degree oven until they hit 200 degrees, which took about 45 minutes, would bring me back to my original problem: a barely tender, watery core.

Clearly, there was a benefit to baking the potatoes longer, so I put another set of potatoes in a 275-degree oven to take a closer look. This time I weighed the potatoes before and after baking to track moisture loss, which I assumed would correspond to flavor concentration, and inserted probes into each potato so that I could monitor its progress. As I recorded temperatures every 10 minutes, I noticed that the potatoes reached 200 degrees shortly after the 2-hour mark, meaning they spent almost the entire last hour at that temperature. They also lost an average of about 30 percent of their starting weight—about twice as much as the potatoes baked quickly in the 450-degree oven, I later discovered—and boasted a creamy consistency with complex flavor. But why?

Look: Perfect Sweets
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/oct17

Dud Spud

Producing baked sweet potatoes with creamy, deeply flavorful interiors isn't just about cooking the spuds to a particular temperature (200 degrees or so). At that point, they're barely tender, chunky, and still full of water that dilutes their flavor. You have to hold them at that temperature for an hour, which allows time for cell walls to break down, starches to gelatinize, and moisture to evaporate so that flavor concentrates.

CHUNKY AND BLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

RECIPE TESTING

THE FASTEST ROUTE TO CREAMY, COMPLEX SWEET POTATOES

To produce potatoes with silky, deeply sweet flesh, we needed to bake them for about an hour after they reached 200 degrees. The question was, how fast could we get this done?

BAKE AT 275°

3 HOURS
Way too slow

- **2 hours** to get to 200 degrees
- then 1 more hour of cooking

BAKE AT 425°

2 HOURS
Still too slow

- **1 hour** to get to 200 degrees
- then 1 more hour of cooking

MICROWAVE + BAKE AT 425°

10-MINUTE MICROWAVE + 1 HOUR
As quick as possible

- **10 minutes** to get to 200 degrees
- then 1 more hour of cooking

Our science editor explained that when a sweet potato approaches 200 degrees, the pectin that gives its cell walls structure begins to break down so that the flesh softens and allows free moisture to escape. At the same time, starch granules within the cell walls take up free water and gelatinize, which makes the potato appear smooth and creamy. But it turns out that at 200 degrees and up to about 212 degrees, the pectin breakdown becomes more rapid, leading to greater softening. It also leads to moisture loss, which causes the spud's sugars to both concentrate and caramelize, leading to more-complex flavor. And the longer the potatoes hover in that 200-plus zone, the creamier and more flavorful they become.

Nuke-clear Weapon

Now that I understood why the potatoes needed that extra hour at 200-plus degrees, I wondered if I could shortcut the front end of cooking by getting the potatoes to 200 degrees as quickly as possible and then let them linger in the oven. I baked the next batches in ovens set to 400, 425, and 450 degrees, weighing the potatoes before and after and probing them as I had before. Baked at 450, the potatoes reached 200 degrees in about 35 minutes. But after another hour in the oven, they had nearly burned on the outside. When baked any lower, they still took almost 2 hours to turn creamy and deeply flavorful—too long for a simple side.

There was one approach I hadn't yet tried: microwaving the potatoes until they hit 200 degrees and then finishing them in the oven. I was skeptical, since when we developed the baked russet recipe, we found that microwaving the spuds turned the flesh gummy. That's because their large and abundant starch granules are relatively fragile, and heating them rapidly in the microwave made them burst and release starch, which created a texture that we perceive as gluey.

But since sweet potatoes contain fewer and finer starch granules, I gave it a shot. I microwaved them until they had reached approximately 200 degrees at their cores, which took less than 10 minutes. Then I transferred them to a 425-degree oven—the hottest temperature I could use without burning them—to bake for a full hour. This hybrid cooking method did the trick: Their texture was creamy, almost fudgy; their flavor, complex and sweet; and their skin nicely tanned but not burnt. Best of all, barely more than an hour had passed, and they tasted just as good as the 3-hour version.

In fact, my sweet potatoes were so moist and creamy that they didn't need any butter or toppings, though I couldn't resist putting together a couple of simple ones to dress them up (yes, they're company-worthy). The first was an Indian-spiced yogurt; the second, a garlicky sour cream laced with chives.

INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT

Sweet Potatoes and White Potatoes Are Not the Same

Sweet potatoes look, taste, and cook differently from white potatoes because they're from different botanical families. Sweet potatoes are members of the *Convolvulaceae* family, which includes plants with fleshy storage roots, such as morning glories, while white-fleshed potatoes belong to the *Solanaceae* (or nightshade) family. Their nutrient makeups—including their starch and sugar contents—also differ.

RUSSET POTATO | SWEET POTATO

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

BEST BAKED SWEET POTATOES

SERVES 4

Any variety of orange- or red-skinned, orange-fleshed sweet potato can be used in this recipe, but we highly recommend using Garnet (also sold as Diane). Avoid varieties with tan or purple skin, which are starchier and less sweet than varieties with orange and red skins. When shopping, look for sweet potatoes that are uniform in size and weigh between 8 and 12 ounces (we prefer smaller potatoes). Top potatoes as desired or with one of our two sauces, Garam Masala Yogurt or Garlic and Chive Sour Cream (recipes follow).

- **4 small sweet potatoes (8 ounces each), unpeeled, each pricked lightly with fork in 3 places**
- **Salt and pepper**

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Place potatoes on large plate and microwave until potatoes yield to gentle pressure and centers register 200 degrees, 6 to 9 minutes, flipping potatoes every 3 minutes.

2. Set wire rack in aluminum foil–lined rimmed baking sheet and spray rack with vegetable oil spray. Using tongs, transfer potatoes to prepared rack and bake for 1 hour (exteriors of potatoes will be lightly browned and potatoes will feel very soft when squeezed).

3. Slit each potato lengthwise; using clean dish towel, hold ends and squeeze slightly to push flesh up and out. Transfer potatoes to serving platter. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

GARAM MASALA YOGURT

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

The warm flavors of garam masala, an Indian spice blend, complement the potatoes' sweetness.

- **½ cup plain yogurt**
- **2 teaspoons lemon juice**
- **½ teaspoon garam masala**
- **⅛ teaspoon salt**

Combine all ingredients in bowl.

GARLIC AND CHIVE SOUR CREAM

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

This garlicky sauce adds tang to balance the potatoes' caramel-y sweetness.

- **½ cup sour cream**
- **1 tablespoon minced fresh chives**
- **1 garlic clove, minced**
- **⅛ teaspoon salt**

Combine all ingredients in bowl.

Great Guacamole

A perfectly seasoned dip isn't just stirred together. You have to cut and paste.

BY LAN LAM

There's no consensus on what makes a good guacamole. Case in point: As soon as I set out different versions of the dip, the arguing began. Some of my colleagues pounced on a minimalist mash of avocados, salt, and onion as their favorite. Others cast their votes for batches featuring additional ingredients such as chiles, fresh lime juice, garlic, diced tomato, fresh cilantro, and spices. Further debate ensued about what the texture should be: thick and chunky, creamy and smooth, or something in between.

That said, the favorite recipes did have one thing in common: In each, the aromatics were thoroughly incorporated into the mashed avocado so that every bite featured a cohesive balance of flavor—not just a bland, unseasoned bite of avocado here and a sharp pop of onion, garlic, and/or chile there.

Smooth Operator

To achieve this cohesive flavor, the traditional recipes I followed called for grinding the aromatics in a *molcajete*, a three-legged mortar made from volcanic rock, which you may be familiar with if you've ever seen guacamole prepared tableside in a restaurant. Its coarse surface is ideal for pulverizing the aromatic ingredients so that they thoroughly break down and release their flavors. Once that's done, the avocado and any other ingredients are mixed in the molcajete's wide, shallow bowl until the paste is fully incorporated and the chunks are broken down to the desired consistency.

Before I decided what, beyond the basics, would go into my dip, I wanted to figure out the best way to achieve a paste without a molcajete, since most home cooks don't own one. Many recipes default to a food processor, but after a couple of tests I decided this was unreliable; the blades had a hard time grabbing and breaking down such a small quantity of aromatics (just a few tablespoons total), and it was impossible to blend in the avocado without pureeing it completely. I also tried to do all the preparation by hand, finely mincing some onion (a placeholder for now) and a serrano chile, tossing them in a bowl with salt, and then mashing three avocados (the nutty, buttery Hass variety was a must) into the aromatics with a fork. But the seasoning wasn't as evenly dispersed as in the molcajete-made batch, and my arm was worn out.

Using a whisk to stir ½-inch pieces of avocado into the aromatic paste produces guacamole that's cohesive yet still chunky.

Worth Its Salt

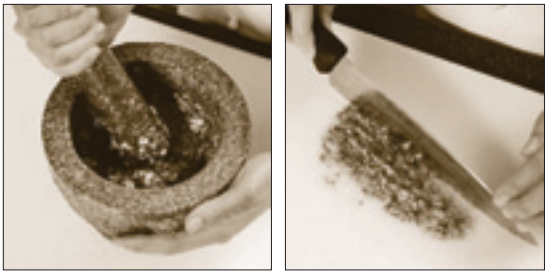
What I needed was something abrasive like the molcajete to quickly and thoroughly break down the aromatics. Fortunately I had something right in the bowl: salt. In the test kitchen, we often use salt to help break down garlic into a creamy paste, since it grinds the particles and draws moisture out of the cells so that they quickly collapse and soften. Borrowing this idea, I piled together a finely chopped onion (I'd test it against garlic later), a minced chile, and ½ teaspoon of kosher salt. As I ran my knife through the pile, I could see that the salt was helping draw out the juices from the onion and chile, and after less than a minute of chopping, I had the homogeneous, fragrant paste I was looking for. I transferred it to a bowl and looked around the kitchen for a better tool with which to incorporate the avocado.

Since my colleagues couldn't agree on the ideal texture, I stuck with my own preference: a creamy base with chunks scattered throughout. I needed a tool that would cut through the avocado but not break it down too much. That ruled out rubber spatulas, wooden spoons, and potato mashers (all too flat), but I paused when I saw a whisk. The top of the whisk, where the wires meet, can mash the avocado efficiently; the gaps between the wires along the body allow most of the avocado chunks to remain whole during mixing; and its rounded shape conforms to the bowl, allowing it to easily incorporate the aromatics. Just a couple of quick turns of the whisk yielded a guacamole that had the right ratio of chunks to mash.

Watch Lan Mash It
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/june17

Make Paste

Traditionally, guacamole is made by grinding aromatics in a *molcajete*, a volcanic rock mortar with a coarse surface that helps break down the aromatics and draw out their juices so they are distributed evenly throughout the dip. We got similar results in a regular mortar and pestle with kosher salt, whose coarseness helped abrade the vegetables. We also found that we could create a paste from the aromatics by simply chopping them with kosher salt.



WITH A GRAIN OF SALT
Kosher salt helps turn aromatics into paste, whether they're pounded in a mortar and pestle or chopped on a cutting board.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Now for the hard part: getting consensus on the added flavors. Everyone agreed that lime juice was a must to balance the rich avocado, so I stirred in a couple of tablespoons. It wasn't quite enough, but adding more juice would make the dip too loose and acidic. Instead, I added lime zest, unlocking its flavor by working it into the onion-chile paste.

As for the other potential additions, everyone preferred onion to the sharper, hotter flavor of raw garlic. Cumin and black pepper didn't make the cut, but cilantro and tomato did; I seeded the tomato to prevent the jelly from diluting the finished guacamole. I also upped the salt to a full teaspoon, since we've found that rich ingredients often need more aggressive seasoning; doing so also helped the paste ingredients break down more quickly.

The result was a perfect combination of buttery avocado chunks and smooth, well-seasoned mash. My tasters asked me to whip up a few more batches—just so that we could be sure it was perfect.

CLASSIC GUACAMOLE

MAKES 2 CUPS

For a spicier version, mince and add the serrano ribs and seeds to the onion mixture. A mortar and pestle can be used to process the onion mixture. Be sure to use Hass avocados here; Florida, or "skinny," avocados are too watery for dips.

- **2 tablespoons finely chopped onion**
- **1 serrano chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced**
- **Kosher salt**
- **¼ teaspoon grated lime zest plus 1½–2 tablespoons juice**
- **3 ripe avocados, halved, pitted, and cut into ½-inch pieces**
- **1 plum tomato, cored, seeded, and cut into ⅛-inch dice**
- **2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro**

Place onion, serrano, 1 teaspoon salt, and lime zest on cutting board and chop until very finely minced. Transfer onion mixture to medium bowl and stir in 1½ tablespoons lime juice. Add avocados and, using sturdy whisk, mash and stir mixture until well combined with some ¼- to ½-inch chunks of avocado remaining. Stir in tomato and cilantro. Season with salt and up to additional 1½ teaspoons lime juice to taste. Serve.

Avocado Primer

SHOPPING

Buy Hass for most recipes: Small, rough-skinned Hass avocados account for 95 percent of the American market. Their rich flavor and buttery texture are essential for guacamole.

HASS
Rich and buttery

"SKINNY"
Sweet and watery

"Skinny" avocados are fine for salads: Large, bright green Florida avocados are sometimes referred to as "skinny" avocados because their fat by weight can be half that of Hass. Their milder, sweeter flavor is fine in salads, but they're too watery for dips and sauces.

Don't judge a Hass (only) by its color: While Hass avocados start out green and get progressively more purple-black as they ripen, color alone isn't an accurate indicator of ripeness.

Use the squeeze test: The most accurate test for ripeness is to place the fruit in the palm of your hand and gently squeeze: It should yield slightly to the pressure.

Double-check with the stem test: Flick off the small stem at the narrow end of the fruit. An easy-to-remove stem with green underneath indicates ripe fruit; if the stem is hard to flick off, the avocado needs to ripen further.

When the fruit is past its prime: Avocados that feel soft like a tomato when gently squeezed and/or don't fill out their skin are overripe; these specimens will also show brown underneath the stem when you flick it off. Another sign: skin with dents or mold.

RIPENING AND STORAGE

Faster (but less even) ripening: Storing avocados in a paper bag at room temperature will speed up ripening by trapping ethylene, the gas that triggers ripening in many fruits and vegetables. But it may also result in uneven ripening, as the ethylene produced by the avocado won't distribute uniformly throughout the flesh. We didn't find that placing avocados in a paper bag with other fruits (we tried Golden Delicious apples, which produce a large amount of ethylene) made much difference: These avocados didn't ripen noticeably faster than those enclosed in a bag on their own.

Slower (but more even) ripening: If you have time, allow your avocados to ripen in the refrigerator. Though it will take longer, the chilling slows down the production of ethylene gas and, therefore, the ripening process, giving the gas time to distribute evenly throughout the fruit. Store avocados near the front of the refrigerator, on the middle to bottom shelves, where the temperature is more moderate.

Always refrigerate ripe avocados: Unless you plan to eat them immediately, keep ripe avocados refrigerated, which can extend their shelf life by days.

PREVENTING BROWNING IN CUT AVOCADOS

Avocado flesh turns brown when cut. Oiling the flesh and placing the avocado cut side down on a plate or wrapping it tightly in plastic wrap (refrigerated in either case) can lessen browning. But these two methods work best.

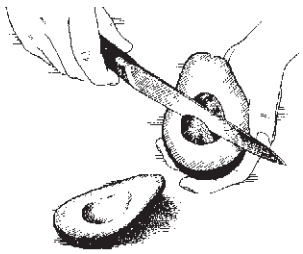
Store in lemon water: We found that storing the avocado cut side down in water that had been acidified with a few squeezes of lemon juice kept it green for two days (although it also turned the flesh a little tart and soft).

Vacuum-seal: Vacuum sealing preserved the color for a week (it works for guacamole, too).

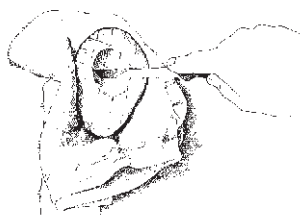
TWO GOOD WAYS
Store cut avocado in lemon water or vacuum-seal it.

PIT, CROSSHATCH, SCOOP

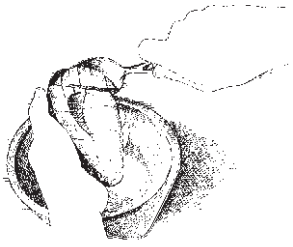
Because the buttery flesh of ripe avocados bruises easily, cutting neat, even pieces requires delicate handling.



1. Strike pit with chef's knife. Twist blade to remove pit. Use wooden spoon to knock pit off blade.



2. Secure avocado half with dish towel and use paring knife to make ½-inch crosshatch slices into flesh without cutting into skin.



3. Insert spoon between skin and flesh to separate them. Gently scoop out avocado cubes.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

Chinese Pork Dumplings

A plateful of juicy dumplings can lift you from the pits of despair. We wanted a recipe that didn't put you there in the first place.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Chinese dumplings are like carefully wrapped gifts: juicy, deeply seasoned pork encased in soft, slightly stretchy dough. Boiled, they are delicately chewy; pan-fried, they are crisp on one side. But whether found in a restaurant or in a supermarket, they're rarely bad. Unfortunately, they're rarely great. I've always wanted to make my own so I could stock my freezer with high-quality dumplings.

As I cooked and ate my way through several versions, I realized that though there are few truly bad dumplings, there are bad dumpling recipes. Some made too much filling for the amount of dough or vice versa. Some doughs were dry, so the dumplings wouldn't seal, while others were wet and stuck to my fingers. I wanted just enough supple-but-not-sticky dough; a juicy, cohesive filling; and a shaping technique that made me feel capable—not clumsy.

To fit 20 dumplings in the skillet, fan 16 dumplings in a spiral pattern around the skillet's edge and place the other four in the center.

Premade dumpling wrappers are thin and lack the stretch and chew of the homemade kind. Happily, you need only two ingredients to make your own: all-purpose flour and boiling water. Boiling water hydrates the starch in flour faster than cold water does, making a dough that is moist but not sticky, and it makes the gluten (the network of proteins that gives the dough structure) looser and less prone to snapping back. I buzzed 1 cup of boiling water and 12½ ounces of all-purpose flour (measuring the flour by weight guarantees the proper ratio) in a food processor, and the dough came together in less than a minute. Then I kneaded it briefly until it was smooth, wrapped it in plastic wrap, and set it aside to rest.

For the filling, I started with 12 ounces of ground pork, saving myself the traditional step of finely chopping a fatty cut such as pork shoulder. I seasoned it with soy sauce, grated ginger, scallions, sesame oil, hoisin sauce, white pepper, and sherry, plus a tablespoon of vegetable oil to compensate for the ground pork's relative leanness. For the vegetable component, I chopped cabbage in the food processor. I then salted it to draw off excess moisture and squeezed it dry before gently mixing it with the seasoned meat. Next I wrapped and pan-fried a test batch to check the flavor and texture of the filling (more on the wrapping later). The dumplings tasted good, but instead of being cohesive, the filling was crumbly.

I had mixed the filling gently to avoid releasing excess myosin, the sticky meat protein responsible for sausage's springy texture. But I noticed that some dumpling recipes call for vigorously mixing the filling, so I wondered if a little myosin development might actually help. This time I pulsed the pork and seasonings in the food processor until the mixture was slightly sticky, added the cabbage and scallions, buzzed it a bit more, and cooked another batch. Now the filling was on point: juicy and well seasoned, with the perfect balance of tenderness and cohesion.

I knew I'd have to carefully portion the dough and the filling to have the perfect amount of each for 40 dumplings, but trying to eyeball either was maddening. I divided the dough into quarters and divided each quarter into tenths. I then did the same with the filling (see "Perfect Portions of Filling"). Using my hand and a rolling pin, I flattened one dough piece into a round, placed about 1 tablespoon of filling in its center, and contemplated how best to close it. The simplest way would be to fold the dough over the filling to form a half-circle. But the classic approach is to pleat the wrapper so that the dumpling curves and is stable enough to stand up and brown on its flat side. To do it, you gather one side of the wrapper into a series of pleats and seal them to the other side, which remains flat. The motion becomes muscle memory if you do it often enough, but otherwise it's tricky to execute. I came up with a simpler two-pleat method that achieved the appearance and functionality of a crescent (see "Shaping the Dumplings").

I brushed vegetable oil over the surface of a cold nonstick skillet (in a hot pan, oil would pool and dumplings with no oil under them wouldn't crisp) and snugly arranged 20 dumplings before turning on the heat. When the bottoms started to brown, I added water and a lid, lowered the heat, and let the dumplings steam. Minutes later, I removed the lid and cranked the heat so that the remaining water would evaporate and the bottoms would crisp. As the finished dumplings cooled, I tipped them onto their sides to preserve their crispy bases.

The results were ideal—a flavorful, juicy, cohesive filling tucked inside a soft, slightly chewy wrapper—and the method was user-friendly and fun. No more takeout for me; from now on, I'll be making dumplings and stockpiling them in my freezer.

Watch Andrea Shape Them
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

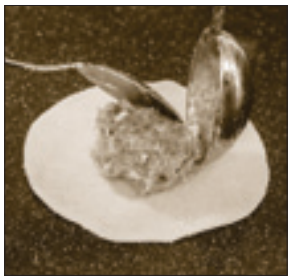
Cooking Fresh and Frozen

The amounts of oil and water and the size of the skillet will change depending on the number of dumplings and whether they are fresh or frozen.

20 fresh	12"	1 tablespoon	½ cup
20 frozen	12"	1 tablespoon	⅔ cup
10 fresh	10"	2 teaspoons	⅓ cup
10 frozen	10"	2 teaspoons	½ cup

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

STEP BY STEP | SHAPING THE DUMPLINGS



1. Place scant 1 tablespoon filling in center of wrapper.

2. Seal top and bottom edges to form 1½-inch-wide seam.

3. Bring far left corner to center of seam and pinch together.

4. Pinch rest of left side to seal. Repeat process on right side.

5. Gently press dumpling into crescent shape.

CHINESE PORK DUMPLINGS

MAKES 40 DUMPLINGS

For dough that has the right moisture level, we strongly recommend weighing the flour. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a full kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount. To ensure that the dumplings seal completely, use minimal flour when kneading, rolling, and shaping so that the dough remains slightly tacky. Keep all the dough covered with a damp towel except when rolling and shaping. There is no need to cover the shaped dumplings. A shorter, smaller-diameter rolling pin works well here, but a conventional pin will also work.

Dough

- 2½ cups (12½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 cup boiling water

Filling

- 5 cups 1-inch napa cabbage pieces
- Salt
- 12 ounces ground pork
- 1½ tablespoons soy sauce, plus extra for dipping
- 1½ tablespoons toasted sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, plus 2 tablespoons for pan-frying (optional)
- 1 tablespoon Chinese rice wine or dry sherry
- 1 tablespoon hoisin sauce
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- ¼ teaspoon ground white pepper
- 4 scallions, chopped fine

- Black or rice vinegar
- Chili oil

1. FOR THE DOUGH: Place flour in food processor. With processor running, add boiling water. Continue to process until dough forms ball and clears sides of bowl, 30 to 45 seconds longer. Transfer dough to counter and knead until smooth, 2 to 3 minutes. Wrap dough in plastic wrap and let rest for 30 minutes.

2. FOR THE FILLING: While dough rests, scrape any excess dough from now-empty processor bowl and blade. Pulse cabbage in processor until finely chopped, 8 to 10 pulses. Transfer cabbage to medium bowl and stir in ½ teaspoon salt; let sit for 10 minutes. Using your hands, squeeze excess moisture from cabbage. Transfer cabbage to small bowl and set aside.

3. Pulse pork, soy sauce, sesame oil, 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, rice wine, hoisin, ginger, pepper, and ½ teaspoon salt in now-empty food processor until blended and slightly sticky, about 10 pulses. Scatter cabbage over pork mixture. Add scallions and pulse until vegetables are evenly distributed, about 8 pulses. Transfer pork mixture to small bowl and, using rubber spatula, smooth surface. Cover with plastic and refrigerate.

4. Line 2 rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Dust lightly with flour and set aside. Unwrap dough and transfer to counter. Roll dough into 12-inch cylinder and cut cylinder into 4 equal pieces. Set 3 pieces aside and cover with plastic. Roll remaining piece into 8-inch cylinder. Cut cylinder in half and cut each half into 5 equal pieces. Place dough pieces on 1 cut side on lightly floured counter and lightly dust with flour. Using palm of your hand, press each dough piece into 2-inch disk. Cover disks with damp towel.

5. Roll 1 disk into 3½-inch round (wrappers needn't be perfectly round) and re-cover disk with damp towel. Repeat with remaining disks. (Do not overlap disks.)

6. Using rubber spatula, mark filling with cross to divide into 4 equal portions. Transfer 1 portion to small bowl and refrigerate remaining filling. Working with 1 wrapper at a time (keep remaining wrappers covered), place scant 1 tablespoon filling in center of wrapper. Brush away any flour clinging to surface of wrapper. Lift side of wrapper closest to you and side farthest away and pinch together to form 1½-inch-wide seam in center of dumpling. (When viewed from above, dumpling will have rectangular shape with rounded open ends.) Lift left corner farthest away from you and bring to center of seam. Pinch to seal. Pinch together remaining dough on left side to seal. Repeat pinching on right side. Gently press dumpling into crescent shape and transfer to prepared sheet. Repeat with remaining wrappers and filling in bowl. Repeat dumpling-making process with remaining 3 pieces dough and remaining 3 portions filling.

7A. TO PAN-FRY: Brush 12-inch nonstick skillet with 1 tablespoon vegetable oil. Evenly space 16 dumplings, flat sides down, around edge of skillet and place four in center. Cook over medium heat until bottoms begin to turn spotty brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Off heat, carefully add ½ cup water (water will sputter). Return skillet to heat and bring water to boil. Cover and reduce heat to medium-low. Cook for 6 minutes. Uncover, increase heat to medium-high, and cook until water has evaporated and bottoms of dumplings are crispy and browned, 1 to 3 minutes. Transfer dumplings to platter, crispy sides up. (To cook second batch of dumplings, let skillet cool for 10 minutes. Rinse skillet under cool water and wipe dry with paper towels. Repeat cooking process with 1 tablespoon vegetable oil and remaining dumplings.)

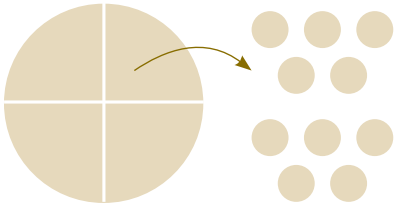
7B. TO BOIL: Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large Dutch oven over high heat. Add 20 dumplings, a few at a time, stirring gently to prevent them from sticking. Return to simmer, adjusting heat as necessary to maintain simmer. Cook dumplings for 7 minutes. Drain well.

8. Serve dumplings hot, passing vinegar, chili oil, and extra soy sauce separately for dipping.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Freeze uncooked dumplings on rimmed baking sheet until solid. Transfer to zipper-lock bag and freeze for up to 1 month. To pan-fry, increase water to ⅔ cup and covered cooking time to 8 minutes. To boil, increase cooking time to 8 minutes.

Perfect Portions of Filling

Rather than try to visualize mounds of filling as 40 equal portions, we devised this technique.



Mark the filling with a cross to divide it into four portions.

Working with one portion at a time, divide each into tenths (approximately 1 scant tablespoon each).

Greek Chicken and Rice Soup

Egg and lemon give *avgolemono* a velvety consistency and a bright taste. We perfected these qualities while ensuring that every shred of chicken was tender and juicy.

BY LAN LAM

When beaten eggs and fresh lemon juice are whisked together with a little hot chicken broth, the duo is transformed into the classic Greek sauce known as *avgolemono* (egg-lemon). Increase the amount of broth (homemade if you've got it) and throw in a handful of rice, and avgolemono becomes a creamy, comforting first-course soup punctuated with lemony tang. The chicken from which the broth is made, along with an assortment of vegetables, typically follows as the main course.

As lovely as the classic version of avgolemono is, it's a more practical variation that interests me: Simply shredding the chicken and adding it to the soup, along with increasing the amount of rice, turns this starter into a light yet satisfying meal. I wanted a savory, citrusy soup, velvety with egg and studded with tender bites of chicken—all in a reasonable amount of time.

We puree some of the rice to give our soup its full, lush body (egg yolks help, too). And the chicken stays moist because it's off the heat.

Chicken Soup with Rice

For the chicken, I chose boneless, skinless breasts. Their milder flavor would fit in better with the fresh, light nature of this soup than thighs would. As a bonus, the breasts would also cook faster than thighs.

Before poaching and shredding, I halved the chicken breasts lengthwise. The benefits of this small move were threefold: First, the extra surface area created would help salt penetrate more uniformly. Second, the smaller pieces of chicken would cook more quickly. Third, halving the muscle fibers ensured that the shreds of chicken would be short enough to fit neatly on a spoon. (I let the salted meat sit while I got the soup going, giving the salt time to both season the chicken and change its protein structure, which would help it stay juicy when cooked.)

My plan was to cook the chicken and rice in tandem to save time, but I knew that just dropping the chicken into simmering broth wouldn't work. That's because water simmers at approximately 190 degrees, and when a chicken breast hits this hot liquid, the exterior quickly overshoots the target doneness temperature of 160 degrees. The result? Dry, chalky meat.

The test kitchen's solution to this problem is to submerge the chicken in subsimmering water and then shut off the heat. The water immediately drops in temperature when the chicken is added; the chicken then cooks very gently with no risk of overshooting the 160-degree mark.

I brought 8 cups of broth and 1 cup of rice to a boil and then let the pot simmer for just 5 minutes. In went the prepared breasts, at which point I put a lid on and shut off the heat. After 15 minutes, the chicken was almost—but not quite—cooked through and the rice was al dente. I removed the breasts from the broth, shredded them, and returned the pieces to the pot, where they quickly finished cooking. Just as I expected, the shreds remained supermoist and tender.

In the Thick of It

Having achieved perfectly poached chicken, I turned to avgolemono's namesake egg-lemon mixture, which thickens the soup. It's the egg proteins that do the work: They uncoil, entangle, and form an open mesh that prevents water molecules from moving freely, thus increasing viscosity. Before being whisked into the soup, the egg mixture is typically tempered, meaning it is combined with a portion of the hot broth to prevent the eggs from curdling when they make contact with the rest of the liquid in the pot. Some Greek cooks so fear a curdled soup that they are known to chant the "avgolemono prayer"—"please don't curdle, please don't curdle"—or make a kissing sound while adding the eggs to magically ensure smooth results. I saw no need for such extreme measures, but I was curious and felt that some testing was in order. We found that tempering worked not because it raised the temperature of the eggs but rather because it diluted the egg proteins.

The tempering step safeguarded against curdling, but I had another issue to deal with. As the proteins in egg whites unwind, they unleash hydrogen sulfide, a compound that can give off a lightly sulfurous aroma. To limit this smell while getting the same thickening power, I mixed 6 tablespoons of lemon juice with two eggs and two yolks (diluted with a little broth) instead of three eggs. This mixture

Watch Lan Make the Soup
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/apr17

A Neat Fit—and Well Seasoned, Too

We start by cutting each chicken breast in half lengthwise and salting it for 30 minutes. The increased surface area of the pieces allows the salt to penetrate the meat uniformly. The halved pieces cook more quickly; plus, they make it easier to shred the chicken after cooking to create bite-size pieces that fit neatly on a spoon.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Maximizing the Lemon Flavor in Avgolemono

A trio of ingredients brings multifaceted lemon flavor to the broth: **Lemon zest** provides fruitiness, **coriander seeds** add herbal/citrus notes, and **lemon juice** offers tartness.

didn't provide quite as much body as I'd hoped, but I didn't want to add more eggs lest the soup become too rich. Luckily, there was another thickener present: amylose, a starch molecule in rice. Similar to egg proteins, it increases viscosity by entangling and forming a matrix that slows the movement of water. To put this starch to work, I simply needed to release it from the rice grains. And I knew just the way to do it: I'd puree some of the rice.

I went back to the stove and prepared another batch of soup, this time using 1 cup of cooked rice from the soup to dilute the eggs. I put the rice into the blender jar along with the eggs, yolks, and lemon juice. After a minute of processing, I had a starchy egg-lemon-rice puree to stir into the broth. And there it was, a soup with exactly the luxurious creamy consistency I wanted.

But there's more. Reheating avgolemono is typically a no-no because the eggs will curdle when they are cooked a second time. In this version, though, because the rice has enough starchy bulk even after being pureed to physically interrupt the egg proteins from interacting with each other, the proteins had a hard time forming curds, even when the soup was reheated—a nice bonus.

Flavor Bundle

The sumptuous consistency of the soup was right where I wanted it, but its flavor needed attention. Although it was tart from the lemon juice, it needed some tweaking if it was to also boast more complexity. I chose garlic, black peppercorns, and lemony coriander seeds to add depth, along with dill for an herbal note. I also used a vegetable peeler to strip the zest from a couple of lemons. The intensely flavored oils in the zest would boost the fruity, citrusy notes without making the soup overly sour.

The complexity imparted by the herb bundle, in combination with the creamy soup and tender chicken, made this avgolemono outshine all the rest.

GREEK CHICKEN AND RICE SOUP WITH EGG AND LEMON (AVGOLEMONO)

SERVES 4 TO 6

If you have homemade chicken broth such as our Classic Chicken Broth, we recommend using it in this recipe, as it gives the soup the best flavor and body. Our preferred commercial chicken broth is Swanson Chicken Stock. Use a vegetable peeler to remove strips of zest from the lemons.

- 1½ pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 12 (3-inch) strips lemon zest plus 6 tablespoons juice, plus extra juice for seasoning (3 lemons)
- 2 sprigs fresh dill, plus 2 teaspoons chopped
- 2 teaspoons coriander seeds
- 1 teaspoon black peppercorns
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and smashed
- 8 cups chicken broth
- 1 cup long-grain rice
- 2 large eggs plus 2 large yolks

1. Cut each chicken breast in half lengthwise. Toss with 1¾ teaspoons salt and let stand at room temperature for at least 15 minutes or up to 30 minutes. Cut 8-inch square of triple-thickness cheesecloth. Place lemon zest, dill sprigs, coriander seeds, peppercorns, and garlic in center of cheesecloth and tie into bundle with kitchen twine.

2. Bring broth, rice, and spice bundle to boil in large saucepan over high heat. Reduce heat to low, cover, and cook for 5 minutes. Turn off heat, add chicken, cover, and let stand for 15 minutes.

3. Transfer chicken to large plate and discard spice bundle. Using two forks, shred chicken into bite-size pieces. Using ladle, transfer 1 cup cooked rice to blender (leave any liquid in pot). Add lemon juice and eggs and yolks to blender and process until smooth, about 1 minute.

4. Return chicken and any accumulated juices to pot. Return soup to simmer over high heat. Remove pot from heat and stir in egg mixture until fully incorporated. Stir in chopped dill and season with salt, pepper, and extra lemon juice to taste. Serve.

Go Ahead—Reheat It

Most recipes for *avgolemono* warn against reheating the soup lest the eggs curdle. But our avgolemono won't produce curdled threads of egg if you reheat it gently. That's because the starchy rice that's blended with the eggs physically interrupts the proteins, making it much harder for them to curdle.

The soup will thicken substantially during refrigeration. Thin it out with a little broth and reheat it over medium-low heat, stirring frequently. Then reseason it with lemon juice, salt, and pepper.

Hands-Off Chicken Broth

This classic approach to making chicken broth calls for gently simmering a mix of chicken backs and wings in water for several hours but requires almost no hands-on work. The long, slow simmer helps the bones and meat release both deep flavor and gelatin. –Keith Dresser

CLASSIC CHICKEN BROTH

MAKES 8 CUPS

If you have a large pot (at least 12 quarts), you can easily double this recipe to make 1 gallon.

- 4 pounds chicken backs and wings
- 3½ quarts water
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 teaspoons salt

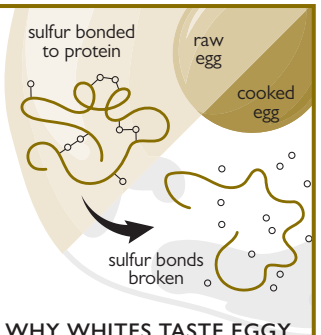
1. Heat chicken and water in large stockpot or Dutch oven over medium-high heat until boiling, skimming off any scum that comes to surface. Reduce heat to low and simmer gently for 3 hours.

2. Add onion, bay leaves, and salt and continue to simmer for 2 hours longer.

3. Strain broth through fine-mesh strainer into large pot or container, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible. Let broth settle for about 5 minutes, then skim off fat.

SCIENCE To Reduce Egginess, Ditch the White

To create just the right rich, velvety texture in our soup, we use two eggs plus two yolks. But there's another reason to ditch some of the whites: They're largely responsible for the "eggy" flavor of eggs. Though the whites are typically regarded as bland, they contain sulfur compounds that release hydrogen sulfide when the eggs are exposed to heat, producing that characteristic eggy taste. We tested this premise in our recipe for French Toast, dipping bread into milk mixed with whole eggs and yolks alone. The toast dipped into the yolks-only soaking liquid tasted significantly less eggy and more custard-like. Similarly, *avgolemono* made with three whole eggs had an overt egginess that was absent when we switched to two whole eggs and two yolks.



WHY WHITES TASTE EGGY

As egg whites cook, their sulfur bonds break, releasing eggy flavor.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE (TOP), JAY LAYMAN (BOTTOM)

Postholiday Turkey Soup

No one wants to toil over turkey stock on the day after Thanksgiving. But what if you had a recipe that practically made itself?

BY STEVE DUNN

I've been the primary cook for my family's Thanksgiving feast for about 20 years now. I gladly inherited this honor from my mom, but there's one task I never took off her plate: making a batch of stock from the leftover turkey carcass. I've always felt guilty about saddling her with the job, so this year I vowed to keep it for myself. Anticipating a bit of postholiday fatigue, I intended to keep this recipe as simple as possible.

With homemade turkey stock on hand, a full-flavored soup comes together in just a few simple steps.

Skin and Bones

As it happened, a colleague was roasting lots of whole turkeys, producing a ready supply of carcasses that I could use for testing purposes. I gathered two that had the leg quarter and breast meat removed but still included meaty bits, the wings, and a fair amount of skin. I prepared two bone-and-water stocks, the first using a carcass straight from the roasted turkey and a second one for which I roasted the carcass for 45 minutes, thinking that this might produce a richer-tasting stock.

The first stock simmered into a lovely pale gold hue, whereas the roasted-carcass stock turned a deep mahogany brown. I assumed that the darker sample would be more popular, so I was pleasantly surprised when tasters gravitated toward the easier-to-make golden stock. It tasted clearly and deeply of turkey, whereas the stock made with twice-cooked bones tasted more generically of roasted meat.

I experimented with aromatics next. To one stockpot containing 4 quarts of water and a whole carcass, I added raw *mirepoix* (chopped carrots, onion, and celery); to a second, the same mix of vegetables that I had first caramelized to a deep golden brown in the oven. Finally, I made a third stock with only water and a carcass. To my delight, we preferred the near-effortless bone-only stock to those made with vegetables. The raw mirepoix stock was too vegetal and the roasted one too sweet, but the bone-only stock boasted nothing but pristine, though slightly weak, poultry flavor.

Happy with the way things were progressing, I made one more bone-only stock, but rather than use the carcass whole, I broke it into smaller pieces—a step easily accomplished with a heavy knife or kitchen shears—so I would need only 2½ quarts of water (enough for a batch of soup) instead of 4 quarts to cover the bones. The upshot was a more concentrated stock. I also found that I could squeeze a broken carcass into a Dutch oven, a boon for cooks who don't own a stockpot.

Things Start to Gel

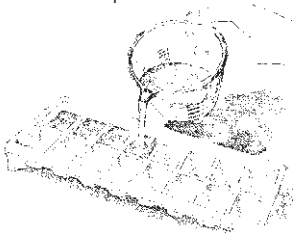
Next up: consistency. To attain the viscosity I wanted, the stock needed plenty of gelatin, which develops from collagen, a protein found in connective tissue, skin, and bones. It lends subtle body you won't find in commercial products and is the hallmark of a good homemade stock. Many recipes call for simmering bones all day to ensure adequate gelatin extraction. Was that truly necessary?

To find out, I filled four pots with equal weights of bones and water and cooked them for 1, 2, 3, and 4 hours, respectively. After an overnight chill in the refrigerator, the 1-hour stock was slightly thickened, indicating the presence of a small amount of gelatin. However, the 2-, 3,- and 4-hour stocks were all lightly set and wiggled like Jell-O when I shook its container. Although the 3- and 4-hour stocks were slightly firmer when cold, when

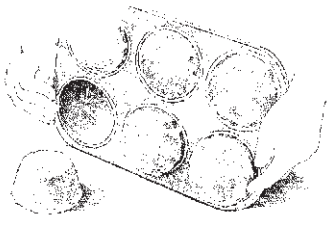
See the Zen Action
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

Keeping Stock in Stock

Freezing stock in portions of different sizes makes it easy to defrost it for different applications. Stock can be frozen for up to four months.



ICE CUBE TRAY
After the cubes have frozen, transfer them to a zipper-lock bag. Use the 2-tablespoon portions for pan sauces or stir-fry sauces.



MUFFIN TIN
Once frozen, transfer the 1-cup portions to a zipper-lock bag. Use them for rice, risotto, grains, couscous, or casseroles or as a braising liquid.

ZIPPER-LOCK BAG
Line a 4-cup measuring cup with a zipper-lock bag; pour in the cooled stock. Lay the bag flat to freeze. Use for soups, stews, or gravy.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

we tasted them hot, they were nearly impossible to distinguish from the 2-hour stock—each was richly flavored and infused with an ample amount of gelatinous body.

Scoring yet another victory for simplicity, I went with a 2-hour simmer. I occasionally skimmed the surface of the bubbling liquid to remove any foam or impurities. Then, once the time was up, I strained out the bones, let the stock cool for 20 minutes, and spooned off the surface fat. Energized by the fact that my stock required nothing more than water, bones, and time, I decided to use the reserved turkey fat to sauté aromatics for a quick batch of soup.

Friday Soup

My first try at an easy postholiday soup—with fennel, rosemary, and kale—was a little too complex; the bold ingredients overwhelmed the poultry flavor I had been at pains to create in my stock. I altered the ingredient list, ultimately ending up with two variations; each one combined 2 cups of shredded leftover turkey meat with a starchy component—barley or orzo—along with carefully selected aromatics, complementary vegetables, mild-mannered seasonings, and a last-minute addition of fresh lemon juice to brighten things up.

Now I was guaranteed to eat well on the Friday after Thanksgiving while still having plenty of time to kick back on the couch.

SIMPLE TURKEY STOCK

MAKES 8 CUPS

Pick off most of the meat clinging to the turkey carcass and reserve it. However, don't pick the carcass clean: The stock will have a fuller flavor if there is some meat and skin still attached. If you have the bones from the drumsticks and thighs, add them to the pot.

- 1 carcass from 12- to 14-pound roasted turkey
- 10 cups water

1. Using chef's knife, remove wings from carcass and separate each wing at joints into 3 pieces. Cut through ribs to separate breastbone from backbone, then cut backbone into 3 to 4 pieces. Using kitchen shears or heavy knife, remove ribs from both sides of breastbone. (You should have roughly 4 pounds of bones broken into 10 to 12 pieces.)

2. Arrange bones in stockpot or large Dutch oven in compact layer. Add water and bring to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to low, cover, and cook for 2 hours, using shallow spoon to skim foam and impurities from surface as needed.

3. Strain stock through fine-mesh strainer into large container; discard solids. Let stock cool slightly, about 20 minutes. Skim any fat from surface (reserve fat for making soup). Let stock cool for 1½ hours before refrigerating. (Stock can be refrigerated for up to 2 days or frozen for up to 4 months.)

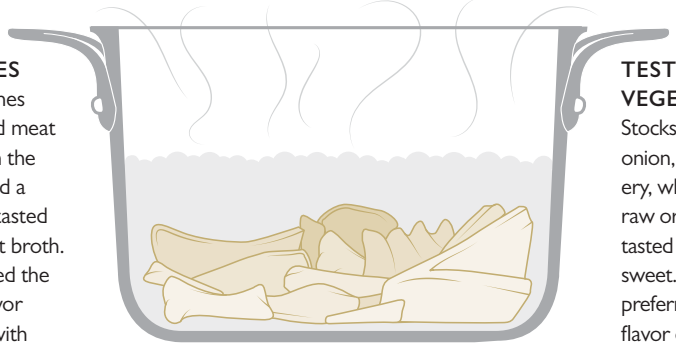
ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

RECIPE TESTING Zen and the Art of Turkey Stock

At every turn, we were happy to find that doing less produced a better-tasting stock.

TEST 1: ROAST BONES

Roasting the bones once the cooked meat was picked from the carcass produced a dark stock that tasted like generic meat broth. **Upshot:** We liked the pure poultry flavor of stock made with unroasted bones.



Our stock is made with just bones and water.

TEST 2: ADD VEGETABLES

Stocks containing onion, carrot, and celery, whether added raw or roasted first, tasted too vegetal or sweet. **Upshot:** We preferred the clean flavor of stock made with no vegetables.

TEST 3: EVALUATE SIMMERING TIME

We simmered identical water-and-bone stocks for 1, 2, 3, and 4 hours, respectively. After chilling overnight, the 1-hour stock was slightly thickened, indicating that it contained only a small amount of mouth-coating gelatin. The 2-, 3-, and 4-hour stocks, on the other hand, contained enough gelatin to set up like Jell-O—the hallmark of a good stock—and the longer-cooked stocks tasted no better than the 2-hour version. **Upshot**: It only made sense to opt for a 2-hour cooking time.

A 2-hour simmer produces a rich, gelatinous stock.

TURKEY BARLEY SOUP

SERVES 6

If you don't have turkey fat, you can substitute unsalted butter.

- 2 tablespoons turkey fat
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- Pinch red pepper flakes
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 8 cups Simple Turkey Stock
- ¾ cup pearled barley
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 celery ribs, cut into ¼-inch pieces
- 2 carrots, peeled and cut into ¼-inch pieces
- 2 cups shredded turkey
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- Salt and pepper

1. Heat fat in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, thyme, and pepper flakes and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened and translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add stock, barley, and bay leaf; increase heat to high and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, partially covered, for 15 minutes.

2. Add celery and carrots and simmer, partially covered, until vegetables start to soften, about 15 minutes.

3. Add turkey and cook until barley and vegetables are tender, about 10 minutes. Off heat, stir in lemon juice and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

TURKEY ORZO SOUP WITH KALE AND CHICKPEAS

SERVES 6

If you don't have turkey fat, you can substitute extra-virgin olive oil. Our favorite canned chickpeas are Pastene Chick Peas.

- 2 tablespoons turkey fat
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- Pinch red pepper flakes
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon ground coriander
- 8 cups Simple Turkey Stock
- 3 ounces curly kale, stemmed and cut into ½-inch pieces (6 cups)
- 1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas, rinsed
- ½ cup orzo
- 2 cups shredded turkey
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- Salt and pepper

1. Heat fat in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and pepper flakes and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened and translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic, cumin, and coriander and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add stock; increase heat to high and bring to simmer. Stir in kale, chickpeas, and orzo; reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, partially covered, for 10 minutes.

2. Add turkey and cook until orzo and kale are tender, about 2 minutes. Off heat, stir in lemon juice and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

Tuscan White Bean and Escarole Soup

Acquacotta transforms humble ingredients into a supremely satisfying meal.

BY LAN LAM

Don't let the name *acquacotta*, meaning "cooked water" in Italian, deceive you. In this Tuscan soup, a cousin of the better-known minestrone and *ribbolita*, water, vegetables, beans, and herbs are transformed into a rustic meal when whole eggs or yolks are whisked into the broth before it's ladled over stale bread, which is often first topped with a poached egg.

Though its name references water, many modern recipes for this soup call for broth. No matter which liquid is used, the soup is usually bolstered with *soffritto*: sautéed minced onion, celery, and garlic. From there, recipes vary wildly. To choose between chicken broth and water, I made two batches of soffritto and added broth to one and water to the other. I also added fennel, for its anise notes, and bitter escarole, which seems delicate but holds up well when cooked. Canned tomatoes contributed acidity, canned cannellini beans brought heartiness, and a Pecorino rind lent salty savoriness. Tasters preferred the broth-based soup, though it still tasted somewhat lean.

That's because I had yet to add the egg. Most recipes call for stirring raw eggs or yolks directly into the soup, but curdling is always a risk. Would diluting the egg proteins with liquid make it harder for them to link up and form firm clumps when heated? I whisked two yolks into the canning liquid from the beans, which was already pretty viscous; this mixture thickened the broth beautifully.

I sprinkled in lots of parsley and oregano for freshness and, taking a cue from thrifty Italian cooks, added the sweet fronds from the fennel bulb. Finally, with no stale bread on hand, I toasted a few slices under the broiler and placed each slice in a bowl. Placing a poached egg on the toast before ladling in the soup made a more substantial meal. With a sprinkling of Pecorino and a spritz of lemon juice, this was a remarkably satisfying soup, all the more enjoyable for its frugal provenance.

Frugal Gourmet

Nothing is wasted in *acquacotta*: Ingredient scraps such as fennel fronds, canned bean liquid, and a Pecorino rind contribute robust flavor and a luxurious texture.

See the Soup Take Shape
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

TUSCAN WHITE BEAN AND ESCAROLE SOUP (ACQUACOTTA)

SERVES 8 TO 10

If escarole is unavailable, you can substitute 8 ounces of kale. We prefer Pecorino Romano's salty flavor, but Parmesan can be substituted, if desired. If your cheese has a rind, slice it off the wedge and add it to the pot with the broth in step 3 (remove it before serving). We like to serve this soup the traditional way, with a poached or soft-cooked egg spooned on top of the toast before the broth is ladled into the bowl.

Soup

- 1 large onion, chopped coarse
- 2 celery ribs, chopped coarse
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 (28-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 8 cups chicken broth
- 1 fennel bulb, 2 tablespoons fronds minced, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 2 (15-ounce) cans cannellini beans, drained with liquid reserved, rinsed
- 1 small head escarole (10 ounces), trimmed and cut into ½-inch pieces (8 cups)
- 2 large egg yolks
- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh oregano
- Grated Pecorino Romano cheese
- Lemon wedges

Toast

- 10 (½-inch-thick) slices thick-crusted country bread
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper

1. FOR THE SOUP: Pulse onion, celery, and garlic in food processor until very finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Transfer onion mixture to Dutch oven. Add tomatoes and their juice to now-empty processor and pulse until tomatoes are finely chopped, 10 to 12 pulses; set aside.

2. Stir oil, ¾ teaspoon salt, and pepper flakes into onion mixture. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until light brown fond begins to form on bottom of pot, 12 to 15 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, increase heat to high, and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture is very thick and rubber spatula leaves distinct trail when dragged across bottom of pot, 9 to 12 minutes.

3. Add broth and fennel bulb to pot and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until fennel begins to soften, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in beans and escarole and cook until fennel is fully tender, about 10 minutes.

4. Whisk egg yolks and reserved bean liquid together in bowl, then stir into soup. Stir in parsley, oregano, and fennel fronds. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

5. FOR THE TOAST: Adjust oven rack about 5 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Place bread on aluminum foil–lined rimmed baking sheet, drizzle with oil, and season with salt and pepper. Broil until bread is deep golden brown.

6. Place 1 slice bread in bottom of each individual bowl. Ladle soup over toasted bread. Serve, passing Pecorino and lemon wedges separately.

Toasted bread makes the soup even heartier.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Warm Winter Salads

For tender, lightly wilted greens, forget the salad bowl and get out your Dutch oven.

BY STEVE DUNN

Spinach is the typical choice for tossing with a warm vinaigrette, but there are plenty of other contenders. I wanted to build a satisfying main-course wilted-green salad featuring a few lettuces that don't get as much attention: frisée, the curly star of French bistro salad; ruffled escarole; and frilly chicory. I hoped that each (or a combination thereof) would soften under a hot dressing and be a unique, robust canvas for all sorts of bold, flavorful ingredients.

When drizzling a hot vinaigrette over the greens wasn't enough to wilt them, I wondered if I could take the unorthodox step of warming the greens with the dressing. But I needed a vessel big enough for 10 cups of greens. That's when I pulled out my roomy Dutch oven. I warmed the dressing in the pot, but by the time I had tossed in all the greens, some leaves were not just wilted but were cooked. I had a better idea: Warm up the pot by sautéing at least one mix-in (such as carrots or fennel), let it cool briefly, and then add the greens off the heat. After a few turns of my tongs, the greens had just the right slightly softened texture.

All that was left was to incorporate other ingredients with contrasting yet complementary tastes and textures: nuts for crunch, cheese for fat and salt, and fruit for sweetness, all tied together with a tangy mustard vinaigrette.

BITTER GREENS, CARROT, AND CHICKPEA SALAD WITH WARM LEMON DRESSING

SERVES 4

The volume measurement of the greens may vary depending on the variety or combination used. Pastene Chick Peas are the test kitchen's favorite.

Vinaigrette

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon grated lemon zest plus 6 tablespoons juice (2 lemons)
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon minced shallot
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon ground coriander
- ¼ teaspoon smoked paprika

Watch: It Really Works
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/feb17

Residual heat from the Dutch oven wilts the greens.

- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper

Salad

- 1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas, rinsed
  Salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 carrots, peeled and shredded
- ¾ cup raisins, chopped
- ½ cup slivered almonds
- 12 ounces (10–12 cups) bitter greens, such as escarole, chicory, and/or frisée, torn into bite-size pieces
- ⅓ cup mint leaves, chopped
- 1½ ounces feta cheese, crumbled (⅓ cup)

1. FOR THE VINAIGRETTE: Whisk all ingredients in bowl until emulsified.

2. FOR THE SALAD: Toss chickpeas with 1 tablespoon vinaigrette and pinch salt in bowl; set aside. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add carrots, raisins, and almonds and cook, stirring frequently, until carrots are wilted, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove pot from heat and let cool for 5 minutes.

3. Add half of remaining vinaigrette to pot, then add half of greens and toss for 1 minute to warm and wilt. Add remaining greens and mint followed by remaining vinaigrette and continue to toss until greens are evenly coated and warmed through, about 2 minutes longer. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer greens to serving platter, top with chickpeas and feta, and serve.

BITTER GREENS, FENNEL, AND APPLE SALAD WITH WARM PANCETTA DRESSING

SERVES 4

The volume measurement of the greens may vary depending on the variety or combination used.

Vinaigrette

- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon minced shallot
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper

Salad

- 3 ounces pancetta, cut into ¼-inch pieces
- 1 small fennel bulb (8 ounces), stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and sliced thin
- 1 cup walnuts, chopped coarse
- 12 ounces (10–12 cups) bitter greens, such as escarole, chicory, and/or frisée, torn into bite-size pieces
  Salt and pepper
- 1 Fuji apple, cored, halved, and sliced thin
- 2 ounces blue cheese, crumbled (½ cup)

1. FOR THE VINAIGRETTE: Whisk all ingredients in bowl until emulsified.

2. FOR THE SALAD: Cook pancetta in large Dutch oven over medium heat until browned and fat is rendered, 7 to 8 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer pancetta to paper towel–lined plate. Pour off all but 1 tablespoon fat from pot. Add fennel and walnuts to fat left in pot and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until fennel is crisp-tender, 5 to 7 minutes. Remove pot from heat and let cool for 5 minutes.

3. Add half of vinaigrette to pot, then add half of greens and toss for 1 minute to warm and wilt. Add remaining greens followed by remaining vinaigrette and continue to toss until greens are evenly coated and warmed through, about 2 minutes longer. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer greens to serving platter, top with apple, sprinkle with blue cheese and pancetta, and serve.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Bringing Back Brown Bread

Colonists knew how to mix up batter and steam it over an open fire to make a remarkably moist whole-grain bread. We think they were onto something.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

As a native New Englander, I've always had a thing for Boston brown bread. It's deeply, darkly delicious—sort of a cross between a cake and a quick bread in texture and rich with molasses, raisins, and the complex flavors (and nutrition) of whole grains. When colonists started making this unyeasted, one-bowl bread in the 18th century, most cooking was done over an open hearth—a tricky environment for bread baking. To get around this, brown bread was steamed in lidded tin pudding molds in a kettle of simmering water over an open fire, giving the loaves a distinctive shape and a smooth, crustless exterior—and keeping the whole-grain crumb remarkably moist. Yankees have always paired brown bread with baked beans for supper, but it is equally delicious toasted, with a schmear of cream cheese or butter, for breakfast or as a snack.

Rye flour, cornmeal, and whole-wheat flour are the stars of these rich, satisfying loaves.

To create a brown bread recipe of my own, I turned to one of the best-known recipes for inspiration. It comes from *Fannie Farmer's Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* (1898) and calls for grains that were plentiful and cheap at the time: rye meal, granulated (coarse) cornmeal, and graham flour. The grains are mixed with salt and baking soda, and then molasses and buttermilk are poured in to create a thick, bubbly batter (the baking soda reacts with both the buttermilk and the molasses to help lighten the loaf). The batter is then scooped into a buttered mold, leaving ample space for the bread to expand during cooking. Next, the mold is covered and set in a boiling-water bath until the bread is fully cooked, which takes about 4 hours since the grains require time to tenderize. Finally, the bread is slid out of the mold and allowed to cool before being sliced and served. I followed the recipe as written, except for employing the modern approach of using a coffee can in place of the pudding mold.

Batter Up(date)

Farmer's recipe has stood the test of time—it was quite good—so I decided to use it as a starting point for my own recipe. I evaluated the ingredients one by one. "Rye meal" simply refers to coarsely ground rye; it has a sandy texture similar to that of grits. Most modern recipes opt for more readily available rye flour, so I followed suit. Using more finely ground, quicker-cooking rye flour helped cut down the long steaming time. For the same reason, I found it best to use finely ground cornmeal rather than coarse. Finally, the graham flour. This is just coarsely ground whole-wheat flour, so I swapped in much more readily available regular whole-wheat flour. I used equal amounts of these three components so that their flavors would get equal billing.

Farmer called for molasses as the sole sweetener in the bread, but many contemporary recipes also include milder sugars such as brown or white. However, I found that these made the bread sweeter than it really should be and masked the pleasing trace of bitterness that is essential to brown bread. Molasses alone was the way to go, and any type—except for blackstrap, which is far too intensely flavored—worked just fine. (For more information, see "Molasses Morass, Unraveled.")

That said, I did come across a few modern refinements that were worth implementing. Adding a second leavener (baking powder) helped give the bread a lighter texture. And mixing in fat—in the form of a few tablespoons of melted butter—gave the bread a welcome richness and softened its coarse texture.

Full Steam Ahead

Finally, there was the question of cooking the bread in a 1-pound coffee can. Since nowadays few people buy coffee in metal cans and even fewer own pudding molds, it seemed like a good idea to scale the recipe to fit into two 28-ounce tomato cans. BPA-free cans are now available, which alleviates any safety concerns (see "A Newer Approach to Steaming Bread"). To prevent sticking, I greased

SKIP THE BLACKSTRAP

SHOPPING Molasses Morass, Unraveled

Buying molasses can be a confusing experience since bottles may be variously labeled mild, dark, robust, full, or blackstrap. Fortunately, we've found that with the exception of blackstrap, these other products all taste similar, and they all work fine in our recipes. As for blackstrap, this designation indicates that the mixture of sugarcane and sugar beet juice used to make the syrup has been boiled three times, rendering the molasses darker and thicker. In taste tests, this type stood out as strongly bitter, smoky, and much less sweet than other types. When we substituted blackstrap in recipes calling for regular molasses (brown bread, baked beans, and chewy molasses cookies), tasters found the results too intense. Another reason to avoid blackstrap in recipes that don't specifically call for it: a lower sugar and higher calcium content. Cookies made with blackstrap didn't spread appropriately, and bean skins refused to soften completely.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

the interiors; once the cans were loaded with batter, I wrapped their tops with greased aluminum foil.

I came across a few recipes that suggested baking the bread in a gentle oven instead of steaming it, but to prevent the tops of the loaves from getting overly dark and leathery, I had to set the oven so low that they took a very long time to cook through. Steaming on the stovetop by setting the cans in a stockpot of simmering water was faster and ensured that the loaves stayed moist inside and out. (Even though the cans are wrapped tightly and the steam never makes contact with the bread, it prevents the loaves from exceeding 212 degrees.) After 2 hours, I pulled two steamy cylinders of utterly delicious whole-grain bread from the pot, happy to carry on the tradition.

BOSTON BROWN BREAD

MAKES 2 SMALL LOAVES; SERVES 6 TO 8

This recipe requires two empty 28-ounce cans. Use cans that are labeled "BPA-free." We prefer Quaker white cornmeal in this recipe, though other types will work; do not use coarse grits. Any style of molasses will work except for blackstrap. This recipe requires a 10-quart or larger stockpot that is at least 7 inches deep. Brown bread is traditionally served with baked beans but is also good toasted and buttered.

- ¾ cup (4⅛ ounces) rye flour
- ¾ cup (4⅛ ounces) whole-wheat flour
- ¾ cup (3¾ ounces) fine white cornmeal
- 1¾ teaspoons baking soda
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1⅔ cups buttermilk
- ½ cup molasses
- 3 tablespoons butter, melted and cooled slightly
- ¾ cup raisins

1. Bring 3 quarts water to simmer in large stockpot over high heat. Fold two 16 by 12-inch pieces of aluminum foil in half to yield two rectangles that measure 8 by 12 inches. Spray 4-inch circle in center of each rectangle with vegetable oil spray. Spray insides of two clean 28-ounce cans with vegetable oil spray.

2. Whisk rye flour, whole-wheat flour, cornmeal, baking soda, baking powder, and salt together in large bowl. Whisk buttermilk, molasses, and melted butter together in second bowl. Stir raisins into buttermilk mixture. Add buttermilk mixture to flour mixture and stir until combined and no dry flour remains. Evenly divide batter between cans. Wrap tops of cans tightly with prepared foil, positioning sprayed side of foil over can openings.

3. Place cans in stockpot (water should come about halfway up sides of cans). Cover pot and cook, maintaining gentle simmer, until skewer inserted in center of loaves comes out clean, about 2 hours. Check pot occasionally and add hot water as needed to maintain water level.

4. Using jar lifter, carefully transfer cans to wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet and let cool for 20 minutes. Slide loaves from cans onto rack and let cool completely, about 1 hour. Slice and serve. (Bread can be wrapped tightly in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 3 days or frozen for up to 2 weeks.)

An Easy Out

To ensure that the bread releases easily from the cans, we spray the insides with vegetable oil spray. The bread shrinks slightly as it cools, so make sure to let it cool for the full 20 minutes. Giving the can a gentle shake before sliding the loaf onto the rack will also facilitate an easy release.

TECHNIQUE | A NEWER APPROACH TO STEAMING BREAD

The colonists steamed their brown bread in tin pudding molds; modern cooks took to using empty coffee cans. But these days, few cooks buy their coffee in cans, so we turned to empty 28-ounce tomato cans, which we wrapped in foil and steamed in a covered stockpot for 2 hours. We made sure to select cans labeled "BPA-free." BPA is a controversial chemical used in the linings of some cans that could leach into the bread when exposed to prolonged heat. Today, many companies use BPA-free cans.

TESTING Thermal Carafes

Thermal carafes can keep coffee hot (and milk cold) for hours—perfect for brunch or a dessert table. Most models are double-walled and vacuum-sealed, meaning the air between the two stainless-steel walls has been removed (without air, heat transfers much more slowly). To find the best carafe, we put eight models, priced from $21.99 to $72.07 and with capacities from 44 to 68 ounces, through their paces.

To test heat retention, we filled each carafe with 161-degree coffee and recorded its temperature every hour. After 4 hours, the coolest coffee was a tepid 138 degrees. Meanwhile, the coffee in the top performers was still quite hot at 152 degrees. The carafes weren't as adept in our cold-water tests, but they are still mostly fine for keeping milk or cream cold for a few hours.

We preferred models that poured with even streams and had valves that quickly closed the pour spouts. We also liked sturdy handles. Finally, we preferred carafes with wide openings for easy filling and lids that closed smoothly and securely. Ultimately, the Zojirushi Stainless Steel Vacuum Carafe won top marks.

—Kate Shannon

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

ZOJIRUSHI Stainless Steel Vacuum Carafe

MODEL: SH-HB15

PRICE: $57.51

COMMENTS: This model is the only carafe that has extra insulation in addition to the standard double-wall vacuum seal, and it received high marks for maintaining the temperature of hot and cold liquids. It boasts a comfortable handle, and it pours with a steady stream.

RECOMMENDED (BEST BUY)

GENUINE THERMOS BRAND 51-Ounce Vacuum Insulated Stainless Steel Carafe

MODEL: TGS1500SS4

PRICE: $42.70

COMMENTS: This carafe nearly kept pace with our favorite in temperature tests. Minor quibbles: The twist-on lid was a bit tricky to attach, especially when it was wet, and it sometimes took an extra try to close the carafe properly.

Andrew Bakes the Bread

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/feb17

Classic Deli Rye at Home

Rye flour contributes little structure to bread and soaks up water like a sponge. So how do you make a tender loaf strong enough to hold up under a pile of sandwich fixings?

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Ask people what they think is the epitome of a deli sandwich, and I'd bet most would say pastrami on rye. I'd agree that it's one of the best uses of rye out there, but deli rye is also great for grilled cheese or even just spread with butter and sprinkled with flaky salt. But a good loaf isn't always easy to come by.

Unlike German and Scandinavian rye breads, which are dark, crumbly, and dense, American deli rye relies on the addition of wheat flour to make a loaf that is lighter in both color and texture. A great loaf should have a fine, even crumb and a tender-yet-sturdy texture that will hold up under sandwich fillings. It's usually a torpedo-shaped free-form loaf, but unlike the crust on a rustic loaf, this loaf's crust should be soft and pliable. And what about the flavor? Caraway seed's anise-like flavor is strongly associated with deli rye, but try a loaf without caraway and you'll notice that rye's flavor is actually fairly similar to that of very fresh wheat flour, but it's sweeter and lacks the bitter edge.

I tried a handful of recipes, most of which produced bread that was too dense, dry, or crumbly or too light on rye flavor and more like regular white or wheat bread. Some loaves were also far too small for sandwich-making.

We brush the loaf with a cooked cornstarch wash after baking. The starch provides sheen while the moisture softens the crust.

Flour Power

To fashion my recipe, I combined 2 cups of bread flour, 1 cup of medium rye flour, yeast, water, and molasses in a stand mixer. I kneaded this until a loose dough formed, and then I let it sit for 20 minutes. This resting stage, known as an autolyse, helps a dough build structure. I figured I needed the insurance since the test loaves I had made were in need of more. I then added the salt and continued kneading until a smooth dough formed. I took it out, gave it a few more kneads and shaped it into a ball, and transferred it to a bowl to proof for a couple of hours, until it had doubled in size. I shaped it into a log, covered it, and allowed it to proof again until it had nearly doubled. I scored it with a sharp knife every inch or so across the top and baked it in a 375-degree oven for about an hour.

This loaf wasn't horrible, but it was a bit light on rye flavor, the slashes were too deep, and the crumb was a bit tight. In addition, the crust lacked an appealing sheen and was somewhat tough, and the loaf was too narrow.

My first change was increasing the proportion of rye flour to wheat flour. But as the percentage of rye flour increased, the density and dryness of the loaf did, too. Here's the thing about working with rye flour: It doesn't contain the proteins that exist in wheat flour that form gluten, the elastic network that gives bread structure and allows it to hold the carbon dioxide produced during fermentation. On top of that, rye does contain carbohydrates called arabinoxylans, which you don't find in wheat flour. They allow rye flour to absorb four times as much water as wheat flour. You might think this would make a loaf more moist, but in reality more water gets bound up by the flour, producing a loaf that tastes drier. This explains why German- and Scandinavian-style rye breads, made with 100 percent rye flour, are so dense and why wheat flour is key in deli rye.

For a moister loaf, the fix is obvious: Add more water. But there's a limit; you can add only so much water before the gluten is too dilute and the loaf lacks structure. After tinkering with the amounts, I hit the limit: 13⅓ ounces of water and 8¼ ounces of rye flour (at least 10 percent more than most recipes call for) with 12½ ounces of bread flour.

Now my bread was moist and had nice rye flavor, but the crumb was a bit too chewy. In many breads, this can be attributed to the formation of too much gluten. Bread flour is comparatively high in gluten, and I didn't want to change my proportion of wheat flour to rye flour, so I tried swapping an equal amount of lower-protein all-purpose flour for the bread flour. This was too far in the other direction—now the loaf didn't have enough structure. King Arthur all-purpose flour, which lands midway between most all-purpose flours and bread flours in terms of gluten, was just right. To further tenderize the loaf, I also added a little vegetable oil.

Shaping Up

To fix the narrow width of my loaf, I reevaluated the shaping process. Instead of rolling the dough up like a carpet to form a log, which produced small tapered ends, I came up with an approach that relied on a series of folds to produce a loaf of even size from end to end (see "How to Shape a Loaf of Deli Rye").

Slashing a loaf before baking allows it to expand evenly in the oven, so the fact that the slashes remained as gouges in the finished bread meant the crumb wasn't expanding much. I looked at factors that might affect oven spring, the rapid rise in volume that yeast breads experience when they enter a hot oven. First, I added steam by pouring boiling water into a preheated pan at the bottom of the oven. The steam, which transfers heat to the loaf more quickly than dry air does, keeps the loaf's exterior soft during the initial stages of baking so that it can expand easily.

Rye's True Taste

Caraway's anise-like flavor has become so strongly associated with rye bread that many mistakenly think that's what rye tastes like. But leave out the caraway and you'll discover rye's true flavor: sweet and almost wheaty but without the bitterness.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

STEP BY STEP | HOW TO SHAPE A LOAF OF DELI RYE

Most recipes shape the dough in a way that results in tapered ends. We press it into an oval and then make a few folds for a sandwich-worthy loaf from end to end.

1. With short end facing edge of counter, fold top left and right edges of dough diagonally into center and press to seal.

2. Fold point of dough toward center and press to seal. Rotate 180 degrees and repeat folding and sealing.

3. Fold dough in half toward you to form 8 by 4-inch crescent shape. Using heel of your hand, press seam closed.

4. Roll loaf seam side down. Tuck ends under loaf to form rounded torpedo shape.

Second, I looked at the oven temperature; I decided to increase it from 375 to 450. With these changes, the slashes smoothed out considerably and the crumb opened up, giving me a less dense interior. Adding the extra oomph of a preheated baking stone was all it took to finish the job.

As for the dull, tough crust, many recipes call for brushing the loaf with an egg wash before baking. This produces an attractive sheen, but the crust will still be tough. I used an alternative approach: a cooked cornstarch wash brushed on after baking. The starch produced a good sheen, and because it was brushed on after baking, the moisture helped soften the crust.

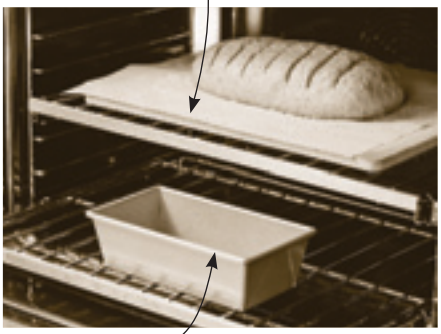
With a top-notch deli rye at the ready, I just needed to find some worthy pastrami.

More Heat = Better Spring

For a well-risen loaf with an open crumb and a smooth crust, it's crucial to maximize oven spring, the rapid rise in volume that yeast breads experience when they first go into a hot oven. We found that three adjustments made all the difference.

USE A BAKING STONE
The stone acts as a heat source beneath the bread.

INCREASE OVEN TEMPERATURE
We pushed the dial from 375 degrees to 450 degrees.



ADD STEAM
Steam (from a pan of boiling water) conducts heat better than dry air does; it also helps keep the crust soft so it expands more easily.

DELI RYE BREAD

MAKES 1 LOAF

We prefer King Arthur all-purpose flour for this recipe; if you have trouble finding it at your supermarket, you can use any brand of bread flour instead. Any grade of rye flour will work in this recipe, but for the best flavor and texture we recommend using medium or dark rye flour. Do not use blackstrap molasses here; its flavor is too intense.

- 2½ cups (12½ ounces) King Arthur all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups (8¼ ounces) rye flour
- 1 tablespoon caraway seeds
- 2½ teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1⅔ cups (13⅓ ounces) plus ½ cup (4 ounces) water, room temperature
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 teaspoons molasses
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 4 teaspoons cornstarch

1. Whisk all-purpose flour, rye flour, caraway seeds, and yeast together in bowl of stand mixer. Whisk 1⅔ cups water, oil, and molasses in 4-cup liquid measuring cup until molasses has dissolved.

2. Fit stand mixer with dough hook; add water mixture to flour mixture and knead on low speed until cohesive dough starts to form and no dry flour remains, about 2 minutes, scraping down bowl as needed. Cover bowl tightly with plastic wrap and let dough rest for 20 minutes.

3. Add salt to dough and knead on medium-low speed until dough is smooth and elastic and clears sides of bowl, about 5 minutes.

4. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter and knead by hand to form smooth, round ball, about 30 seconds. Place dough seam side down in lightly oiled large bowl, cover tightly with plastic, and let rise until doubled in size, 1½ to 2 hours.

5. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter and gently press into 8-inch disk, then fold edges toward middle to form round. Cover loosely with plastic and let rest for 15 minutes.

6. Adjust oven racks to middle and lowest positions, place baking stone on upper rack, and heat oven to 450 degrees. Line overturned rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper and dust lightly with rye flour. Gently press and stretch dough into 12 by 9-inch oval, with short end of oval facing edge of counter. Fold top left and right edges of dough diagonally into center of oval and press gently to seal. Fold point of dough into center of oval and press seam gently to seal. Rotate dough 180 degrees and repeat folding and sealing top half of dough.

7. Fold dough in half toward you to form rough 8 by 4-inch crescent-shaped loaf. Using heel of your hand, press seam closed against counter. Roll loaf seam side down. Tuck ends under loaf to form rounded torpedo shape. Gently slide your hands underneath loaf and transfer, seam side down, to prepared sheet.

8. Spray sheet of plastic with vegetable oil spray and cover loaf loosely. Let loaf rise until increased in size by about half and dough springs back minimally when poked gently with your knuckle, 45 minutes to 1¼ hours.

9. Place empty loaf pan on bottom oven rack. Using sharp paring knife or single-edge razor blade, make six to eight 4-inch-long, ½-inch-deep slashes with swift, fluid motion across width of loaf, spacing slashes about 1 inch apart. Pour 2 cups boiling water into empty loaf pan in oven.

10. Slide parchment and loaf from sheet onto baking stone. Bake until deep golden brown and loaf registers 205 to 210 degrees, 25 to 30 minutes, rotating loaf halfway through baking. Transfer loaf to wire rack.

11. Whisk cornstarch and remaining ½ cup water in bowl until cornstarch has dissolved. Microwave, whisking frequently, until mixture is thickened, 1 to 2 minutes.

12. Brush top and sides of loaf with 3 tablespoons cornstarch mixture (you will have extra cornstarch mixture). Let cool completely, about 3 hours, before slicing and serving.

Watch: Deli-Style Magic
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/apr17

Really Good Garlic Bread

How do you make the ultimate version of this classic? It's a pressing issue.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Everyone takes shortcuts in the kitchen, including buying aluminum foil–wrapped garlic bread from the supermarket. And yet once that steamy, squishy, greasy loaf is revealed, regret is inevitable. But even when you take the time to make garlic bread from scratch (most recipes call for slathering a halved loaf with garlic butter and placing it in the oven), success is far from guaranteed. The bread rarely gets perfectly crisp, and most recipes miss the mark with the garlic itself—it's either muted or too in-your-face. I wanted a toasty, golden-brown loaf with a pleasantly crisp crust and a moist interior. There would be a generous amount of butter, and the garlic flavor would be prominent but not harsh.

I decided to work with supermarket Italian bread. Its fine, plush crumb would hold on to butter, and its soft, thin crust could crisp without toughening.

As for the garlic, I knew that if I wanted full but not biting flavor, it wasn't just a matter of how much to use but how to treat it. Since heat tames garlic's harshness, I minced a tablespoon's worth of cloves and microwaved them with a stick of butter (enough to provide ample richness without turning the loaf greasy) until the garlic lost some of its bite.

Evenly brushing the melted garlic butter onto a halved loaf proved to be challenging: The soft crumb was too good at soaking up the butter and pulled it in like a sponge, leaving some areas saturated and others barely moistened. I decided to melt half the butter with the garlic and then whisk it with the remaining solid butter to make a soft mixture that I could evenly spread—rather than brush—onto the bread.

After being baked with the cut sides facing up, the bread was spotty brown, but the larger garlic chunks jutting up from the surface had darkened and become bitter. I turned to a rasp-style grater to transform the cloves into a fine paste (no large pieces to potentially scorch) that blended smoothly into the butter.

Next, I wanted to add depth with the sweet, toasty flavor of roasted garlic. Roasting a head of garlic was out of the question, so I swapped in garlic powder. It's made by grinding and drying garlic cloves, a process via which a mild roasted flavor develops. The freeze-dried powder contains the active enzyme alliinase, which, when mixed with water, produces allicin, the compound responsible for the characteristic garlic taste. One teaspoon provided just the right amount of roasty flavor.

Watch the Press
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/oct17

Garlic powder and cayenne pepper bolster the flavor of fresh garlic.

But I didn't stop there. After all, I was going for perfection. That would mean even browning from edge to edge—the kind you get in a grilled sandwich. Well, then why not cook the bread like a grilled sandwich? I slid another halved loaf into the oven, cut sides up, and once the butter had fully soaked in, I flipped the halves cut sides down. I pressed a second baking sheet on top of the bread, panini press–style, and returned the assembly to the oven. The top sheet held the bread flat against the bottom sheet, ensuring even browning and crisping.

Pressed For Success

Pressing on the bread (placed cut sides down on the baking sheet) with a second baking sheet helps the crumb brown deeply and evenly.

REALLY GOOD GARLIC BREAD

SERVES 8

A 12 by 5-inch loaf of supermarket Italian bread, which has a soft, thin crust and fine crumb, works best here. Do not use a rustic or crusty artisan-style loaf. A rasp-style grater makes quick work of turning the garlic into a paste. The amount of time needed to brown the bread after flipping it in step 3 depends on the color of your baking sheet. If using a dark-colored sheet, the browning time will be on the shorter end of the range.

- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon water
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 4–5 garlic cloves, minced to paste (1 tablespoon)
- 1 (1-pound) loaf soft Italian bread, halved horizontally

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Combine garlic powder and water in medium bowl. Add 4 tablespoons butter, salt, and cayenne to bowl; set aside.

2. Place remaining 4 tablespoons butter in small bowl and microwave, covered, until melted, about 30 seconds. Stir in garlic and continue to microwave, covered, until mixture is bubbling around edges, about 1 minute, stirring halfway through microwaving. Transfer melted butter mixture to bowl with garlic powder–butter mixture and whisk until homogeneous loose paste forms. (If mixture melts, set aside and let solidify before using.)

3. Spread cut sides of bread evenly with butter mixture. Transfer bread, cut sides up, to rimmed baking sheet. Bake until butter mixture has melted and seeped into bread, 3 to 4 minutes. Remove sheet from oven. Flip bread cut sides down, place second rimmed baking sheet on top, and gently press. Return sheet to oven, leaving second sheet on top of bread, and continue to bake until cut sides are golden brown and crisp, 4 to 12 minutes longer, rotating sheet halfway through baking. Transfer bread to cutting board. Using serrated knife, cut each half into 8 slices. Serve immediately.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Eggs Pipérade

This Basque-inspired sauté can dress up scrambled eggs—or leave them waterlogged.

BY ADAM RIED

You can bulk up scrambled eggs with any mix of vegetables, but one of my favorites is the pepper and tomato sauté called *pipérade*, a preparation that originated in the Basque region of northern Spain and southern France. Pipérade delivers richness, acidity, and tempered heat from a combination of sweet or mildly spicy fresh peppers, tomatoes, olive oil, garlic, and onion; fragrant spices, such as paprika; and a subtly spicy, fruity dried pepper called *piment d'Espelette* that is widely grown in the area. If you've scrambled eggs with vegetables, you know the challenges: how to incorporate watery produce without leaving the eggs in a puddle of liquid, and how to prevent the eggs from cooking up as stringy bits rather than pillowy curds.

To help maximize my chances of tender curds, I'd use the test kitchen's recipe for Perfect Scrambled Eggs (July/August 2011). Its combination of high and low heat (the initial blast causes the eggs to puff up, while a slow finish keeps them soft and moist), a generous amount of fat (we use half-and-half), and a gentle folding technique produce rich, tender results.

Most pipérade recipes call for precooking the vegetables to evaporate excess liquid. I started by sautéing the aromatics—chopped onion, a bay leaf, a few cloves of minced garlic, paprika, and red pepper flakes, which contributed at least some of the fruitiness of hard-to-find piment d'Espelette—in olive oil and then added red and green bell pepper strips and some salt. I covered the pan and let the mixture cook for about 10 minutes to soften the peppers. I stirred in a few coarsely chopped fresh tomatoes and cooked the mixture uncovered for another 10 minutes or so to concentrate the flavors and evaporate the tomato liquid. Out came the bay leaf, and in went a couple of tablespoons of minced fresh parsley. The mixture was nicely thickened, and it tasted rich, if a bit flat, so I added a last-minute splash of sherry vinegar. What didn't go over well were the bits of chewy tomato skin, so I made subsequent batches with a can of whole peeled tomatoes (drained of most of their excess liquid). I also tried swapping the green bell peppers for mild Cubanelle peppers, which tasters preferred for their less vegetal taste.

Watch the Technique
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/feb17

Where many recipes go wrong is scrambling the eggs directly in the pipérade. The liquid in the produce causes the eggs to cook up stringy and wet rather than creamy and smooth; it also muddies their soft yellow color. I figured I could just push the cooked pipérade to the side of the pan, scramble the eggs, and fold the two components together, but even then some liquid bled into the eggs. So I further separated the two components by removing the pipérade from the skillet and wiping the pan clean before scrambling the eggs. I also swapped the half-and-half for fruity olive oil, which better complemented the dish. To keep up the tidy appearance, I plated the two components side by side rather than folding the cooked eggs into the peppers (though the latter is traditional and a fine option), and I garnished the platter with minced parsley. The finished product was attractive enough for company, quick and easy enough for everyday, and incredibly satisfying.

EGGS PIPÉRADE

SERVES 4

We like Cubanelle peppers here, but you can substitute green bell peppers, if desired. To serve the dish the traditional way, fold the eggs gently into the pepper mixture.

- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 large bay leaf
- Salt and pepper
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- ¾ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 3 red bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ⅜-inch strips
- 3 Cubanelle peppers, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ⅜-inch strips
- 1 (14-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained with ¼ cup juice reserved, chopped coarse
- 3 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 2 teaspoons sherry vinegar
- 8 large eggs

1. Heat 3 tablespoons oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, bay leaf, and ½ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened and just starting to brown, about 6 minutes. Add garlic, paprika, thyme, and pepper flakes and cook, stirring occasionally, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add bell peppers, Cubanelle peppers, and 1 teaspoon salt; cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until peppers begin to soften, about 10 minutes.

2. Uncover and stir in tomatoes and reserved juice. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until mixture appears dry and peppers are tender but not mushy, 10 to 12 minutes. Discard bay leaf; stir in 2 tablespoons parsley and vinegar. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer pepper mixture to serving dish and wipe skillet clean with paper towels.

3. While pepper mixture cooks, beat eggs, 2 tablespoons oil, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper with fork until eggs are thoroughly combined and color is pure yellow.

4. Return now-empty skillet to medium-high heat, add remaining 1 tablespoon oil, and heat until shimmering. Add egg mixture and, using rubber spatula, constantly and firmly scrape along bottom and sides of skillet until eggs begin to clump and spatula just leaves trail on bottom of pan, 30 to 60 seconds. Reduce heat to low and gently but constantly fold eggs until clumped and just slightly wet, 30 to 60 seconds. Immediately transfer eggs to serving dish with pepper mixture, sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon parsley, and serve.

Sautéing the peppers, onions, and tomatoes separately from the eggs keeps the curds creamy and fluffy.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

Perfect Poached Eggs

The most vexing problem with poached eggs is keeping the whites neat and tidy. Gimmicky methods abound, but a few simple tricks and tools are all you need.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

You could argue that poaching eggs is an ambitious goal from the start. Drop a delicate raw egg, without its protective shell, into a pot of simmering water in the hope that it will emerge perfectly cooked. That means a tender, fully set white—no ring of gelatinous, translucent goo surrounding the yolk—and a yolk that's fluid but thickened, almost saucy. Equally important: The white must not be raggedy or wispy at the edges and must boast a plump, ovoid flying-saucer shape that's ideal for nestling atop an English muffin or a bed of salad greens.

Since a raw egg cooked in simmering water wants to spread out in all directions before it sets, it's this latter issue that's the trickiest to overcome. I was determined to figure out a solution, and I would have plenty of help: There are dozens of recipes, essays, and videos claiming to produce perfect results. I would try them all and see where I landed.

Great poached eggs have the same fluid yolks as soft-cooked eggs, but their whites are more moist and plump from direct contact with water.

Down the Drain

First I experimented with the more novel suggestions I found. These ranged from poaching eggs in a muffin tin in the oven to microwaving each egg individually in a small bowl of shallow water to parcooking them in the shell before releasing them directly into the simmering water. I wasn't too surprised when most of these ideas proved to be dead ends. (See "Poaching Approaches That Didn't Pan Out.") Conventional methods worked better, but they also had their limitations. The most common trick was to swirl the water around the eggs to create a vortex that kept the white from spreading, all the while folding any loose stragglers back on the yolk. The whirlpool worked, but it meant I could only poach one or two eggs a time. Another approach involved lowering an egg into the water in a large metal spoon and keeping it there while using a second spoon to block the loose white from straying too far. The results were perfect—but who wants to juggle spoons like that to cook a single egg?

Perfect Poaching Demo
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/apr17

The most useful trick I found didn't try to corral the white during cooking but instead started by draining the raw eggs in a colander. At first I found this step counterintuitive—wouldn't all the white just drain off through the holes? It turns out that every egg contains two kinds of white, thick and thin. The thicker portion clings more tightly to the yolk, while the thinner portion is looser and can break away and slip through the colander holes. It is this thinner white that is most prone to spreading out into wispy tendrils in the water, so eliminating it went a long way toward fixing this issue. I also found that starting with the freshest eggs possible increased the chance that more of the white was thick, so less of it would drain away (see "Fresh Eggs = Thick Whites" for more information), leaving me with a plumper poached egg.

Acid Test

I next tried a common method targeted at a different issue: ensuring that the yolks stay runny while the whites, which solidify at a much higher temperature, reach the right degree of tender firmness. This approach calls for adding a few splashes of vinegar to the simmering water before slipping in the eggs. Acid lowers the water's pH, which makes the proteins in the white set faster. The only issue? For the vinegar to be effective, you have to add so much that it gives the eggs a sour taste. I found that the upper limit was ½ teaspoon per cup of water, which wasn't enough to be much help. But there was something else I could add that also makes egg proteins bond faster: salt. Using vinegar and salt together meant I didn't need much of either one. After a few tests, I worked out my formula: 1 tablespoon vinegar and 1 teaspoon salt to 6 cups water.

Testing the Waters

But there was still more I could do to keep the whites tidy—I could get the eggs into the water as gently as possible. Gingerly sliding them into the water from bowls held close to the water's surface, as many recipes suggest, kept the white contained, but pouring multiple bowls at once—I was poaching four eggs to serve 2 people—was awkward. Cracking all the eggs into a 2-cup liquid measuring cup and pouring them in one by one at different spots in the water was easier. Plus, I could retrieve them in the order they were added, so they cooked to the same degree. It made sense at this point to switch from a large saucepan to a broader Dutch oven, which made bringing the measuring cup close to the water easier.

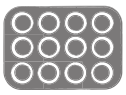
After bringing the water to a boil, I added the vinegar and salt, deposited the drained eggs around

Make-Ahead Poached Eggs

Here's a neat trick: Poach eggs ahead of time and serve them later (a common practice in restaurants). Start by transferring up to four cooked eggs to a bowl of cold water (for more than four eggs, use ice water). Refrigerate the eggs in the water for up to three days. To reheat, transfer the eggs to a pot of water heated to 150 degrees on the stove (use 6 cups of water for two to four eggs or 10 cups for six to eight eggs) and cover them for 3 minutes, by which time they should be at serving temperature.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

RECIPE TESTING Poaching Approaches That Didn't Pan Out



TEST 1
POACH IN MUFFIN TIN
Method: Poach eggs in 350-degree oven in muffin tin with 1 tablespoon water added to each muffin cup.

Results: Whites stayed neat, but eggs cooked unevenly, setting faster in the outside cups.

TEST 2
POACH IN MICROWAVE
Method: Place each egg in small glass bowl with ¼ cup water. Microwave for 1 to 2 minutes.

Results: Whites stayed contained, but cooking time and heat level would need tinkering for every microwave.

TEST 3
PARCOOK IN SHELLS
Method: Briefly boil eggs in shells, then scoop each parcooked egg out of shell into water.

Results: Too involved; eggs must be cool before removing from shells, which was messy and tended to break up white.

TEST 4
CREATE VORTEX
Method: Swirl water vigorously around eggs to create whirlpool.

Results: Effective at keeping whites neat but too fussy and only works for one or two eggs at a time.

TEST 5
ENCLOSE IN SPOONS
Method: Lower 1 egg at a time into boiling water in large metal spoon, using smaller second spoon to keep loose white from straying too far.

Results: Effective but fussy and only works for one egg at a time.

the water's surface, and then considered whether to lower the heat to a bare simmer or shut it off completely and cover the pot, allowing residual heat to do the cooking. I'd seen recipes calling for both methods, and after a quick test, I settled on the latter for two reasons: First, even though it was very gentle, the residual heat was still enough to allow the egg whites to set, and it was extra insurance that the yolk would stay beautifully runny. Second, in the covered environment, steam could cook the white at the very top of the eggs, which can be the most stubborn to set, without constantly turning the egg over in the water. Though timing varied slightly depending on the size of the eggs, I found that it took about 3 minutes for the white, including the top, to become nicely opaque. Plus, one advantage of poaching eggs as opposed to cooking them in their shells is that you can actually see the results and return the eggs to the pot if necessary.

And with that, I really had it: a foolproof recipe for perfect poached eggs. As ambitious as it had seemed at first, poaching eggs now felt like a quick, simple way to add protein to any meal, from eggs Benedict and corned beef hash to a salad or pasta to fried rice to polenta.

PERFECT POACHED EGGS

SERVES 2

For the best results, be sure to use the freshest eggs possible. Cracking the eggs into a colander will rid them of any watery, loose whites and result in perfectly shaped poached eggs. This recipe can be used to cook from one to four eggs. To make two batches of eggs to serve all at once, transfer four cooked eggs directly to a large pot of 150-degree water and cover them. This will keep them warm for 15 minutes or so while you return the poaching water to a boil and cook the next batch. We like to serve these eggs on buttered toast or toasted and buttered English muffins or on salads made with assertively flavored greens.

- **4 large eggs**
- **1 tablespoon distilled white vinegar**
- **Salt and pepper**

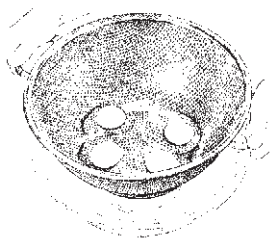
1. Bring 6 cups water to boil in Dutch oven over high heat. Meanwhile, crack eggs, one at a time, into colander. Let stand until loose, watery whites drain away from eggs, 20 to 30 seconds. Gently transfer eggs to 2-cup liquid measuring cup.

2. Add vinegar and 1 teaspoon salt to boiling water. With lip of measuring cup just above surface of water, gently tip eggs into water, one at a time, leaving space between them. Cover pot, remove from heat, and let stand until whites closest to yolks are just set and opaque, about 3 minutes. If after 3 minutes whites are not set, let stand in water, checking every 30 seconds, until eggs reach desired doneness. (For medium-cooked yolks, let eggs sit in pot, covered, for 4 minutes, then begin checking for doneness.)

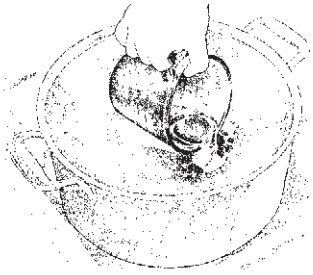
3. Using slotted spoon, carefully lift and drain each egg over Dutch oven. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve.

TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

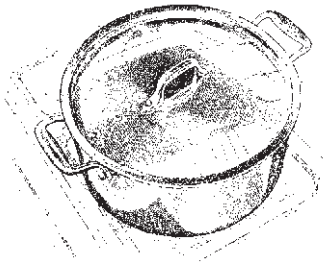
Besides adding salt and vinegar to the poaching water, which helps the whites set at a lower temperature off the heat before the faster-cooking yolks get too thick, we use these tools to achieve perfect results.



COLANDER
Draining the eggs before cooking removes the loose whites, preventing messy, wispy tendrils.



LIQUID MEASURING CUP
Pouring the eggs from a measuring cup allows us to add them to the water gently, minimizing jostling.



DUTCH OVEN WITH LID
Covering the pot allows residual heat to finish cooking the eggs, even the gooey white at the top.

Fresh Eggs = Thick Whites

A raw egg white (albumen) has two consistencies, thick and thin. The ratio of the two consistencies depends on the egg's age: In the freshest eggs, 60 percent of the white is thick, but as the egg ages, it drops to 50 percent and below. In most cooked egg applications, the albumen ratio won't be noticeable because the white is either scrambled, browned in a skillet, or cooked in the confines of the shell. A poached egg is the exception since the thin white is able to freely flow away from the thick white and cooks up ragged and wispy, not plump and tidy.

Our recipe gets around the issue of egg freshness by draining off the loose, watery white in a colander before poaching. But for the plumpest results, it's best to use the freshest eggs you can find.

FRESH

OLD

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN (TOP), JOHN BURGOYNE (BOTTOM)

German Pancake

What's the secret to achieving a tender, custardy base and a crispy, puffy rim? Ignoring one of the cardinal principles of baking.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

The German pancake, sometimes called a Dutch baby, is a study in contrasts: The edge of the skillet-size breakfast specialty puffs dramatically to form a tall, crispy rim with a texture similar to that of a popover while the base remains flat, custardy, and tender, like a thick crêpe. Luckily, this entertaining treat is far easier to prepare than its pomp and circumstance would suggest. A stir-together batter of flour, egg, and milk is simply poured into a skillet and baked. Sometimes sautéed apples are incorporated into the batter. The pancake may also be served with a fruit topping, drizzled with syrup, or sprinkled with sugar and lemon juice.

The puffy rim starts to deflate after the pancake is removed from the oven, so it is best served immediately for maximum dramatic effect.

Ballooning Up

After auditioning a number of recipes, I settled on a routine: Caramelize sliced apples with sugar in a skillet (using nonstick ensures an easy release), pour in the batter, and place the filled skillet in a 375-degree oven (the highest temperature most nonstick skillets are rated to withstand). After 20 minutes, the rim of this pancake browned and puffed while the base remained flat, with a custardy texture. However, the rim wasn't particularly tall—it had risen only 1 inch.

That said, it was interesting that it had puffed at all, since I hadn't added any leavener or incorporated air into the eggs. Rather than relying on a chemical reaction or the expansion of an egg foam to provide lift (as in a soufflé), a German pancake inflates more like a balloon (or a popover): Heat begins to set the gluten and egg proteins on the surface of the batter, forming a flexible shell. Meanwhile, water inside this shell turns to steam; the trapped steam causes the pancake "balloon" to inflate. Since popovers are made in small, cup-shaped tins, the batter is in close contact with the sides of the tins and the heat of the oven and thus inflates uniformly. A German pancake, on the other hand, bakes in a wide, shallow vessel and cooks more quickly at the edges, which are in contact with the hot sides of the skillet. This results in a distinct rim and base.

Look: It Puffs
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/june17

Puff Piece

I wondered if the apple filling was weighing things down and preventing the rim from fully expanding. If so, it would be easy enough to turn it into a topping. Testing my theory, I whisked together another batch of my basic mix: 5 eggs and 1½ cups each of flour and milk, along with salt, vanilla, lemon zest, and a pinch of nutmeg (all standard flavorings). I melted a couple of pats of butter in a skillet, added the batter, and transferred it to the oven.

Sure enough, the rim of this no-fruit pancake rose much higher, about 3 inches. But the rim verged on dry, and the section of pancake alongside the rim was overly thick and dense. Meanwhile, the very center was paper-thin. It was as if the batter had moved like an ocean wave toward the edges of the pan during baking, crested, and stayed that way.

I added an extra egg to push the texture in the direction I wanted. One more egg made the base more custardy, but it didn't add substance to the very center. The additional moisture and fat also mitigated some of the dryness at the edge. But there was a limit to the benefits since yet another egg made the pancake taste too eggy. Could I make the very center of the pancake more substantial by adding more flour? An additional ¼ cup did create a bit more depth, but any more than that made the pancake too dry.

At this point, I needed to better understand the mechanics of the dish in order to make more progress toward my goals. So I peered through the oven door during baking. When I put the skillet into the oven, the batter was an even 1 inch deep. As the batter at the edges started to rise up out of the pan—at about the 20-minute mark—the batter in the center of the pan was still fluid. Over time, as the edges started to creep northward and the rim inflated, the rim pulled more and more of the batter into itself; as that happened, the level at the center of the pan dropped. Eventually, even the center of the pancake began to set, and it began to puff there as well. But there was so little batter left at that point that it was still paper-thin.

Heating Butter Until Foaming Subsides?

Butter starts to melt at about 85 degrees and is completely liquefied at 94 degrees; when it reaches 190 degrees, it starts to foam. This is an indication that its water is evaporating and the milk proteins are forming a froth. At 212 degrees, the bubbling becomes more vigorous and the foaming subsides. While many recipes call for heating butter to this point to ensure that it's very hot, we don't typically use this direction. That's because we don't often use butter in applications that would require a really high temperature (such as frying or sautéing). In the case of German pancakes, we need only to melt the butter before pouring in the batter since it will continue to heat in the oven.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

For a More Satisfying Pancake, Start It in a Cold Oven

Most German pancake recipes call for pouring the batter into a preheated skillet and/or using a preheated oven. This means that the batter at the edges heats and puffs up very quickly, drawing some of the batter from the middle of the skillet with it and resulting in a pancake that's superthin at the center. Starting in a cold oven, on the other hand, allows the heat to build up slowly enough that the center can start to set (and maintain its thickness) before the oven reaches the temperature necessary to give maximum lift to the rim (which takes about 25 minutes). A thicker center is more satisfying to eat and is better able to stand up to a fruit topping.

How Low Could I Go?

I needed the batter at the very center to set before too much of it had migrated toward the edges. But the pancake was cooking from the outer edges inward. Would lowering the oven temperature even things out? I whipped up another batch of batter and reduced the temperature to 350 degrees. It helped, but only a little. When I went down to 325 degrees, my pancake was substantially thicker at the center, but the edges no longer rose as dramatically. Clearly the pancake needed to be above a certain temperature to ensure sufficient lift. But I was on the right track, since slowing the rate at which the pancake puffed gave the center time to set before the batter rose up the side of the rim. How about starting low and finishing high? For my next test, I started the pancake in a 250-degree oven and increased the temperature to 375 degrees after 10 minutes. Better but still not quite right. That's when I went for broke: I put the pan into a cold oven and then set the oven to 375 degrees.

This approach worked like a charm, allowing the heat to build up slowly enough that the center of the pancake could start to set before the oven reached the temperature necessary to give maximum lift to the rim (which took about 30 minutes). Now the pancake formed a near-perfect bowl shape, with a beautifully tall, crispy rim and a moist, custardy, evenly thick base. I devised a brown sugar–based topping with apples, but the pancake was a treat even with nothing more than a drizzle of maple syrup or a squeeze of lemon juice and dusting of sugar.

A German Pancake or a Dutch Baby?

German pancakes and Dutch babies are essentially the same thing, but the dish is said to have originated in Germany, not the Netherlands. The term "Dutch baby" was coined by an American restaurateur whose use of "Dutch" was a corruption of the word "Deutsch" ("German" in German). "Baby" referred to the fact that the restaurant served miniature versions.

GERMAN PANCAKE

SERVES 4

A traditional 12-inch skillet may be used in place of the nonstick skillet; coat it lightly with vegetable oil spray before using. As an alternative to sugar and lemon juice, serve the pancake with maple syrup or our Brown Sugar–Apple Topping (recipe follows). The text kitchen's favorite unsalted butter is Plugrá European-Style Unsalted Butter, and our favorite vanilla extract is McCormick Pure Vanilla Extract.

- 1¾ cups (8¾ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon grated lemon zest plus 1 tablespoon juice
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1½ cups milk
- 6 large eggs
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla extract
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter

1. Whisk flour, 3 tablespoons sugar, lemon zest, salt, and nutmeg together in large bowl. Whisk milk, eggs, and vanilla together in second bowl. Whisk two-thirds of milk mixture into flour mixture until no lumps remain, then slowly whisk in remaining milk mixture until smooth.

2. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position. Melt butter in 12-inch ovensafe nonstick skillet over medium-low heat. Add batter to skillet, immediately transfer to oven, and set oven to 375 degrees. Bake until edges are deep golden brown and center is beginning to brown, 30 to 35 minutes.

3. Transfer skillet to wire rack and sprinkle pancake with lemon juice and remaining 1 tablespoon sugar. Cut into wedges and serve.

BROWN SUGAR–APPLE TOPPING

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

You can substitute Honeycrisp or Fuji apples for the Braeburn apples, if desired.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ⅓ cup water
- ¼ cup packed (1¾ ounces) brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 1¼ pounds Braeburn apples (3 to 4 apples), peeled, cored, halved, and cut into ½-inch-thick wedges, wedges halved crosswise

Melt butter in 12-inch skillet over medium heat. Add water, sugar, cinnamon, and salt and whisk until sugar dissolves. Add apples, increase heat to medium-high, and bring to simmer. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Uncover and continue to cook until apples are translucent and just tender and sauce is thickened, 5 to 7 minutes longer. Transfer to bowl and serve. (Topping can be refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

TESTING

Syrup Dispensers

Pouring maple syrup or honey onto your breakfast can result in sticky tables, counters, fingers, and more—especially when kids are involved. Maple syrup dispensers promise to reduce mess when pouring the sweet stuff over pancakes and waffles. We tested five models priced from $7.80 to $42.00, and one, the American Metalcraft Beehive Syrup Dispenser, 6 oz, quickly moved to the front of the pack. Its simple design made it easy to fill and clean, and it poured like a dream. One minor quibble: It's not microwave-safe. But it's a mess-saver and a bargain at just about eight bucks.

–Lisa McManus

RECOMMENDED

AMERICAN METALCRAFT
Beehive Syrup Dispenser, 6 oz
MODEL: BSD64
PRICE: $7.80
COMMENTS: This winning dispenser's spring-loaded spout cover worked like a charm and can be opened as much or as little as you like, allowing you to pour neatly and precisely. It was easy to fill and clean, too.

NOT RECOMMENDED

NORPRO Honey/Syrup Dispenser
MODEL: 780
PRICE: $18.99
COMMENTS: This vessel dispenses from its bottom, which sits in a base that can be filled with warm water to keep syrup soft and flowing. It works beautifully until it's time to refill—an awkward, messy operation.

Modern Fresh Fruit Tart

A showpiece when whole, a classic fresh fruit tart rarely retains its good looks when sliced—a pity, when it takes hours to make. A new approach was in order.

BY LAN LAM

A fresh fruit tart is the showpiece of a bakery pastry case—and for good reason. With its clean crust edge and ornate arrangement of fruit glistening with glaze, this dessert is beautiful and conveys a sense of occasion. But anyone who has served one knows that the pretty presentation literally falls apart when the knife meets the tart. Instead of neat wedges, you get shards of pastry oozing messy fruit and juice-stained filling. That's a disappointing end for a dessert that started out so impressive and required several hours to make.

It seemed to me that the classic fresh fruit tart needed to be reconceptualized from crust to crown. I wanted the crust and filling to be sturdy and stable enough to retain their form when cut, and I wanted to streamline the preparation of these two components. That might mean departing from tradition, but as long as the tart looked pretty and featured a buttery crust complementing a satiny filling and bright, sweet, juicy fruit, I was ready for new ideas.

With browned butter in the crust and mascarpone and lime in the filling, our revamped fruit tart packs much more flavor than classic versions.

Crust Ease

As it turned out, there were plenty of published recipes touting innovative approaches to the fresh fruit tart, starting with the crust. The most promising one traded the traditional *pâte sucrée*—in which cold butter is worked into flour and sugar, chilled, and rolled out—for a simpler pat-in-the-pan crust. This style of crust calls for nothing more than melting the butter and stirring it into the flour mixture to create a pliable dough that is easily pressed into the pan (I was using a 9-inch tart pan with a removable bottom) and baked. I tried one such recipe: While the result was crisp and cookie-like rather than flaky, it still made a nice contrast to the creamy filling.

I had one tweak in mind: Since I would be melting the butter anyway, I'd try browning it to give the pastry a richer, nuttier character. But when I did this, the dough seemed dry and produced a sandy, cracked crust. I realized that by browning the butter, I had cooked off all its water (about 18 percent of butter's weight). That meant there wasn't enough moisture for the proteins in the flour to form the gluten necessary to hold the crust together. Hoping the fix was as simple as putting back some moisture, I added a couple of tablespoons of water to the browned butter before mixing it with the dry ingredients. This worked perfectly: The dough was more cohesive and, after 30 minutes in a 350-degree oven, formed a crust that held together.

On to the filling. I wasn't keen on the traditional pastry cream, since you have to cook it, strain it, and let it cool before it's ready to use. Plus, it would be good to create a filling that wouldn't ooze from the crust when sliced. What I needed was something that was thick and creamy from the get-go. Mascarpone, the creamy, tangy-sweet fresh cheese that's the star of tiramisù and many other Italian desserts, seemed like a good option. Sweetened with a little sugar and spread over the tart shell, it was a workable starting point, but it still wasn't dense enough to hold its shape when sliced. Thickeners such as gelatin, pectin, and cornstarch required either cooking or hydrating in liquid to be effective, as well as several hours to set up. A colleague had a better idea: white chocolate. I could melt it in the microwave and stir it into the mascarpone. Since white chocolate is solid at room temperature, it would firm up the filling as it cooled.

I melted white baking chips (they resulted in a firmer texture than white chocolate, which contains cocoa butter) in the microwave and quickly realized that the melted mass was too thick to incorporate evenly into the mascarpone. I started again, this time adding ¼ cup of heavy cream, which loosened up the baking chips just enough for them to blend into the cheese. When the filling was homogeneous, I smoothed it into the cooled crust, gently pressed in the fruit while the filling was still slightly warm (once cooled completely it would be too firm to hold the fruit neatly), brushed on a jam glaze, and refrigerated the tart for 30 minutes so the filling would set. I then allowed the tart to sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before slicing it.

The filling was satiny and, thanks to the baking chips, nicely firm. But I wondered if I could give it a little more oomph. In my next attempt I added bright, fruity lime juice, which—despite being a liquid—wouldn't loosen the filling. Instead, the acid would act on the cream's proteins, causing them to thicken; meanwhile, the cream's fat would prevent any graininess.

Since heating the lime juice would drive off its

See How It's Done
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/aug17

When Things Fall Apart

Beautiful but fragile, most fresh fruit tarts crumble as soon as they're sliced.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

bright flavor, I stirred it in with the mascarpone; it paired beautifully with the rich cheese and white chocolate. For even more lime flavor, I added a teaspoon of zest, heating it with the chocolate and cream to draw out its flavor-packed oils.

Edible Arrangements

Up to this point I'd been topping the tart with just berries, since they're easy to work with and colorful. For even more appeal, I decided to add a couple of ripe peaches, peeled and cut into thin slices. But before I placed the fruit on the filling, I thought carefully about how to arrange it. Many tarts feature fruit organized in concentric circles. These look great when whole, but since you have to cut through the fruit when slicing, it winds up mangled, with the berries bleeding juice into the filling. Why not arrange the fruit so that the knife could slip between pieces?

First, I spaced eight berries around the outer edge of the tart. I then used these berries as guides to help me evenly arrange eight sets of three slightly overlapping peach slices so that they radiated from the center of the tart to its outer edge. The peach slices would serve as cutting guides for eight wedges. Next, I artfully arranged a mix of berries on each wedge. The final touch: I made a quick glaze using apricot preserves that I thinned with lime juice for easy dabbing.

The crisp, sturdy, rich crust; satiny yet stable filling; and bright-tasting fruit added up to a classic showpiece with modern flavor. Best of all, it was quick to make, and each slice looked just as polished and professional as the whole tart.

FRESH FRUIT TART

SERVES 8

This recipe calls for extra berries to account for any bruising. Ripe, unpeeled nectarines can be substituted for the peaches, if desired. Use white baking chips here and not white chocolate bars, which contain cocoa butter and will result in a loose filling. Use a light hand when dabbing on the glaze; too much force will dislodge the fruit. If the glaze begins to solidify while dabbing, microwave it for 5 to 10 seconds.

Crust

- 1⅓ cups (6⅔ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup (1¾ ounces) sugar
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 10 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons water

Tart

- ⅓ cup (2 ounces) white baking chips
- ¼ cup heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon grated lime zest plus 7 teaspoons juice (2 limes)
- Pinch salt
- 6 ounces (¾ cup) mascarpone cheese, room temperature
- 2 ripe peaches, peeled
- 20 ounces (4 cups) raspberries, blackberries, and blueberries
- ⅓ cup apricot preserves

1. FOR THE CRUST: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Whisk flour, sugar, and salt together in bowl. Melt butter in small saucepan over medium-high heat, swirling saucepan occasionally, until foaming subsides. Cook, stirring and scraping bottom of saucepan with heatproof spatula, until milk solids are dark golden brown and butter has nutty aroma, 1 to 3 minutes. Remove saucepan from heat and add water. When bubbling subsides, transfer butter to bowl with flour mixture and stir until well combined. Transfer dough to 9-inch tart pan with removable bottom and let dough rest until just warm, about 10 minutes.

2. Use your hands to evenly press and smooth dough over bottom and up side of pan (using two-thirds of dough for bottom crust and remaining third for side). Place pan on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet and bake until crust is golden brown, 25 to 30 minutes, rotating pan halfway through baking. Let crust cool completely, about 1 hour. (Cooled crust can be wrapped loosely in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 24 hours.)

3. FOR THE TART: Microwave baking chips, cream, lime zest, and salt in medium bowl, stirring every 10 seconds, until baking chips are melted, 30 to 60 seconds. Whisk in one-third of mascarpone, then whisk in 6 teaspoons lime juice and remaining mascarpone until smooth. Transfer filling to tart shell and spread into even layer.

4. Place peach, stem side down, on cutting board. Placing knife just to side of pit, cut down to remove 1 side of peach. Turn peach 180 degrees and cut off opposite side. Cut off remaining 2 sides. Place pieces cut side down and slice ¼ inch thick. Repeat with second peach. Select best 24 slices.

5. Evenly space 8 berries around outer edge of tart. Using berries as guide, arrange 8 sets of 3 peach slices in filling, slightly overlapping slices with rounded sides up, starting at center and ending on right side of each berry. Arrange remaining berries in attractive pattern between peach slices, covering as much of filling as possible and keeping fruit in even layer.

6. Microwave preserves and remaining 1 teaspoon lime juice in small bowl until fluid, 20 to 30 seconds. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer. Using pastry brush, gently dab mixture over fruit, avoiding crust. Refrigerate tart for 30 minutes.

7. Remove outer metal ring of tart pan. Slide thin metal spatula between tart and pan bottom to loosen tart, then carefully slide tart onto serving platter. Let tart sit at room temperature for 15 minutes. Using peaches as guide, cut tart into wedges and serve. (Tart can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours. If refrigerated for more than 1 hour, let tart sit at room temperature for 1 hour before serving.)

STEP BY STEP | MAKE AN EDIBLE SLICING GUIDE

Strategically arranging the fruit isn't all about looks. It can make it easier to cut clean slices, too.

1. Evenly arrange 8 berries around outer edge of tart.

2. Arrange 8 sets of 3 overlapping peach slices from center to edge of tart on right side of each berry.

3. Arrange remaining berries in attractive pattern between peach slices in even layer to cover filling.

Our Simpler, Sturdier, More Flavorful Fruit Tart

To produce a showstopping tart in less time and with less effort, we streamlined the preparation of the crust and the filling. Along the way, we added richer, more complex flavor, too.

PAT-IN-THE-PAN CRUST

The rich browned-butter dough comes together in minutes—then you just press it into the pan.

NO-COOK FILLING

Melted white baking chips and lime juice make our mascarpone filling creamy, tangy, and sliceable.

French Butter Cake

Hailing from France's Brittany coast, gâteau Breton boasts a bright jam filling and a rich, dense texture, which elevate this rustic cake to a first-class confection.

BY STEVE DUNN

I first encountered gâteau Breton years ago while living in France, and I was smitten from my first bite. As its name implies, the cake hails from the Brittany region of France, which lies on the western edge of the country, abutting the Atlantic Ocean. It's a simple yet pretty cake, rich in butter, with a dense, tender crumb that falls somewhere between shortbread cookies and pound cake. In my favorite versions, the cake camouflages a thin layer of jam or fruit filling baked into its center, which delivers a vein of sweet acidity that balances the cake's richness. The cake's firm structure allows it to be cut into thin wedges for nibbling with an afternoon cup of tea, but in my experience, a portion so small is never enough.

When I tried my hand at gâteau Breton by baking five existing recipes, I quickly learned that there are plenty of ways to go wrong. One cake, made with buckwheat flour (an ancient tradition from the days when wheat flour was unavailable in Brittany), was dry enough for a colleague to liken it to "compressed sawdust." The center of another was so wet and gummy that folks were convinced it included gooey marzipan. As for the fillings, most tasted flat and were thin and runny; spreading them evenly over the sticky batter proved to be quite a challenge. I wanted a cake with a crumb to rival the very best I had enjoyed in France, along with a lively filling with a workable consistency.

The rich, dense texture of gâteau Breton lies somewhere between shortbread and pound cake.

Beau Gâteau

Most modern recipes call for four main ingredients: all-purpose flour, salted butter, sugar, and egg yolks. (Since the test kitchen almost exclusively uses unsalted butter for baking, I would investigate later whether salted butter was worth a special purchase.) I used one of the better recipes from my first round of testing as a starting point. It was pleasantly dense but a little too wet and greasy, so I spent a few afternoons in the test kitchen, baking gâteau after gâteau and slowly increasing the amount of dry ingredients and decreasing the amount of butter until I got a cake I liked.

I also examined the technique. Most recipes call for creaming the butter and sugar before incorporating the yolks and flour, and some specify upwards of 10 minutes of creaming. But extensive creaming incorporated too much air into the batter and resulted in a light, fluffy crumb—just the opposite of what I wanted. Ultimately, I landed on creaming two sticks of butter with a little less than 1 cup of sugar in a stand mixer for only 3 minutes, adding 5 yolks one at a time, and finally mixing in 2 cups of flour. This produced an ultrathick batter that baked up with the trademark firm yet tender crumb that I was after.

With the cake nailed down, I dug deeper into the butter issue. Bretons insist that their local butter made with sea salt is key to this cake, so I arranged a head-to-head comparison of cake made with the test kitchen's favorite salted butter, Lurpak (a cultured butter from Denmark), and cake made with our favorite unsalted sticks, from Land O'Lakes (with some salt stirred into the batter to compensate). Not surprisingly, tasters found that the European butter delivered a slightly more complex cake, but in the end I decided that the difference wasn't enough to warrant the extra cost or trip to the market.

I did, however, want to explore other ways to add complexity. In France, liquor is often used as a flavor enhancer for this cake, so why not add some to mine? I experimented with kirsch and Calvados before finally settling on dark rum for its rich caramel notes. I also added vanilla extract for even more depth.

In a Jam

I'd produced a rich, flavorful cake with just the right dense texture. Now it was time to address the filling. A prune puree is traditional, and while I did end up developing a prune variation, I preferred to showcase a version with a brighter, bolder filling. I'd seen recipes featuring chocolate, date, or apricot fillings, and apricot seemed like the ideal foil to my buttery cake.

Unfortunately, store-bought apricot jam was too sweet and dull; plus, it was too thin and runny to work well as a filling. You see, when constructing this cake, you first spread half the thick batter in the bottom of a buttered cake pan, and then you layer on the filling before finally spreading the rest of the batter on top and baking the cake. If the filling is too thin, it'll either get picked up and mixed in with the batter or leak from the sides of the cake as it bakes, creating a real mess.

I thought that reducing the jam might concentrate its flavor and give me the consistency I wanted, but ultimately I decided to craft my own filling from dried apricots so that I could achieve the exact flavor and consistency I wanted.

Too bad my first batch didn't taste very good. I had made the puree with dried Turkish apricots, and they just didn't have enough oomph. Using dried California apricots remedied this weakness in a hurry: Their concentrated sweet-tart flavor delivered a bright, fruity zing (for more information, see "Dried Apricots"). I chopped up the apricots, tossed them into a blender with enough water to engage the blade, and whizzed them until smooth.

Steve Explains It All
A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/feb17

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

TECHNIQUE

QUICK CHILL FOR EASIER ASSEMBLY

To make gâteau Breton, a fruit filling is baked between two layers of batter. To facilitate the process, we briefly freeze the first layer of batter so it stays put when the filling is added. We then return the pan to the freezer so the filling doesn't budge when a second layer is spread on top.

A HOT MESS

If the batter isn't chilled before the filling is added, the two components will smear together instead of remaining distinct.

After cooking the puree in a skillet with sugar until it thickened and darkened slightly, I squeezed in a bit of fresh lemon juice. Now I had a thick, fruity puree to highlight the rich, buttery cake.

To make the assembly of the cake foolproof, I experimented with what a fellow test cook called a "jam dam," a lip of batter at the edge of the pan designed to hold the filling in place and keep it from oozing out the sides of the cake during baking. It worked well enough in that regard but did little to keep the jam from mixing with the cake batter. Ultimately, I solved the problem with a bakery trick: quickly chilling the first layer of batter by sliding the cake pan into the freezer. Given the high concentration of butter in this cake, just 10 minutes of chilling did the trick: The batter became so firm that it didn't budge when I spooned on the apricot puree. Putting the pan back into the freezer for 10 minutes once the jam layer was on ensured that everything stayed put when the remaining batter was added.

All that was left to do was pretty up the cake with a simple egg wash and decoration. Here, I didn't deviate at all from tradition. I first brushed the cake with an egg yolk beaten with a teaspoon of water (this would give it a slight sheen) and then gently dragged the tines of a fork across the cake's surface in a crisscrossing diamond pattern. This branded my dessert as a classic gâteau Breton and was the final step in ensuring that my beautiful, buttery cake held true to its roots.

TECHNIQUE

SOFTENING BUTTER

Using room-temperature butter makes the creaming process faster. Let the sticks sit at room temperature for about an hour to soften. Alternatively, cut the butter into 1-tablespoon chunks. By the time you've preheated the oven and measured the remaining ingredients, the pieces should be near 65 degrees, the right temperature for creaming.

IS IT SOFT ENOUGH?

A stick that's ready for creaming bends easily.

GÂTEAU BRETON WITH APRICOT FILLING

SERVES 8

We strongly prefer the flavor of California apricots in the filling. Mediterranean (or Turkish) apricots can be used, but increase the amount of lemon juice to 2 tablespoons. This cake is traditionally served plain with coffee or tea but can be dressed up with fresh berries, if desired.

Filling

- ⅔ cup water
- ½ cup dried California apricots, chopped
- ⅓ cup (2⅓ ounces) sugar
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice

Cake

- 16 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- ¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons (6⅛ ounces) sugar
- 6 large egg yolks (1 lightly beaten with 1 teaspoon water)
- 2 tablespoons dark rum
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 cups (10 ounces) all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt

1. FOR THE FILLING: Process water and apricots in blender until uniformly pureed, about 2 minutes. Transfer puree to 10-inch nonstick skillet and stir in sugar. Set skillet over medium heat and cook, stirring frequently, until puree has darkened slightly and rubber spatula leaves distinct trail when dragged across bottom of pan, 10 to 12 minutes. Transfer filling to bowl and stir in lemon juice. Refrigerate filling until cool to touch, about 15 minutes.

2. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease 9-inch round cake pan.

3. Using stand mixer fitted with paddle, beat butter on medium-high speed until smooth and lightened in color, 1 to 2 minutes. Add sugar and continue to beat until pale and fluffy, about 3 minutes longer. Add 5 egg yolks, one at a time, and beat until combined. Scrape down bowl, add rum and vanilla, and mix until incorporated, about 1 minute. Reduce speed to low, add flour and salt, and mix until flour is just incorporated, about 30 seconds. Give batter final stir by hand.

4. Spoon half of batter into bottom of prepared pan. Using small offset spatula, spread batter into even layer. Freeze for 10 minutes.

5. Spread ½ cup filling in even layer over chilled batter, leaving ¾-inch border around edge (reserve remaining filling for another use). Freeze for 10 minutes.

6. Gently spread remaining batter over filling. Using offset spatula, carefully smooth top of batter. Brush with egg yolk wash. Using tines of fork, make light scores in surface of cake, spaced about 1½ inches apart, in diamond pattern, being careful not to score all the way to sides of pan. Bake until top is golden brown and edges of cake start to pull away from sides of pan, 45 to 50 minutes. Let cake cool in pan on wire rack for 30 minutes. Run paring knife between cake and sides of pan, remove cake from pan, and let cool completely on rack, about 1 hour. Cut into wedges and serve.

SHOPPING Dried Apricots

CALIFORNIAN VERSUS TURKISH

Turkish apricots are cheaper than the Californian variety, but we found that they lack the intensely sweet-tart flavor of those grown domestically. Turkish apricots are the Malatya variety, which has a less concentrated flavor than the Patterson and Blenheim varieties prevalent in California. In addition, Turkish apricots are "slip-pitted": The pit is removed from whole slit fruit, rather than the fruit being halved and pitted as apricots are in California. Slip-pitting results in more moisture retention, which dilutes flavor.

TURKISH
Dull flavor

CALIFORNIAN
Bright flavor

SULFURED VERSUS UNSULFURED

Both Turkish and Californian apricots are often treated with sulfur dioxide to prevent browning, oxidation, and flavor changes. When we prepared the apricot filling for our gâteau Breton with sulfured and unsulfured apricots, we preferred the deeply fruity flavor and bright color of the former. (That said, the unsulfured type was acceptable.)

Chocolate Sheet Cake

Our cake boasts a deeply chocolaty crumb, plush frosting, and a fuss-free method. Plus, it taught us something new about cocoa powder.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Sheet cakes don't require the work that goes into making layer cakes; they are simply spread with a thick coat of frosting and served straight from the pan. When the results are good, a sheet cake yields great reward for the effort. But most versions I've made are dry and crumbly, have barely a whisper of chocolate flavor, or are so dense that they verge on brownie territory. Loose, drippy frostings make cakes too messy to eat out of hand, while stiff, fudgy ones weigh down the crumb; more often than not, they're cloyingly sweet, too.

The kind of chocolate sheet cake I could turn to again and again would boast a tender, moist, sturdy crumb that was seriously chocolaty and a silky chocolate frosting just sweet enough to stand apart from the flavor of the cake. It would come together with baking staples and basic equipment—no mixers or food processors needed.

Both the cake and frosting are mixed by hand and come together with no more than a half-hour of active time.

Cocoa Loco

Some recipes for chocolate cake call for cocoa powder but no bar chocolate, but we've found that using both produces cakes with deeper chocolate flavor. That's because, ounce for ounce, cocoa powder packs more chocolate flavor than any other form of chocolate, while bar chocolate adds complexity, fat, and sugar.

In fact, when I made a series of chocolate cakes to get my bearings, the one with the fullest chocolate flavor contained plenty of both—¾ cup of cocoa powder and 8 ounces of melted bittersweet chocolate. That recipe didn't specify which type of cocoa to use, natural or Dutch-processed, but I used the latter. We reserve Dutch-processed cocoa, which tends to be more expensive, for recipes where cocoa makes up a significant portion of the batter because we've found that its flavor is more complex and balanced than that of natural cocoa; "Dutching" refers to processing the cocoa with an alkali that neutralizes its natural acidity.

To make a basic chocolate cake batter, I melted butter with the chocolate and added the cocoa powder so that its flavor molecules would release fully (or "bloom"). Then I whisked eggs with sugar; added the butter-chocolate-cocoa mixture, milk, and vanilla; and whisked in the dry ingredients (flour, salt, and baking soda) until a smooth batter formed. This "dump-and-stir" method is fast and easy and also produces a less crumbly cake than the creaming method. In that method, flour is combined with creamed butter and sugar alternately with liquid, so some of the flour becomes coated in fat and thus can't interact with water to form gluten. And the less gluten, the more crumbly the cake.

I poured the batter into a greased 13 by 9-inch baking pan, which would produce a higher ratio of cake to frosting than a baking sheet would. I baked it at 325 degrees for about 30 minutes. It wasn't too sweet, but despite loading up the batter with cocoa and chocolate, it lacked the chocolate punch and depth that I was hoping for.

Fortunately, trading the melted butter for vegetable oil solved that; its neutral flavor produced a cleaner-tasting cake that allowed the chocolate to shine. I also saved myself a couple of bowls to wash by mixing the dry and wet ingredients into the saucepan where I'd heated the chocolate mixture.

Before focusing on the frosting, I made the cake with natural cocoa, just to check that it worked. I'd expected this cake to be paler (Dutching raises the pH of cocoa, darkening its color) and a bit less complex in flavor, but what caught me by surprise was its noticeably drier crumb. To be sure that I hadn't overbaked the cake, I made several more, using multiple natural cocoas, and was met with the same dry result each time. It wasn't until I did some digging about cocoa—including talking to Clay Gordon, the creator and moderator of chocolatelife.com, a clearinghouse for chocolate information—that I understood the problem: In addition to being more acidic than Dutch-processed cocoas, most natural cocoas are much lower in fat, which makes them very absorbent. In essence, the low-fat natural cocoas were robbing the cake of moisture (for more information, see "Dry Cake? Check Your Cocoa"). I'd be sticking with the Dutch-processed cocoa for sure.

Icing on the Cake

A simple sheet cake deserves an equally simple frosting—one that can be stirred together while the cake bakes. That eliminated buttercreams, which require hauling out a stand mixer or food processor. For something creamy and spreadable, I considered a ganache. This frosting often takes the form of a pourable glaze of melted chocolate and cream, sometimes gilded with softened butter. But ganache can range from soupy to stiff, depending on the ratio of cream and butter to chocolate, so I would adjust

When Chocolate Cake Became Chocolate

American chocolate cake as we know it—one that contains chocolate, cocoa powder, or both—is a relatively young dessert. The term "chocolate cake" originally referred to a yellow or vanilla cake that was served with a chocolate beverage. Only once chocolate became cheaper, around 1940, did home cooks start baking with large amounts of cocoa and recipes for truly chocolaty cakes come about.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; HERSHEY'S RECIPES PHOTO: COPYRIGHT 1940, THE HERSHEY COMPANY (USED WITH PERMISSION)

the ratio of those ingredients until I had something thick and creamy.

One recipe I'd tried called for spreading the cake with a milk chocolate ganache, the lighter flavor of which countered the darker cake nicely. Riffing on this idea, I landed on ⅔ cup cream heated with a pound of chocolate; the high proportion of chocolate gave me a thicker ganache than most standard recipes. I then added 2 sticks of softened butter, which lent it body and made it spreadable at room temperature. But waiting for my frosting to cool took 2 to 3 hours, so I refrigerated it, which cooled it down within an hour so that it was ready to use when the cake finished cooling. Then I gave the mixture a good whisk, which made it smooth and creamy, before slathering a thick layer of it over the cake.

The dark, complex cake and milky-sweet, satiny frosting was a combination that I knew would tempt both milk and dark chocoholics alike. And since it comes together with baking staples and an unfussy, appliance-free mixing method, this is a chocolate cake built for any cook and any occasion.

CHOCOLATE SHEET CAKE WITH MILK CHOCOLATE FROSTING

SERVES 12

While any high-quality chocolate can be used here, our preferred bittersweet chocolates are Ghirardelli 60% Cacao Bittersweet Chocolate Premium Baking Bar and Callebaut Intense Dark Chocolate, L-60-40NV, and our favorite milk chocolate is Dove Silky Smooth Milk Chocolate. We recommend making this cake with a Dutch-processed cocoa powder; our favorite is from Droste. Using a natural cocoa powder will result in a drier cake.

Cake

- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) granulated sugar
- 1¼ cups (6¼ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup whole milk
- 8 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine
- ¾ cup (2¼ ounces) Dutch-processed cocoa powder
- ⅔ cup vegetable oil
- 4 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Frosting

- 1 pound milk chocolate, chopped
- ⅔ cup heavy cream
- 16 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 16 pieces and softened

1. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Lightly spray 13 by 9-inch baking pan with vegetable oil spray. Whisk sugar, flour, baking soda, and salt together in medium bowl; set aside.

2. Combine milk, chocolate, and cocoa in large saucepan. Place saucepan over low heat and cook, whisking frequently, until chocolate is melted and mixture is smooth. Remove from heat and let cool slightly, about 5 minutes. Whisk oil, eggs, and vanilla into chocolate mixture (mixture may initially look curdled) until smooth and homogeneous. Add sugar mixture and whisk until combined, making sure to scrape corners of saucepan.

3. Transfer batter to prepared pan; bake until firm in center when lightly pressed and toothpick inserted in center comes out with few crumbs attached, 30 to 35 minutes, rotating pan halfway through baking. Let cake cool completely in pan on wire rack before frosting, 1 to 2 hours.

4. FOR THE FROSTING: While cake is baking, combine chocolate and cream in large heatproof bowl set over saucepan filled with 1 inch barely simmering water, making sure that water does not touch bottom of bowl. Whisk mixture occasionally until chocolate is uniformly smooth and glossy, 10 to 15 minutes. Remove bowl from saucepan. Add butter, whisking once or twice to break up pieces. Let mixture stand for 5 minutes to finish melting butter, then whisk until completely smooth. Refrigerate frosting, without stirring, until cooled and thickened, 30 minutes to 1 hour.

5. Once cool, whisk frosting until smooth. (Whisked frosting will lighten in color slightly and should hold its shape on whisk.) Spread frosting evenly over top of cake. Cut cake into squares and serve out of pan. (Leftover cake can be refrigerated in airtight container for up to 2 days.)

DUTCHED COCOA

Free moisture does not get bound up with the starches, so the cake is more moist.

NATURAL COCOA

Free moisture gets bound up with the higher level of starches, so the cake is drier.

SCIENCE Dry Cake? Check Your Cocoa

There are two types of unsweetened cocoa powder: natural and what is known as Dutch-processed. The Dutch-processed kind is often more expensive, but in recipes that call for a hefty amount of cocoa powder (more than ½ cup), it is worth seeking out. For one thing, Dutched cocoa has been neutralized with alkali to take away some of the cacao bean's harsher, more acidic notes. But here's another, far less well-known reason: Dutched cocoas typically have far more fat than natural cocoas, sometimes twice as much. Fat adds a perception of moisture in baked goods. In addition, cocoa powders with more fat contain less starch. Why is that important? Starch absorbs free moisture in a batter, so the crumb bakes up drier. In fact, the starches in cocoa powder absorb up to 100 percent of the powder's weight. (Compare that with the starches in flour, which can absorb only 60 percent of the flour's own weight.) This helps explain why we found our cake to be noticeably moister when made with Dutched rather than with natural cocoa powders.

But not just any Dutched cocoa will do, since fat percentages vary. Our recommended cocoa from Droste contains 22 percent fat. Compare that with the 11.9 percent in Equal Exchange Dutch Processed Cocoa Powder, an amount that's similar to those of most natural cocoas. The takeaway: In baked goods that call for a higher proportion of cocoa powder, we'll be calling for higher-fat Dutch-processed cocoas not just for their rounder flavor but for the moist texture they provide.

FROSTING CONSISTENCY, BEFORE AND AFTER

Because both chocolate and butter are fluid when warm and solid at room temperature, the frosting consistency will change from start to finish.

At first, the frosting will be pourable and warm.

Once cooled, the frosting will be thicker and stiffer. Giving it a quick whisk after chilling will make it smooth and spreadable.

Watch It Happen
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/apr17

Gingerbread Layer Cake

Leave gingerbread people to the kids. The best vehicle for seriously sophisticated flavor is a tender, moist showstopper cake.

BY ANDREA GEARY

As I get older, I find myself increasingly drawn to the dark side. Before you start to worry for my immortal soul, let me clarify: I'm talking gingerbread. I've made the same gently spiced, fancifully frosted gingerbread cookies every Christmas since I was 12 years old, but I no longer find them all that satisfying. What I really crave is dark, moist gingerbread cake, the kind with an intriguing hint of bitterness and a peppery finish. Unfortunately, it's usually a homely, unadorned square or loaf, and it might even be a bit sunken and damp. Such rusticity, no matter how delicious, seems out of place on a fancy holiday table.

But if I could transform humble gingerbread into a stately layer cake, I'd have a dessert to satisfy both my sense of occasion and my desire for complex ginger flavor. Ideally, it would deliver all the dark moistness and spicy punch of traditional gingerbread but in a more sophisticated package.

We pack in plenty of ground ginger along with the freshly grated kind and then add flavorful sparkle with a garnish of chopped crystallized ginger.

Feel the Burn

I started with a recipe for a regal-looking four-layer cake that contained both molasses and stout, which I hoped would provide a touch of bitterness and a dramatically dark crumb. The other attraction? It looked really easy to make.

I combined the molasses and stout and stirred in some baking soda, a traditional step that neutralizes acidic ingredients and seems to allow ginger flavor to shine through. (At least that's what my tasters concluded when I did a side-by-side test with a cake in which I'd added the baking soda to the dry ingredients instead.) Next, I whisked in eggs, vegetable oil, and both brown and granulated sugars. Then I stirred in the other dry ingredients: flour, ginger and other ground spices, baking powder, and salt. I divided the batter between two 8-inch round cake pans and baked them.

The stout and molasses produced a beautiful dark crumb with great depth, but the cake lacked a gingery zing despite containing 2 tablespoons of ground ginger. Also, it was overly moist at the center, which made splitting each layer tricky.

For my next batch, I ruthlessly stripped out all the extraneous spices—cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and cardamom—so the ginger could be the sole focus. I augmented the fiery ground ginger with 1 tablespoon of the sweet and spicy grated fresh kind. And yet the ginger flavor was still not as intense as I wanted it to be. In fact, this cake was heading toward downright boring. I doubled the fresh ginger and added back a bit of cinnamon—barely detectable but enough to support the ginger.

And how better to increase pepperiness than to add actual pepper? I opted for white pepper, which is made by soaking fully ripened black peppercorns in water to ferment before removing their outer seed coats. Although stripping the seed coats removes many of the volatile oils and aroma compounds responsible for pepper's heat, the fermentation period gives white pepper an earthy, floral flavor. I also added a pinch of sinus-clearing cayenne.

Now the flavor was just where I wanted it. But the cake was still so sticky that I couldn't picture splitting it successfully. Also, I had objections to a couple of ingredients.

Smart Subs

Brown sugar is just molasses mixed with granulated sugar, so did this recipe really require all three? I took out the brown sugar and increased the granulated, and I got the same flavor with one less ingredient.

Now, about that stout. I wondered if there was anything that could do the same job without requiring (for me, at least) a trip to the liquor store. As it happens, I'm a coffee drinker, and coffee ticked both the "dark color" and "bitter edge" boxes and supplied a different but equally likeable flavor.

But unfortunately the cake was still overly moist and sticky. The batter was quite loose, so I could fix the excess moisture problem by cutting back on the molasses or coffee or adding a bit more flour. But both strategies would lighten the color and dull the flavor. Instead, I added a conventional ingredient that's unconventional in gingerbread: cocoa powder. Cocoa contains a high proportion of absorbent starch. Just ¼ cup of it soaked up the cake's excess moisture, so the crumb was no longer objectionably sticky. The cocoa also deepened the color and flavor without making the cake taste chocolaty. As a bonus, it made the crumb more tender (see "Cocoa Powder Packs a Punch").

Now the cake layers were less sticky, but the prospect of splitting them to make my coveted four-layer cake remained daunting. Well, I thought, if I wanted to end up with four layers, why couldn't I just bake

Andrea Bakes the Cake
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

Cocoa Powder Packs a Punch

Just ¼ cup of cocoa powder offers multiple benefits to our Gingerbread Layer Cake, all without making it taste discernibly chocolaty.

- Its bitterness provides complexity and helps balance the sugar's sweetness.
- Its superabsorbent starch soaks up excess moisture from the molasses and coffee.
- It dilutes the gluten in the mix, making a more tender cake.
- It deepens the color of the crumb.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

them that way? It was a tiny bit more work to bake four layers in two batches, but because the slimmer layers baked and cooled more quickly than two thicker ones, the whole process clocked in about 30 minutes faster. (See "A Faster, Better Route to Four Layers.") And because they set up faster, the thinner cakes didn't have a chance to dome (caused by the outside setting faster than the middle), so I ended up with nice flat layers. Accuse me of splitting hairs, but I'll tell you what I'm not doing: splitting layers.

Fearless Frosting

As for frosting, the usual cream cheese frosting seemed too ordinary. I seized the opportunity to try out an old-fashioned (and frankly odd-sounding) recipe: ermine frosting. You cook flour, cornstarch, milk, and sugar in a pot until the mixture is thick. When it cools to a gel, you whip it with soft butter and a bit of vanilla. I was skeptical, but devotees described it as fluffy, creamy, and not too sweet. I gave it a try, finding that the cooled gel, with its gray, translucent cast, didn't look promising. Things didn't improve when I mixed the gel into the butter (which I had beaten in a stand mixer until fluffy), as the mixture appeared curdled. But with continued whipping, it formed one of the lushest, silkiest frostings I had ever seen (see "Three Stages of Ermine Frosting"). Its simple flavor was the perfect complement to my spicy cake.

I sprinkled chopped crystallized ginger along the top edge of the cake for flavor and sparkle, and with that, my holiday gingerbread revamp was complete.

GINGERBREAD LAYER CAKE

SERVES 12 TO 16

Transferring the milk mixture to a wide bowl will ensure that it cools within 2 hours. A rasp-style grater makes quick work of grating the ginger. Use a 2-cup liquid measuring cup to portion the cake batter. Baking four thin cake layers two at a time eliminates the need to halve thicker layers. Do not use blackstrap molasses here, as it is too bitter.

Frosting

- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- ¼ cup (1¼ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1½ cups milk
- 24 tablespoons (3 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Cake

- 1¾ cups (8¾ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup (¾ ounce) unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 tablespoons ground ginger
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground white pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 cup brewed coffee
- ¾ cup molasses
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- ¾ cup vegetable oil
- 3 large eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons finely grated fresh ginger
- ¼ cup chopped crystallized ginger (optional)

1. FOR THE FROSTING: Whisk sugar, flour, cornstarch, and salt together in medium saucepan. Slowly whisk in milk until smooth. Cook over medium heat, whisking constantly and scraping corners of saucepan, until mixture is boiling and is very thick, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer milk mixture to wide bowl and let cool completely, about 2 hours.

2. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour two 8-inch round cake pans and line pans with parchment paper. Whisk flour, cocoa, ground ginger, baking powder, cinnamon, salt, pepper, and cayenne together in large bowl. Whisk coffee, molasses, and baking soda in second large bowl until combined. Add sugar, oil, eggs, and fresh ginger to coffee mixture and whisk until smooth.

3. Whisk coffee mixture into flour mixture until smooth. Pour 1⅓ cups batter into each prepared pan. Bake until toothpick inserted in center of cake comes out clean, 12 to 14 minutes. Let cakes cool in pans on wire rack for 10 minutes. Invert cakes onto wire rack and peel off parchment; reinvert cakes. Wipe pans clean with paper towels. Grease and flour pans and line with fresh parchment. Repeat baking and cooling process with remaining batter.

4. Using stand mixer fitted with paddle, beat butter on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Add cooled milk mixture and vanilla; mix on medium speed until combined, scraping down bowl if necessary. Increase speed to medium-high and beat until frosting is light and fluffy, 3 to 5 minutes.

5. Place 1 cake layer on platter or cardboard round. Using offset spatula, spread ¾ cup frosting evenly over top, right to edge of cake. Repeat stacking and frosting with 2 more cake layers and 1½ cups frosting. Place final cake layer on top and spread remaining frosting evenly over top and sides of cake. Garnish top of cake with crystallized ginger, if using. Refrigerate cake until frosting is set, about 30 minutes. (Cake can be refrigerated, covered, for up to 2 days. Let cake come to room temperature before serving.)

TECHNIQUE | A FASTER, BETTER ROUTE TO FOUR LAYERS

Instead of taking the usual approach of painstakingly halving two thick cake rounds horizontally, we came up with a new approach: We simply bake four thin cake layers, two at a time. The slim layers bake and cool more quickly than the thicker ones, so the whole process is about 30 minutes faster. What's more, the rapid baking ensures that the layers stay flat, with none of the doming caused when the outside edge of the cake bakes faster than the middle.

2 THICK LAYERS HALVED HORIZONTALLY
Thicker layers are difficult to cut evenly, take longer to bake, and tend to dome in the oven.

4 SLIM LAYERS BAKED IN 2 BATCHES OF 2
Slim, even layers bake more quickly, cool faster, and don't need to be split in half.

TECHNIQUE | THREE STAGES OF ERMINE FROSTING

For this cake, we chose old-fashioned ermine frosting, which deserves a revival. This frosting gets its name from an unlikely source: a weasel with a shiny white coat. It relies on a water-in-oil emulsion for its silky texture. As butter is whipped into a milk-based gel, air is incorporated and the frosting gradually emulsifies (the water in the milk is dispersed as tiny droplets in the butterfat), looking curdled before becoming light and fluffy.

COOL COOKED GEL | COMBINE WITH BUTTER | WHIP UNTIL VELVETY

Olive Oil Cake

Repurpose one of your favorite savory ingredients for a cake that's light yet plush and simple yet sophisticated.

BY ANDREA GEARY

New England, where I've lived for most of my life, is not known for its vast and fruitful olive groves. Maybe that's why I only recently learned about olive oil cake, which is commonplace in most traditional olive-producing regions of the world.

That said, I've made plenty of cakes with neutral-flavored vegetable oil. Though most people associate cake with butter, oil is a good choice for simple snack cakes and quick breads because it provides moisture, tenderness, and richness without calling attention to itself. It also makes the mixing process simpler (more on this in a minute). But extra-virgin olive oil, the type I kept seeing called for in recipes for olive oil cake, can be noticeably grassy, peppery, and even a little bitter. That's welcome in a salad, but I was skeptical about how it would work in cake, so I made a few versions.

I happily discovered that the slightly savory notes of olive oil can, in fact, lend appealing complexity to a cake. But there's no definitive version. Some cakes had a lot of oil and a correspondingly assertive flavor and rich, dense crumb; others included only a modest amount of oil and were light and spongy, and the flavor was so faint that they might as well have been made with vegetable oil. Still others had so many additional ingredients—apples, spices, loads of citrus—that the oil's flavor was obscured.

And that's fair enough. I suspect that such recipes originated not to showcase olive oil but because people wanted cake, they needed fat to make it, and the local olive oil was the fat they had on hand. But I have my choice of fats, so if I was going to be using extra-virgin olive oil in my cake, I wanted to be able to taste it, at least a bit. I didn't want sponge-cake austerity or dense decadence but something between the two. I wanted a cake that offered some intrigue but was at the same time simple, something I could enjoy with a cup of tea.

Andrea Will Demonstrate
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/june17

This simple, not-too-sweet cake lets the flavor of the olive oil come through, with just a little lemon zest accentuating the oil's fruitiness.

Crumb Quandary

One of the most attractive aspects of making a cake with oil rather than butter is the way it expedites the mixing process: There's no waiting for butter to come to room temperature and then beating it with sugar before you even start to add the rest of the ingredients. With many oil-based cakes, you simply whisk the dry ingredients in one bowl, whisk the wet ingredients in another, and then combine the contents of the two bowls.

So that's where I started. The dry ingredients were all-purpose flour, baking powder, and salt, and the wet ingredients were eggs, milk, the test kitchen's favorite supermarket olive oil (see "Use a Good Oil"), plus the sugar. The batter was ready to go into the oven in 5 minutes flat, and the cake came out just 40 minutes later.

This first attempt was easy to make but not easy to love. The crumb was dry and coarse, and I could detect the olive oil flavor only if I thought about it really, really hard. As for the appearance, I was okay with simplicity, but this cake looked uninvitingly plain. What I really wanted was the kind of even, fine crumb that the best butter cakes have. The problem? That texture is largely due to their being made with butter.

In a butter cake, air is whipped into the butter before it's mixed with the other ingredients. In the heat of the oven, the baking powder creates carbon dioxide, which inflates those bubbles a bit more. Those tiny bubbles are what make a butter cake fluffy and fine-textured.

But I wasn't without options for producing a similar effect in my oil cake. Although most oil cakes use the "mix wet, mix dry, and combine" method, chiffon cake is an oil cake that's mixed a bit differently. Its light and fluffy texture is achieved by whipping egg whites with some sugar to form a foam, which you then fold into the batter. Might that approach work for my olive oil cake?

I applied the chiffon method to my recipe and, at the same time, implemented a couple of ingredient adjustments: I increased the eggs from two to three for better lift and the olive oil from ½ cup to ¾ cup for more richness and moisture and a more pronounced flavor. The batter was promisingly airy and mousse-like. The cake rose impressively in the oven—but it fell when it cooled. And when I cut it open, there was a line of dense, collapsed cake in the middle.

Don't Panic When It Puffs

Sprinkling sugar on top of this cake creates a crackly-sweet crust once the cake has cooled. It will puff up during baking, but don't worry. This is just air released by the cake batter getting trapped beneath the layer of melted sugar. It will settle once it cools.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

It turned out that the batter was too airy to support all the fat; it essentially overextended itself. But I was happy with the more pronounced olive oil flavor, so I was reluctant to back down. Providing more support by switching to a tube pan, the vessel of choice for chiffon cakes, could help, but frankly I didn't want my olive oil cake to be mistaken for chiffon. Instead, I'd adjust the mixing method.

Going All In

If whipped egg whites were too airy, maybe whipping yolks, which aren't as good at holding air, would be better. I did a quick test, but the cake came out dense and squat. Whipping whole eggs, I hoped, would be the solution. I put all three eggs, both whites and yolks, in the mixer bowl with the sugar and whipped the mixture for about 4 minutes, until it was pale and airy. I added the rest of the ingredients, including a tiny bit of lemon zest to accentuate the fruitiness of the olive oil. After pouring the batter into the cake pan, I sprinkled the top liberally with granulated sugar to lend some visual appeal and textural contrast.

The whipped whole eggs did indeed provide just the right amount of lift, creating a crumb that was fine but not dense and light but not spongy. (For more on how whipping eggs impacts cake, see "Aerating Cake with Eggs.") The sugar on top had coalesced into an attractively crackly crust that complemented the cake's plush texture, and the lemon zest supported the olive oil flavor without overwhelming it.

And there's one more advantage to my olive oil cake: Because it's made with liquid fat instead of solid, it will keep longer than its butter-based counterparts (see "A Real Keeper"). It can be stored at room temperature for up to three days—in the unlikely event that it doesn't get eaten right away.

OLIVE OIL CAKE

SERVES 8 TO 10

For the best flavor, use a fresh, high-quality extra-virgin olive oil. Our favorite supermarket option is California Olive Ranch Everyday Extra Virgin Olive Oil. If your springform pan is prone to leaking, place a rimmed baking sheet on the oven floor to catch any drips. Leftover cake can be wrapped in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to three days.

- 1¾ cups (8¾ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- 3 large eggs
- 1¼ cups (8¾ ounces) plus 2 tablespoons sugar
- ¼ teaspoon grated lemon zest
- ¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ¾ cup milk

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease 9-inch springform pan. Whisk flour, baking powder, and salt together in bowl.

2. Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip eggs on medium speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Add 1¼ cups sugar and lemon zest, increase speed to high, and whip until mixture is fluffy and pale yellow, about 3 minutes. Reduce speed to medium and, with mixer running, slowly pour in oil. Mix until oil is fully incorporated, about 1 minute. Add half of flour mixture and mix on low speed until incorporated, about 1 minute, scraping down bowl as needed. Add milk and mix until combined, about 30 seconds. Add remaining flour mixture and mix until just incorporated, about 1 minute, scraping down bowl as needed.

3. Transfer batter to prepared pan; sprinkle remaining 2 tablespoons sugar over entire surface. Bake until cake is deep golden brown and toothpick inserted in center comes out with few crumbs attached, 40 to 45 minutes. Transfer pan to wire rack and let cool for 15 minutes. Remove side of pan and let cake cool completely, about 1½ hours. Cut into wedges and serve.

Use a Good Oil

Our goal was a cake with a subtle but noticeable savory, complex flavor imparted by the oil. While there's no need to splurge on a premium extra-virgin olive oil, spring for a good supermarket product such as our favorite from California Olive Ranch. A cheap supermarket EVOO won't deliver enough character.

A Real Keeper

Unlike butter cakes, which start to taste dry just a day after baking, oil-based cakes and tea breads can taste moist for several days. This is an illusion, since over time the starches in both types of cakes retrograde, or stale and harden into a crystalline structure, and this structure traps water within the crystals. A cake made with butter, which is solid at room temperature, will seem drier. But oil, which is liquid at room temperature, acts to retard retrogradation, causing even a days-old cake to seem moist even though it's actually not.

BUTTER CAKE

Dry and crumbly the day after it's baked

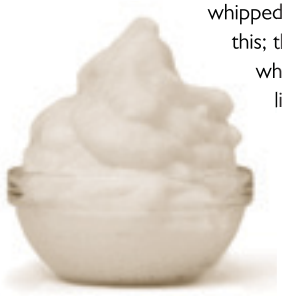
OIL CAKE

Seems moist and tender three days after baking

SCIENCE Aerating Cake with Eggs

While butter cakes get their lift from air that's whipped into the butter, our olive oil cake relies on eggs. Whipped whites might be the first thing to come to mind, but you can also whip just yolks or whole eggs. We tried all three in our cake. Whipped whites made it too airy, and our cake collapsed somewhat. Whipped yolks made a squat, dense cake. Whipping whole eggs was the perfect compromise. But why?

The proteins in egg whites are better at unfurling and creating a foam than the proteins in egg yolks are, so whipped whites will be more voluminous than whipped whole eggs and certainly more voluminous than whipped yolks. But the oil in this batter is a factor, too. Oil molecules are able to displace some egg white proteins in whipped whites, which weakens the bubbles. Yolks offer some protection against this; their emulsifiers help keep the oil from interfering with the structure. Thus, whipped whole eggs are the perfect compromise because they provide some lift from the whites as well as a more stable structure from the yolks.



JUST WHITES

Ultrafluffy egg whites made a cake that was too airy and collapsed.

JUST YOLKS

Unable to hold much air, egg yolks made a squat, dense cake.

WHOLE EGGS

Whipping whole eggs provided structure and just enough lift.

Apple Bundt Cake

The unique properties of a Bundt pan can help produce an apple cake that's wonderfully moist and not soggy. Ensuring lots of true apple flavor is another story.

BY ANDREA GEARY

If you're making an apple cake, there are some very good reasons to bake it in a Bundt pan. For starters, the generous size and graceful, undulating ring shape of a Bundt cake looks impressive—especially considering that Bundt cakes come together fairly easily. What's more, instead of making a buttercream, ganache, or other frosting that requires cooking or mixing in a large appliance, Bundt cakes are adorned with a stir-together icing that's either drizzled or poured over the top of the cake so that it drips attractively down the sides. But the most compelling reason to make an apple cake in a Bundt pan? Enhanced energy transfer.

I know that sounds hopelessly nerdy, but bear with me. Apple flavor is relatively mellow, so if you want a cake with robust apple flavor, you have to pack in a ton of fruit. And to accommodate the moisture that all those apples will release, the batter has to be pretty thick and stiff, which can be a problem when it comes to baking: The denser the batter, the lower the moisture and the longer it takes for the oven's heat to penetrate from the outside to the middle. That's especially problematic if you bake the batter in a standard round pan, since heat transfer can take so long that the edges of the cake overcook while the middle stays wet and dense (see "Bundt Pans: Built for Thick Batters").

Enter the Bundt. The central hole in a Bundt pan does more than just eliminate the problematic middle—it actually allows heat to flow through the center of the cake so that it bakes simultaneously from the inside out and from the outside in, producing a more evenly baked cake. I theorized that if I used a Bundt pan, I could pack my cake with enough apples to produce plenty of flavor without harming the texture—and to some degree, I was right. Baking several apple Bundt cakes confirmed that the shape of the pan ensured a uniformly moist crumb even in cakes made from very thick batters. But all the cakes were light on apple flavor, and in some cases that flavor was completely obscured by assertive warm spices such as cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, and allspice.

Using a combination of grated apples and reduced apple cider, we manage to pack the equivalent of 4½ pounds of fruit into our cake and its glaze.

Using a Bundt pan was a good start, but it wasn't enough to ensure a cake that really tasted like apples. Maybe I just needed to add more fruit.

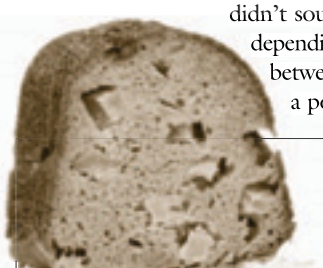
The Cider House Rules

Most of the apple Bundt cake recipes I'd tried called for 1 to 2 pounds of apples, which honestly didn't sound like that much; depending on size, there are between 2 and 4 apples in a pound. But once I'd baked the cakes, it was obvious why recipes didn't call for more. The fruit-heavy cakes were so flooded with moisture that the crumb was soggy and dense, with a compact, Play Doh–like texture in places. And even then, the fruit flavor was lacking. Somehow I needed to boost the apple flavor while decreasing the amount of apples, which sounded like a job for an apple concentrate of some kind.

Until now, I'd been mixing up a thick batter by combining dry ingredients (flour, salt, leaveners, and small amounts of cinnamon and allspice) in one bowl and wet (melted butter, brown sugar, eggs, milk, and vanilla) in another and then gently stirring the two together. Going forward, I could replace the milk with some form of apple concentrate—but what, exactly? Making applesauce or even apple butter would remove excess water but not without adding work and time to what I'd hoped would be a simple project. And I reluctantly dismissed the convenience of using commercial versions of either product, since there would surely be inconsistencies in water content or sweetness across brands that would make the flavor and texture of the cake unpredictable.

But what about apple cider? With a little digging, I found that it takes more than 12 pounds of apples to make a single gallon of cider, so I reasoned that it can be considered a concentrated form of the fruit. Also, its simplicity—cider is just the juice of crushed apples—means it's pretty consistent. I swapped it in for the milk and also added 1½ pounds of grated Granny Smith apples, since their tartness would deliver brighter flavor than sweeter apples would. I deliberately avoided cutting the apples into chunks for two reasons: They leave pockets of gooey, underbaked batter around them, and they shrink, so that gaps form around them and make the cake look pocked (see "Why We Chuck the Chunks").

Behold the Bundt in Progress
A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/oct17



MIND THE GOOEY GAPS

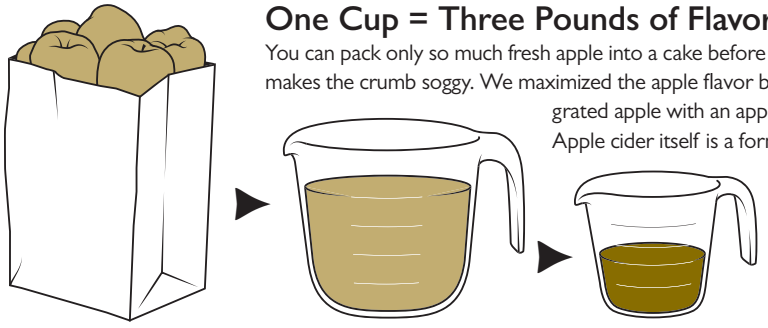
Why We Chuck the Chunks

Apple chunks provide bursts of juicy fruit flavor. Unfortunately, they also release moisture into the batter during baking, leaving wet patches and holes in the crumb as they shrink. Instead, we grate the apples; the finer pieces result in more-even distribution of flavor and moisture.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

One Cup = Three Pounds of Flavor

You can pack only so much fresh apple into a cake before the fruit's moisture makes the crumb soggy. We maximized the apple flavor by supplementing grated apple with an apple cider concentrate. Apple cider itself is a form of concentrate; there are about 3 pounds of apples in every quart of cider, which we further intensified by reducing this volume to 1 cup.



3 POUNDS OF APPLES | 1 QUART OF CIDER | 1 CUP REDUCTION

Chunks"). I poured the batter into a greased and floured Bundt pan, baked it for about an hour in a 350-degree oven, allowed the cake to cool briefly, and carefully unmolded it. To further bolster the apple flavor, I whisked some cider into confectioners' sugar to make an icing, which I drizzled over the cake. The crumb was much improved, neither soggy nor gooey, but the fruit flavor was only slightly stronger, and the icing, while pretty, was not particularly appley.

The Boiling Point

Since cider lacked the required intensity, I considered enhancing my cake with boiled cider, a syrupy, superreduced form of the juice that I see occasionally in New England markets in the fall. It would be the perfect solution to my problem—if only it were more widely available. But I still had plenty of cider left. Why not make my own boiled cider?

I placed a 12-inch skillet (the greater the surface area, the speedier the reduction) on the stovetop, poured in 4 cups of cider, and boiled it over high heat until it was reduced to 1 cup. That took a good 25 minutes, but during that time I was able to gather and measure all my other ingredients and peel and grate another 1½ pounds of apples.

My reduction wasn't as viscous as boiled cider from a bottle, but it had a similarly intense sweetness and acidity, much like sour apple–flavored candy in liquid form. I stirred ½ cup into the wet ingredients and proceeded with the recipe as before. While the cake baked, I whisked 2 tablespoons of the remaining reduced cider into some confectioners' sugar to make an icing that I hoped would taste brighter and fruitier. I had about 6 tablespoons of cider reduction left over, which I hated to waste, so I brushed it over the surface of the cake once I'd unmolded it. Once the liquid had sunk in, I drizzled the cake with the icing and set it aside to cool.

I took a bite of the final product, which really was packed with true, vibrant apple flavor. All that layering of apple flavor—from the grated fresh fruit and reduced cider in the batter to the reduction brushed over the warm cake to the cider glaze—had paid off. And since the cake itself was nothing more than a simple dump-and-stir style, it was a dessert I could casually throw together as a snack for tea or as an easy but elegant dessert for a crowd.

ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

CIDER-GLAZED APPLE BUNDT CAKE

SERVES 12 TO 16

For the sake of efficiency, begin boiling the cider before assembling the rest of the ingredients. Reducing the cider to exactly 1 cup is important; if you accidentally overreduce it, make up the difference with water. To ensure that the icing has the proper consistency, we recommend weighing the confectioners' sugar. We like the tartness of Granny Smith apples in this recipe, but any variety of apple will work. You can shred the apples with the shredding disk of a food processor or on the large holes of a paddle or box grater.

- **4 cups apple cider**
- **3¾ cups (18¾ ounces) all-purpose flour**
- **1½ teaspoons salt**
- **1½ teaspoons baking powder**
- **½ teaspoon baking soda**
- **¾ teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- **¼ teaspoon ground allspice**
- **¾ cup (3 ounces) confectioners' sugar**
- **16 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted**
- **1½ cups packed (10½ ounces) dark brown sugar**
- **3 large eggs**
- **2 teaspoons vanilla extract**
- **1½ pounds Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored, and shredded (3 cups)**

1. Bring cider to boil in 12-inch skillet over high heat; cook until reduced to 1 cup, 20 to 25 minutes. While cider is reducing, adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour 12-cup nonstick Bundt pan. Whisk flour, salt, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, and allspice in large bowl until combined. Place confectioners' sugar in small bowl.

2. Add 2 tablespoons cider reduction to confectioners' sugar and whisk to form smooth icing. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside. Set aside 6 tablespoons cider reduction.

3. Pour remaining ½ cup cider reduction into large bowl; add melted butter, brown sugar, eggs, and vanilla and whisk until smooth. Pour cider mixture over flour mixture and stir with rubber spatula until almost fully combined (some streaks of flour will remain). Stir in apples and any accumulated juice until evenly distributed. Transfer mixture to prepared pan and smooth top. Bake until skewer inserted in center of cake comes out clean, 55 minutes to 1 hour 5 minutes.

4. Transfer pan to wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Brush exposed surface of cake lightly with 1 tablespoon reserved cider reduction. Let cake cool for 10 minutes. Invert cake onto wire rack and remove pan. Brush top and sides of cake with remaining 5 tablespoons reserved cider reduction. Let cake cool for 20 minutes. Stir icing to loosen, then drizzle evenly over cake. Let cake cool completely, at least 2 hours, before serving. (Cooled cake can be wrapped loosely in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

Watch That Pan!

Keep a watchful eye on the cider as it is reduces, especially as it approaches the early end of the reduction time range. The less liquid there is to burn off, the greater the risk of overreducing. If you do overreduce the cider, you can add water to make up the difference, but the apple flavor won't be as strong.

Bundt Pans: Built for Thick Batters

Though it creates an aesthetically unique cake, the central hole in a Bundt pan is really a practical innovation. It tunnels through the center of the cake, providing faster and more even heat distribution so that dense batters, such as the one used to make our Cider-Glazed Apple Bundt Cake, bake uniformly from edge to edge. When baked in a conventional round cake pan, batters such as this overcook at the edges long before their centers set.

DENSE, GUMMY CENTER

EVEN FROM EDGE TO EDGE

Better Holiday Sugar Cookies

Most roll-and-cut cookies force you to battle rock-hard dough and then rarely even taste good. We wanted it all: ease, good looks, and a crisp, buttery crumb.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

Are roll-and-cut sugar cookies a fun, festive project? Not in my kitchen: They've always been a maddening chore with nothing but floury, shapeless disappointments to show for the effort. Most recipes require you to haul out a stand mixer to cream sugar and softened butter before mixing in the remaining ingredients and then to refrigerate the dough before rolling, cutting, and baking. The lump of dough is always stiff after chilling, so it's challenging to roll. Many of the cookies puff during baking, which leaves them uneven or with indistinct outlines. What's more, they're often hard and dense rather than simply sturdy.

I wanted to turn things around with a dough that would be easy—maybe even fun—to work with. It would be firm enough to shape with cookie cutters and to carry frosting and other decorations after baking. The cookies would bake up crisp and flat, with sharp edges, and they would have a satisfying, buttery flavor.

A touch of almond extract, added along with the usual vanilla, makes these cookies taste more interesting without giving them overt almond flavor.

The Way the Cookie Crumbles

I began with a recipe that had decent flavor. It called for beating 2 sticks of softened butter with 1 cup of sugar; mixing in 2½ cups of flour, an egg, salt, and vanilla; and then chilling the dough before rolling, cutting, and baking. The resulting cookies were buttery, with just enough sweetness. However, they had a slightly granular texture and a tendency to puff in the oven, which left them bumpy and uneven.

> "... I would need to 'plasticize' the butter, or soften it while keeping it cold, so that my dough would roll out without ripping or sticking."

Graininess can come from an excess of sugar, but reducing the sugar by ⅓ cup upset the flavor. Instead, I tried replacing the granulated sugar with confectioners' sugar, but this turned the cookies somewhat chalky and hard rather than crisp. However, superfine sugar, which is granulated sugar that has been ground to a fine—but not powdery—consistency, was just the ticket: fine enough to smooth out any graininess but coarse enough to maintain a slightly open crumb. And happily, superfine sugar is a cinch to make by pulverizing granulated sugar in a food processor.

To address the cookies' puffiness, I examined the creaming step, the goal of which is to incorporate air. It makes sense for a soft, cakey cookie, but was it detrimental to one that I wanted to be flat and even? To find out, I made another batch in which I briefly mixed the sugar and butter until just combined. Sure enough, these cookies baked up entirely flat.

But they were now a little dense, begging for a tiny amount of air. I turned to baking soda and baking powder; ¼ teaspoon of each produced flat cookies with a crisp yet sturdy texture.

Rolling in Dough

Now it was time to address my other issue with roll-and-cut cookies—the need to chill the dough before rolling it, which inevitably leads to strong-arming a cold, hardened lump into submission. Refrigerating the dough for a shorter time wasn't an option, since it wouldn't have time to chill evenly. And rolling the dough straightaway was out of the question because I was using softened butter—a must for easy combining in a stand mixer—which produced a soft dough that would cling to a rolling pin. I needed a dough made with cold butter.

That meant I would need to "plasticize" the butter, or soften it while keeping it cold, so that my dough would roll out without ripping or sticking. Croissant bakers plasticize blocks of butter by pounding them with a rolling pin. I certainly didn't want to beat butter by hand, but I realized that the solution was already on the counter: the food processor. Unlike the paddle of a stand mixer, which would struggle to soften cold butter quickly, the fast, ultrasharp blades of a food processor could turn it malleable.

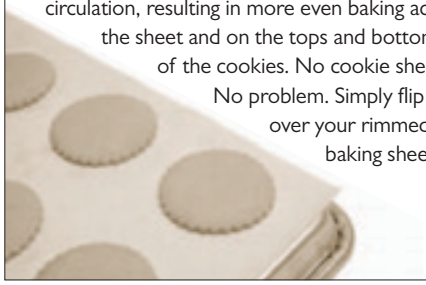
I processed the sugar and then added chunks of cold butter. Thirty seconds later, the two had combined into a smooth paste. I whizzed in the egg and vanilla, plus a smidge of almond extract for an unidentifiable flavor boost, and then added the dry ingredients. The dough was pliable but not soft or sticky.

I halved the dough and placed each portion between sheets of parchment paper to help prevent sticking. It rolled out like a dream. To ensure easy cutting and clean, well-defined edges, I still needed to chill the dough, so I placed it in the refrigerator for 1½ hours. By eliminating the need to bring the butter to room temperature, skipping creaming, and making the dough easy to roll, I'd shaved off some time—and plenty of effort—from the recipe.

I'd been baking the cookies at 350 degrees on the middle rack, but the edges of the cookies around the perimeter of the sheet were dark brown

Cookie-Sheet Workaround

The lack of a rim on a cookie sheet (versus a rimmed baking sheet) leads to better air circulation, resulting in more even baking across the sheet and on the tops and bottoms of the cookies. No cookie sheet? No problem. Simply flip over your rimmed baking sheet.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

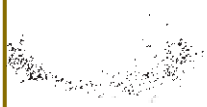
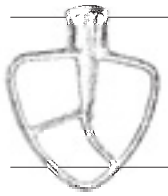
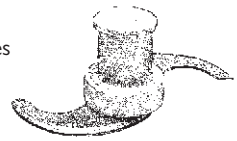
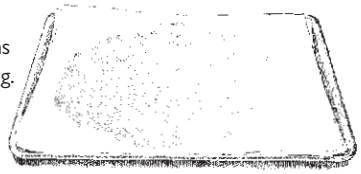
by the time the center ones were golden. The fix was three-pronged. One: I reduced the oven temperature to 300 degrees; more-gradual baking evened the color. Two: I lowered the oven rack, so the cookies baked from the bottom up. This meant that they browned nicely on their undersides (for hidden flavor) while remaining lighter on top. Three: I swapped the rimmed baking sheet I had been using for a rimless cookie sheet. This promoted air circulation, so the cookies baked more evenly (see "Cookie-Sheet Workaround").

A Royal Finish

All that remained was to come up with an icing that tasted good and firmed up nicely. It was the perfect opportunity for a classic royal icing. Named for its use on Queen Victoria's cake at her marriage to Prince Albert in 1840, this mix of whipped egg whites and sugar sets into a dry, matte surface. I added vanilla and salt to my version. Piped or poured onto the cooled cookies, it was a joyful finish to the best—and easiest—cut-out cookies I'd ever made.

Revamping Sugar Cookies

A number of updates to the usual approach resulted in better, easier cookies.

Old Way	New Way
 SOFTENED BUTTER means dough must be chilled before rolling.	 COLD BUTTER means dough is firm enough to be rolled immediately after mixing.
 GRANULATED SUGAR produces slightly grainy crumb.	 SUPERFINE SUGAR, made by processing granulated sugar in food processor, smooths out graininess but still allows for open crumb.
 BLUNT PADDLE OF STAND MIXER requires room-temperature ingredients.	 SHARP BLADES OF FOOD PROCESSOR rapidly whiz cold ingredients into malleable dough.
 CHILL, THEN ROLL method firms dough before rolling.	 ROLL, THEN CHILL method eliminates need to battle cold, hard lump of dough into thin sheet.

EASY HOLIDAY SUGAR COOKIES

MAKES ABOUT FORTY 2½-INCH COOKIES

For the dough to have the proper consistency when rolling, make sure to use cold butter directly from the refrigerator. In step 3, use a rolling pin and a combination of rolling and a pushing or smearing motion to form the soft dough into an oval. A rimless cookie sheet helps achieve evenly baked cookies; if you do not have one, use an overturned rimmed baking sheet. Dough scraps can be combined and rerolled once, though the cookies will be slightly less tender. If desired, stir 1 or 2 drops of food coloring into the icing. For a pourable icing, whisk in milk, 1 teaspoon at a time, until the desired consistency is reached. You can also decorate the shapes with sanding sugar or sprinkles before baking.

Cookies

- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon almond extract
- 2½ cups (12½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¼ teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 cup (7 ounces) granulated sugar
- 16 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled

Royal Icing

- 2⅔ cups (10⅔ ounces) confectioners' sugar
- 2 large egg whites
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ⅛ teaspoon salt

1. FOR THE COOKIES: Whisk egg, vanilla, salt, and almond extract together in small bowl. Whisk flour, baking powder, and baking soda together in second bowl.

2. Process sugar in food processor until finely ground, about 30 seconds. 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 mixture and process until smooth and paste-like, about 10 seconds. 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. Turn out dough onto counter and knead gently by hand until smooth, about 10 seconds. Divide dough in half. Place 1 piece of dough in center of large sheet of parchment paper and press into 7 by 9-inch oval. Place second large sheet of parchment over dough and roll dough into 10 by 14-inch oval of even ⅛-inch thickness. Transfer dough with parchment to rimmed baking sheet. Repeat pressing and rolling with second piece of dough, then stack on top of first piece on 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 rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Line rimless cookie sheet with parchment. Working with 1 piece of rolled dough, gently peel off top layer of parchment. Replace parchment, loosely covering dough. (Peeling off parchment and returning it will make cutting and removing cookies easier.) Turn over dough and parchment and gently peel off and discard second piece of parchment. Using cookie cutter, cut dough into shapes. Transfer shapes to prepared cookie sheet, spacing them about ½ inch apart. Bake until cookies are lightly and evenly browned around edges, 14 to 17 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking. Let cookies cool on sheet for 5 minutes. Using wide metal spatula, transfer cookies to wire rack and let cool completely. Repeat cutting and baking with remaining dough. (Dough scraps can be patted together, rerolled, and chilled once before cutting and baking.)

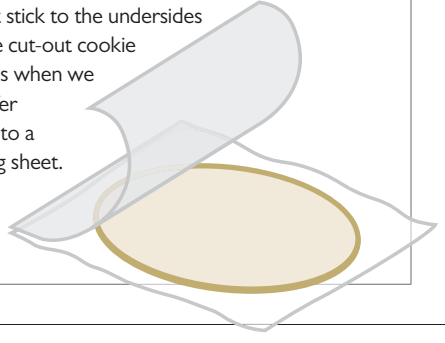
5. FOR THE ROYAL ICING: Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip all ingredients on medium-low speed until combined, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and whip until glossy, soft peaks form, 3 to 4 minutes, scraping down bowl as needed.

6. Spread icing onto cooled cookies. Let icing dry completely, about 1½ hours, before serving.

TECHNIQUE

LOOSEN PARCHMENT SO COOKIES DON'T STICK

After chilling the rolled-out dough between sheets of parchment paper, we peel back and replace the top sheet of parchment before flipping the dough over. The loosened parchment won't stick to the undersides of the cut-out cookie shapes when we transfer them to a baking sheet.



See How It Works

A step-by-step video is available at Cookslllustrated.com/dec17

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE (TOP), JAY LAYMAN (BOTTOM)

DIY RECIPES

DIY RECIPE Hot Sauce

We wanted a simple recipe for hot sauce that didn't require fermenting. We liked the clean flavor of habanero chiles, but we found it best to temper their intense heat with milder (but still plenty spicy) jalapeños. Brown sugar, shallot, and garlic also balanced the heat and added depth while white vinegar lent a clean, sharp brightness. We started by broiling the aromatics and the peppers since we didn't like the flavor of an uncooked sauce. Our sauce was a little thin once blended, so we turned to a unique ingredient for the fix: a carrot. Some commercial hot sauces include carrots, and we found that just one gave our sauce the right body and a nice touch of sweetness. –Amanda Rumore

SIMPLE HOT SAUCE

MAKES 2 CUPS

You can remove the seeds from the chiles if you prefer a milder sauce. We recommend storing the sauce in a glass bottle since plastic can add off-flavors.

- **6 ounces red jalapeño or Fresno chiles**
- **1 carrot, peeled and chopped**
- **1 shallot, quartered**
- **6 garlic cloves, peeled**
- **2 ounces habanero chiles, stemmed**
- **1 cup distilled white vinegar**
- **2 tablespoons packed brown sugar**
- **1 tablespoon salt**

1. Adjust oven rack 8 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Place jalapeños, carrot, shallot, and garlic on aluminum foil–lined baking sheet. Broil vegetables, turning jalapeños once, until jalapeños are black and blistered, 8 to 10 minutes.

2. Transfer jalapeños to bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and let sit for 10 minutes. Transfer remaining broiled vegetables to blender jar.

3. Stem and seed jalapeños and remove most of blackened skin. Transfer jalapeños to blender jar with other vegetables. Add habaneros, vinegar, sugar, and salt and process until smooth, about 1 minute.

4. Using funnel and ladle, transfer hot sauce to 2-cup glass bottle. Let sauce cool completely. Cover and refrigerate or serve immediately. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 3 months; flavor will deepen over time.)

DIY RECIPE Boozy Peach Jam

For a jam with its namesake flavors, we added 1 cup of bourbon at the beginning of cooking for sweet bourbon notes and left the skins on the peaches to intensify the peach flavor. –Amanda Rumore

PEACH-BOURBON JAM

MAKES 2 CUPS

Do not use white peaches here; they are not acidic enough. Also, be sure to use bottled lemon juice here, not fresh-squeezed juice, for food-safety reasons.

- **½ vanilla bean**
- **1 pound ripe but firm yellow peaches, halved, pitted, and cut into ½-inch pieces (3 cups)**
- **1 cup sugar**
- **1 cup bourbon**
- **½ Granny Smith apple, peeled and grated (½ cup)**
- **1 tablespoon bottled lemon juice**

1. Place 2 small plates in freezer. Using paring knife, cut vanilla bean in half lengthwise. Using tip of paring knife, scrape out seeds. Stir vanilla bean and seeds, peaches, sugar, bourbon, apple, and lemon juice together in large saucepan. Cover and let sit for 20 minutes. Bring mixture to boil over medium-high heat, stirring often. Once sugar is completely dissolved, reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer, stirring occasionally, until peaches are softened, about 10 minutes. Off heat, crush fruit with potato masher until mostly smooth. Return mixture to boil over medium-high heat and cook, stirring frequently, for 6 minutes. Remove saucepan from heat and discard vanilla bean.

2. To test consistency, place 1 teaspoon jam on chilled plate and freeze for 2 minutes. Drag your finger through jam on plate; jam has correct consistency when your finger leaves distinct trail. If jam is runny, return saucepan to heat and continue to simmer 1 to 3 minutes longer before retesting. Skim any foam from surface of jam using spoon.

3. Meanwhile, place two 1-cup jars in bowl and place under hot running water until heated through, 1 to 2 minutes; shake dry.

4. Using funnel and ladle, portion hot jam into hot jars and let cool completely. Cover and refrigerate until jam is set, 12 to 24 hours. (Jam can be refrigerated for up to 2 months.)

DIY RECIPE Gravlax

Compared with its cousins smoked salmon, lox, and nova, which are all usually brined and then smoked, gravlax relies on a one-step process. The name, derived from *gravad lax* (Swedish for "buried salmon"), alludes to covering the fish with a salt-and-sugar cure (and typically dill). We call for skin-on salmon because it makes slicing the cured fish easier. A splash of brandy adds flavor, helps the cure adhere, and assists in the preserving process. Most recipes use granulated sugar, but we opt for brown sugar because its flavor complements the salmon. Pressing the salmon under a few cans helps it release moisture and gives the fillet a firmer, more sliceable texture. We baste the salmon with the released liquid once a day to help speed up the curing process and to keep it from drying out. Serve it sliced thin on its own or on our Deli Rye Bread (page 87) with cream cheese, shallot, or other accoutrements. –Kate Hartke

GRAVLAX

MAKES ABOUT 1 POUND

For easier slicing, freeze the gravlax for 30 minutes.

- **⅓ cup packed light brown sugar**
- **¼ cup kosher salt**
- **1 (1-pound) skin-on salmon fillet**
- **3 tablespoons brandy**
- **1 cup coarsely chopped fresh dill**

1. Combine sugar and salt in bowl. Place salmon, skin side down, in 13 by 9-inch glass baking dish. Drizzle with brandy, making sure to cover entire surface. Rub salmon evenly with sugar-salt mixture, pressing firmly to adhere. Cover with dill, pressing firmly to adhere.

2. Cover salmon loosely with plastic wrap, top with square baking dish or pie plate, and weight with several large, heavy cans. Refrigerate until salmon feels firm, about 3 days, basting salmon with liquid released into dish once a day.

3. Scrape dill off salmon. Remove salmon from dish and pat dry with paper towels before slicing. (Unsliced gravlax can be wrapped tightly in plastic and refrigerated for up to 1 week; slice just before serving.)

DIY RECIPE Chocolate-Toffee Bark

For a sweet treat that's great for gifts, we make a buttery, nutty layer of toffee; let it harden; and then coat both sides with chocolate. –Julia Collin Davison

CHOCOLATE-TOFFEE BARK

MAKES ABOUT 1½ POUNDS

You will need a thermometer that registers high temperatures for this recipe.

- **8 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- **½ cup water**
- **1 cup (7 ounces) sugar**
- **¼ teaspoon salt**
- **1½ cups pecans or walnuts, toasted and chopped**
- **8 ounces semisweet chocolate, chopped coarse**

1. 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. Spray foil with vegetable oil spray.

2. Heat butter and water in medium saucepan over medium-high heat until butter is melted. Pour sugar and salt into center of saucepan, taking care not to let sugar touch sides of saucepan. Bring mixture to boil and cook, without stirring, until sugar is completely dissolved and syrup is faint golden color and registers 300 degrees, about 10 minutes.

3. Reduce heat to medium-low and continue to cook, gently swirling saucepan, until toffee is amber-colored and registers 325 degrees, 1 to 3 minutes longer. Off heat, stir in ½ cup pecans until incorporated and thoroughly coated. Pour toffee into prepared pan and smooth into even layer with spatula. Refrigerate, uncovered, until toffee has hardened, about 15 minutes.

4. Microwave 4 ounces chocolate in bowl at 50 percent power, stirring occasionally, until melted, about 2 minutes. Pour chocolate over hardened toffee and smooth with spatula, making sure to cover toffee layer evenly and completely. Sprinkle with ½ cup pecans and press lightly to adhere. Refrigerate, uncovered, until chocolate has hardened, about 15 minutes. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Using foil sling, invert toffee onto prepared sheet. Discard foil.

5. Microwave remaining 4 ounces chocolate in bowl at 50 percent power, stirring occasionally, until melted, about 2 minutes. Pour chocolate over toffee and smooth with spatula, making sure to cover toffee layer evenly and completely. Sprinkle with remaining ½ cup pecans and press lightly to adhere. Refrigerate, uncovered, until chocolate has hardened, about 15 minutes.

6. Break bark into rough squares and serve. (Bark can be stored at room temperature for up to 2 weeks.)

DIY RECIPE Pickled Jalapeños

Most store-bought pickled jalapeños are preserved in a vinegar brine and seasoned with bay leaf and onion. Their flavor is not complex. To add deeper flavors, we ferment our jalapeños and add shallot and garlic. Cumin seeds lend earthiness while lime zest adds brightness. Over time, we found that the jalapeños took on complex floral notes and also increased in spiciness since the cell walls of the chiles continued to break down, releasing more of the spicy capsaicinoid compounds. –Anne Wolf

PICKLED JALAPEÑOS

MAKES 10 JALAPEÑOS

For spicier results, don't seed the jalapeño. For a balanced flavor, we prefer fermenting at a cool room temperature of 65 degrees (consider locations such as a basement, a den, or a cabinet in an air-conditioned room). We don't recommend fermenting above 70 degrees, as the flavor suffers; above 75 degrees, food safety becomes a concern. The fermentation temperature will affect the timing and flavor of the jalapeños; warmer temperatures will result in faster fermentation and sharper, more pungent flavors.

- **3 cups water**
- **7 teaspoons canning and pickling salt**
- **1½ tablespoons sugar**
- **1 tablespoon cumin seeds**
- **10 small jalapeño chiles (2 to 3 inches long), halved lengthwise and seeded**
- **1 shallot, peeled and halved through root end**
- **6 (2-inch) strips lime zest**
- **4 garlic cloves, smashed and peeled**

1. Bring water, salt, sugar, and cumin seeds to boil in small saucepan over high heat. Remove from heat and let cool completely. Cut out parchment paper round to match diameter of 1-quart wide-mouth jar.

2. Tightly pack jalapeños, shallot, lime zest, and garlic into jar, leaving 1½ inches headspace. Pour cooled brine over jalapeños to cover and leave 1 inch headspace; vegetables should be so tightly packed that jalapeños don't float. Press parchment round flush to surface of brine and press gently to submerge. Cover jar with triple layer of cheesecloth and secure with rubber band.

3. Place jar in 50- to 70-degree location away from direct sunlight and let ferment for 10 days; check jar daily, skimming residue from surface. After 10 days, taste jalapeños daily until they have reached desired flavor (this may take up to 4 days longer; jalapeños should be softened, with tangy, floral flavor).

4. When jalapeños have reached desired flavor, remove cheesecloth and parchment and skim off any residue. Serve. (Pickled jalapeños and brine can be transferred to clean jar, covered, and refrigerated for up to 5 months; once refrigerated, flavor of jalapeños will continue to mature and they will darken in color.)

DIY RECIPE Tortilla Chips

For our Homemade Tortilla Chips, starting with good-quality corn tortillas was key; thinner, fresh, locally made tortillas resulted in the best chips. A frying temperature of 350 degrees browned the chips quickly without burning them, and frying in two batches ensured that the oil's temperature didn't drop too much when we added the tortilla wedges. As soon as they came out of the oil, we sprinkled them with kosher salt, which was easier to distribute evenly than table salt. –Lan Lam

HOMEMADE TORTILLA CHIPS

SERVES 4

For the best results, use fresh, locally made tortillas (the thinnest available). We prefer peanut oil for deep frying because of its high smoke point, but vegetable or corn oil will also work.

- **8 (6-inch) corn tortillas**
- **5 cups peanut oil**
- **Kosher salt**

1. Cut each tortilla into 6 wedges. Line 2 baking sheets with several layers of paper towels. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat to 350 degrees.

2. Add half of tortillas and fry until golden and crispy around edges, 2 to 4 minutes.

3. Transfer chips to prepared sheets, sprinkle lightly with salt, and let cool.

4. Repeat with remaining tortillas. Serve. (Cooled chips can be stored in zipper-lock bag at room temperature for up to 4 days.)

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

TASTINGS & TESTINGS

TASTING Crushed Tomatoes

Crushed tomatoes are a convenience product. Rather than haul out the food processor to break down canned whole tomatoes for a quick sauce or soup, you should be able to just pop the can lid and pour the tomatoes into a pot. As for texture, they should walk that line between a smooth puree and chunkier diced tomatoes and be topped off by puree or juice, offering both body and fluidity. We tested eight nationally available products served plain and in a simple pasta sauce tossed with spaghetti. Our favorite, **SMT Crushed Tomatoes** ($3.50 for 28 ounces), tasted "very bright and sweet" with "full tomato flavor." Added diced tomatoes, though nontraditional in crushed tomato products, contributed a firm, tender texture. Although the letters SMT bring to mind the famed San Marzano tomatoes of Italy, the tomatoes are grown domestically, and the manufacturer declined to disclose the exact variety.

–Kate Shannon

TASTING Premium Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

Extra-virgin olive oil, the lush, vibrant product of fresh olives, is premium by definition—or it should be. But most of what you'll find at the supermarket doesn't deserve that label. The oils are often mislabeled as a higher grade, mishandled so their flavor turns rancid, or even fraudulently blended with other, cheaper oils and passed off as the real deal. We rounded up 10 premium oils priced from $0.94 to $2.13 per ounce (plus shipping) from France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Tunisia, Portugal, and the United States. Our first step was to sample the oils plain. As we then tasted them tossed with butter lettuce and a little salt and finally drizzled over a bowl of warm cannellini beans, we marveled at how distinct each oil was. Ultimately we recommended them all and classified them by flavor profile, from mild to robust, but our crowd-pleasing favorite was **Gaea Fresh Extra Virgin Olive Oil**, which tasters described as "buttery," "smooth," and "nicely balanced." –Lisa McManus

TASTING Gruyère

Gruyère, which has been made in the eponymous alpine region of Switzerland for more than 900 years, is pleasantly firm, dense, and slightly crumbly and boasts a faint crystalline crunch. Good versions taste deeply nutty and have sweet, fruity tang; nice salinity; and a good bit of earthy funk. Gruyère functions just as well in cooked applications as it does on a cheese plate. We found eight nationally available options and sampled each plain at room temperature, baked in spinach-and-cheese squares, and melted on crostini. Our winner, **1655 Le Gruyère AOP** ($19.99 per pound), had the highest fat content and one of the lowest moisture contents, and it was aged the longest: 12 to 14 months. Tasters raved about its "excellent crystalline structure"; "dense," "fudgy" texture; and "deeply aged, caramel-like" flavor that came through even when the cheese was baked with spinach and onions. –Kate Shannon

TASTING Supermarket Turkey

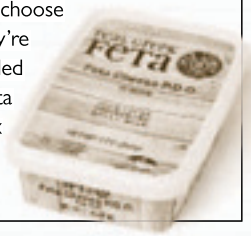
Is there any holiday food more fraught than the turkey? First it hogs the refrigerator, and then it hogs the oven. Never mind the logistics of thawing, seasoning, and roasting. After all that, it often turns out dry and bland. A well-tested recipe and the right equipment go a long way toward a better bird, but there's another variable: The turkey itself matters just as much. To find the best supermarket bird, we purchased eight best-selling turkeys from both national and regional brands. All birds were in the 12- to 14-pound range, which we like for its 10- to 12-serving yield and easy maneuverability. Our favorite, **Mary's Free-Range non-GMO Verified Turkey** ($2.69 per pound), is from the same company that produces our winning chickens and heritage turkeys. It had "clean," "robust" turkey flavor and a slightly "nutty aftertaste." –Kate Shannon

TASTING White Wine Vinegar

As vinegars go, the red and white wine varieties are utility players: Neither is as distinct as sherry, balsamic, or cider vinegar; nor is either a go-to condiment for a particular pairing as sherry is for gazpacho or balsamic is for strawberries. But that's exactly what makes them valuable as pantry staples; a good version of either can deliver a jolt of clean acidity and balanced fruity sweetness to just about any dish. However, white wine vinegar has a small but significant advantage: It doesn't impart color, which can make it the better choice for seasoning pan sauces and soups or for pickling vegetables. So we rounded up eight widely available vinegars, priced from $0.21 to $0.58 per ounce, and tasted them, first in a simple vinaigrette served with mild salad greens and then simmered with sugar, salt, and herbs to make a flavorful brine for giardiniera, the classic Italian pickled vegetable medley. **Napa Valley Naturals Organic White Wine Vinegar** ($4.19 for 12.7 ounces) won tasters over with its high levels of both acidity and sweetness, which likely accounted for the "fruity" vinaigrette it produced. –Kate Shannon

TASTING Feta

The Greeks have been perfecting feta cheese since Homer's time—the early process for making it is mentioned in *The Odyssey*. Thousands of years later, Greek immigrants brought feta to the United States in a wave of migration that started in the 1880s. It remained a specialty item for most of the last century, but in recent years it has become as common in American refrigerators as cheddar. In the test kitchen, we add it to salads, pastas, dips, pizza, and more. This rise in feta's popularity has meant more options to choose from—and, as we discovered, those options can vary wildly depending on where they're made. How would the imitations compare with the real deal from Greece? We sampled eight cheeses plain, crumbled into couscous salad, and baked in Greek spinach and feta pie. It turns out that you can't beat the real deal: Our winner is made by **Real Greek Feta** ($13.99 per pound). This superb sheep's-milk feta was complex yet balanced. It was "buttery" and "savory" with a "milky," "clean dairy flavor." –Hannah Crowley

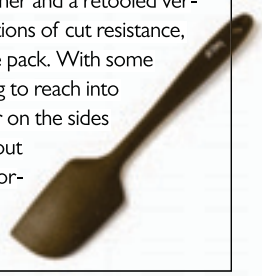


TESTING Slow Cookers

Previous experience with testing slow cookers taught us that glass lids were a must, as they allow you to see progress without losing heat. So were oval-shaped crocks, as these can accommodate large roasts and offer more versatility than round crocks. We also wanted a generous 6- to 7-quart capacity. With these criteria in mind, we rounded up eight models priced from $39.99 to $148.71. The **KitchenAid 6-Quart Slow Cooker With Solid Glass Lid** ($99.99) won for its well-designed control panel with a countdown timer that was simple and unambiguous to set and allowed us to monitor progress. The roomy stoneware crock cooked gently and evenly, so food emerged tender and juicy. Its broad handles with textured undersides usually stayed cool enough that we could pick up the crock without potholders. –Lisa McManus

TESTING Silicone Spatulas

Whether we're baking or cooking, scrambling or sautéing, flipping or folding, a heatproof silicone spatula is one of the busiest tools in our kitchen. Nine years ago, we gave top honors to a heatproof model that is ubiquitous in restaurant kitchens but can sometimes feel too big and unwieldy at home. So we rounded up 10 spatulas priced from $6.95 to $18.67 from the dizzying array available, including our previous winner and a retooled version of our old runner-up. We subjected each to a slew of recipe tests, as well as evaluations of cut resistance, stain and odor resistance, heat resistance, and durability to see which stood out from the pack. With some products, comfort was an issue. Performance was also an issue, with some spatulas failing to reach into the edges of saucepans or leaving pockets of unmixed food. Others left streaks of batter on the sides of bowls. The **Di Oro Living Seamless Silicone Spatula—Large** ($10.97) stood out from the rest for being firm enough to scrape and scoop and for fitting neatly into tight corners. Its straight sides and wide, flat blade ensured that no food was left unmixed. The all-silicone design eliminates any crannies that could trap food. –Kate Shannon

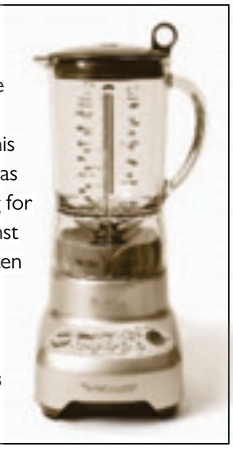


TESTING Fire Extinguishers

Unattended cooking is the primary cause of fire-related injuries and household fires in the United States; more than $1.1 billion in property damages are claimed each year. That's why it's wise to always keep a fire extinguisher within reach of your stove. But the trouble with most fire extinguishers is that you can't give them a test run; once the trigger punctures the pressurized canister, it can't be used a second time. We bought eight models of home fire extinguishers and drove to a firefighter training facility west of Boston to test them on staged cooking-related fires. We set up shop in the department's "burn building," a blackened concrete structure behind the fire station. With a stack of 10-inch skillets, a dozen cotton dish towels, portable electric burners, and a jug of vegetable oil, we set a series of typical kitchen fires and went about trying to put them out. Our winner, the **Kidde ABC Multipurpose Home Fire Extinguisher** ($25.99), was fast and effective. Its powerful spray put out both the grease fire and the towel fire right away. –Lisa McManus

TESTING Midpriced Blenders

Five years ago we set out to find a reasonably priced blender that could stand up to the constant, heavy-duty use that many of us demand of this appliance. The Hemisphere Control from Breville ($199.95) was our winner then, and as satisfied as we are with this machine, it's our job to periodically scour the marketplace to make sure nothing new has come along that might topple the current champ. With that in mind, we went shopping for midpriced blenders, capping the price at $300.00. We found six contenders to pit against the Breville and put them through a range of tests: pureeing kale, orange juice, and frozen pineapple into smoothies; crushing ice; emulsifying eggs and oil into mayonnaise; and grinding almonds into almond butter. We evaluated each blender on how easy it was to operate, fill, pour from, and clean, and we examined each for wear and tear. When we tallied the scores, we weren't surprised to find that our previous winner, **Breville's The Hemisphere Control**, once again bested all competitors. –Hannah Crowley



TESTING Large Saucepans

Cookware doesn't get much simpler than a saucepan, but it also doesn't get more important, since this is the vessel you'll use to prepare everything from soups and sauces to pasta and grains to custards and puddings. To zero in on a reliable, hard-wearing saucepan, we assembled a team of staffers to test 10 large (3- to 4-quart) saucepans with lids, priced from $18.99 to $214.99, in a variety of styles and materials. In each saucepan, we stirred, scraped, and poured custard; made rice pilaf; and browned butter. We watched water boil, timing how long a measured amount took to bubble, before blanching green beans and draining the contents in a colander, noting how easy each model was to pour from. We washed the saucepans by hand after every test. We even abused them by heating them and plunging them into ice water to replicate the warping effects of thermal shock and by whacking them on a concrete step to test their sturdiness and the strength of their handle attachments. **The All-Clad Stainless 4-Qt Sauce Pan** ($179.13) excelled, with uniform, steady heating and good visibility inside the saucepan to monitor browning. –Lisa McManus

TESTING Santoku Knives

Santoku knives became an overnight sensation in the United States in the early 2000s, when Rachael Ray declared on TV that she loved her Wüsthof model. Sales shot up, and several knife manufacturers, both Asian and Western, scrambled to create their own versions or promote their models. The appeal was the friendly shape of the blade: 5 to 7 inches long, with a rounded front edge and a boxier build than the typical chef's knife. We rounded up 10 models, priced from $24.99 to $199.95. Some knife experts claim that santokus are suited only for cutting softer vegetables and boneless meat, not for thornier kitchen tasks. So our question was: Are santoku knives a viable alternative to chef's knives, or are they in fact more specialized? We put every model through our usual battery of chef's knife tests: mincing fresh herbs, dicing onions, butchering whole raw chickens, and quartering unpeeled butternut squashes. Our favorite, the **Misono UX10 Santoku 7.0"** ($179.50), wowed testers of all abilities, who raved that it felt "agile, sharp, and really good in hand." "Solid but light," it made "fine, level cuts" with "great precision and control." –Lisa McManus

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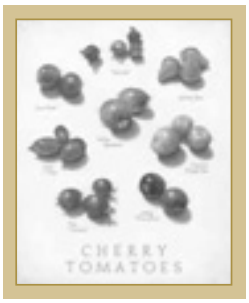
ON THE BACK COVER BY JOHN BURGOYNE

Cherry Tomatoes



The origin of the cherry tomato is unclear—Greece, Peru, Mexico, and Israel all lay claim to it—but its worldwide popularity is undisputed, as more than 100 varieties are now grown. Among them, the **SUN GOLD** tastes as vibrant as its color suggests, and its juice is syrupy and tangy. Pea-size and perfectly spherical, the **CURRANT** pops with sweetness that's bright, nutty, and a touch smoky. The skin of the lush, soft **INDIGO CHERRY DROP** fades from dark red to purplish black, while the crisp, oblong **INDIGO KUMQUAT** is golden with a purplish blush at the stem end. Streaky-looking and pointy at the tip, the **PINK TIGER** resembles a small shallot and is loaded with tart juice. Given the floral, lilac-like aroma of a **PINK COCKTAIL**, its flavor is surprisingly watery. Streaked with peach-pink tones, the **SUNRISE BUMBLE BEE** is plump, with supersweet juice and hints of raspberry. The **YELLOW PEAR** teardrop is meaty-textured and has tropical, low-acid juice.

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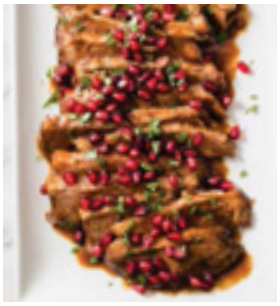

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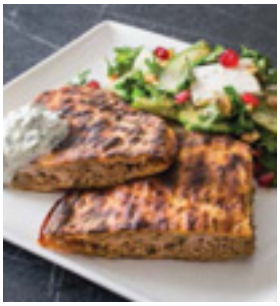

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CHERRY TOMATOES