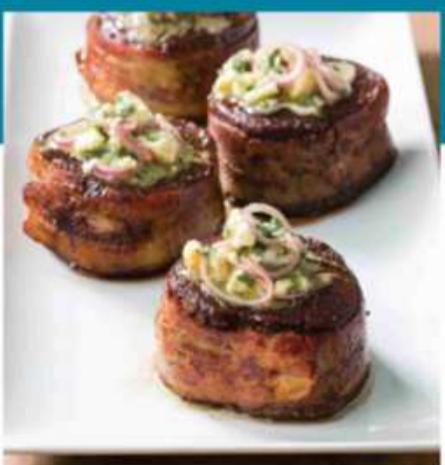
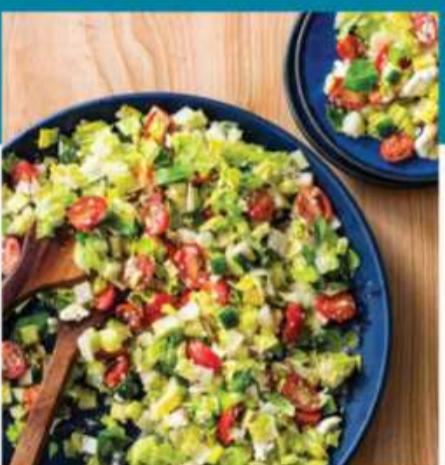


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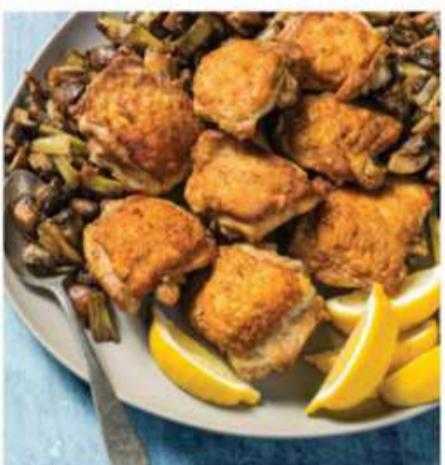
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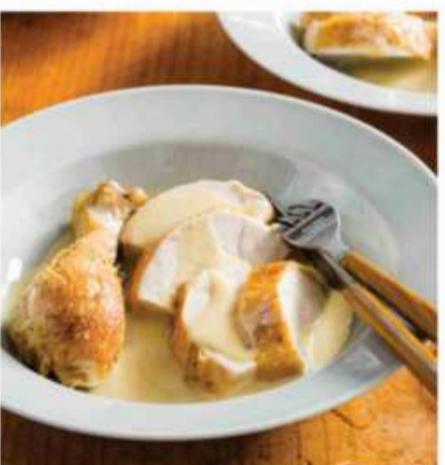
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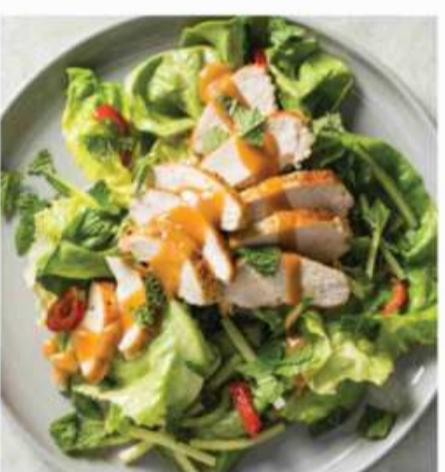
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Cook's Country



SWEET HOLIDAY

Please the crowd with a batch of our crunchy-soft Gooey Butter Cake Bars.

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Bacon-Wrapped Filets
Dinner Party Winner

Cheesy Stuffed Shells
No Up-Front Cooking

Chocolate Fudge
Easier Than You Think

Mexican Meatball Soup
Weeknight Warm-Up

Amish Cinnamon Bread
One Loaf for You,
One for a Friend

Caesar Brussels Sprouts
Crunchy Bread Crumbs on Top

Supermarket Bacon
Which Brand Is Best?

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



SOME FOODS ARE unquestionably beautiful to behold: luxuriant ribbons of glossy melted chocolate, for example. Delicate, coral-colored flakes of gently cooked salmon. Verdant leaves of peak-season lettuces, a thousand shades of green. These foods have an advantage, because beautiful foods are more likely to be loved.

But not every dish can bank on physical beauty. Take Chicken Cooked in Milk (page 10), the weirdest recipe in this issue. When you pull it from the oven, you'll wonder what you've done. But once you place the first bite of tender chicken and soul-warming sauce on your tongue, its inner beauty blossoms. Close your eyes. Absorb its nuance. You are smitten.

Our Amish Cinnamon Bread (page 23) cuts a similarly plain figure but will fill your kitchen with mesmerizing aromas, hinting at an uncommonly lovely inner beauty; I can't think of a better sweet treat on a cool morning. Our recipe is even more beautiful in that it makes two loaves, so you'll have one for yourself and one to share.

If these dishes lack visual pizzazz, they overdeliver on honesty, humility, and heart. And if you ask me, with food as with people, these qualities matter more than physical beauty any day.

TUCKER SHAW

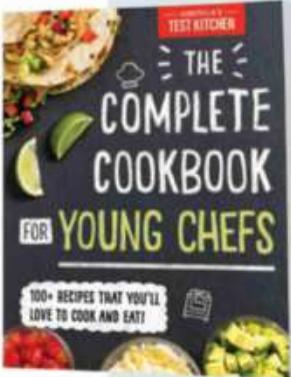
Editor in Chief

Illustration: Ross MacDonald

"MOM, I'VE GOT DINNER COVERED"

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On the cover: Gooey Butter Cake Bars

America's Test Kitchen is a real test kitchen located in Boston. It is the home of more than 60 test cooks, editors, and cookware specialists. Our mission is to test recipes until we understand exactly how and why they work and eventually arrive at the very 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) and *Cook's Country from America's Test Kitchen* (CooksCountry.com) on public television, and you can listen to our weekly segments on *The Splendid Table* on public radio. You can also follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram.



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A tart dried-fruit stuffing makes a perfect foil for savory, succulent pork. But is there an easier way to combine the two?

5 Skillet-Charred Broccoli

A big, bold char isn't just for steaks.

7 Shrimp Mozambique

Could we create a pantry version of this saucy, spicy Portuguese American dish without a key ingredient?

8 Cheesy Stuffed Shells

The appeal of comfort food wanes if it's a pain to make. Our streamlined method delivers.

9 Caesar Brussels Sprouts

Caesar dressing and Brussels sprouts may seem like a quirky pairing, but trust us—it's one you want to try.

10 Chicken Cooked in Milk

This dish required a big leap of faith. But the payoff was spectacular.

11 Mexican Meatball Soup

Move beyond your normal Mexican-food routine with this robust, tomatoey broth studded with flavorful meatballs and tender vegetables.

12 Scampi-Style Chicken

A well-known Italian restaurant chain makes a mint selling garlicky, lemony "chicken scampi." We knew we could make a better version.

13 Simple Sautéed Kale

Say goodbye to tough, boring kale. We found a better way to sauté.

15 Gooey Butter Bars

The challenge: Turn St. Louis's most famous sweet treat into a batch of bars.

16 Holiday Fudge

Many fudge recipes claim to be foolproof. After making 177 pounds of it, we finally have one that truly is.

18 Bacon-Wrapped Filets Mignons

Could we get the bacon crispy and the meat perfectly cooked on the same timetable?

19 Cheddar Scalloped Potatoes

Some recipes call for cooking this side dish for 2½ hours or longer. On holidays, we're too busy for that.

20 Southern Cheese Straws

Everyone loves cheese and crackers. We took cues from Southern snackers and combined them into one crispy, cheesy snack.

21 Baked Goat Cheese

Baked Brie has its familiar charms, but we wanted something surprising.

22 Amish Cinnamon Bread

Our goal: Make a quick version of this beloved "friendship bread" without losing any of its sweet flavor or knockout aroma. **PLUS** Testing Measuring Spoons

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**Compiled by Morgan Bolling
and Cecelia Jenkins**

How Hot Is Your House?

What do you mean when you call for something to be “room temperature”?
My grandma keeps her kitchen a lot warmer than mine.

—Lydia Gendron, East Hartford, Conn.

The term “room temperature” shows up a lot in our recipes. Often in baking recipes, we call for butter and other ingredients to be at room temperature so they cream/incorporate better and/or produce a desired effect in the final baked good. And we often call for letting yeasted doughs rise at room temperature.

When we test recipes, we assume 67 degrees is room temperature. While you don’t have to adjust your thermostat every time you bake, we do suggest you remain aware of your cooking environment. If you live in a warm climate, breads and other things that rise at “room temperature” will likely reach a visual cue (such as “doubled in size”) on the shorter end of a recipe’s time range. And you may want to let butter soften in a cooler area of your kitchen or not let it sit out too long.

Conversely, if you live in a cold climate or keep the thermostat turned

down, yeasted doughs will take longer to proof and we’d advise you to soften butter in the warmest parts of your kitchen (typically near your stove or a sunny window).

As for butter, depending on how cool you keep your refrigerator, it is typically around 40 degrees right out of the refrigerator. After 2 hours of sitting on the counter, butter is around 67 degrees and is considered “room temperature”; it should give slightly when pressed (as shown in the middle image below). Butter that has been sitting in the sun or near a heat source starts to lose its shape (and become too soft for most baking recipes) at around 72 degrees.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Room temperature varies, so we use 67 degrees as a guide. But as long as you follow the visual cues given in a recipe (or our visual guide for butter), you’ll be able to adjust to the temperature of your room.



COLD BUTTER: 40°

PROPERLY SOFTENED: 67°

TOO SOFT: 72°

Not All Avocados Are Created Equal

I bought these really big, smooth-skinned avocados on sale at the grocery store. Can I make guacamole with them?

—Jane Eltringham, Joliet, Ill.

The common, pebbly-skinned Hass avocado dominates the national market year-round, but the larger, smoother, lighter-colored Florida avocado can make an appearance in some grocery stores in the summer and fall.

Nearly three times the size of the Hass avocado (most of which are grown in California or Mexico), the Florida avocado has golden flesh and a smooth green skin that doesn’t change throughout ripening. It contains up to 50 percent less fat than a Hass avocado, so it is less buttery in texture and more mild and fruity in flavor (containing roughly six times the amount of sugar by weight of a Hass avocado). A marketing campaign branded it the

“slimcado” decades ago to attract diet-conscious consumers.

We tasted Florida and Hass avocados side by side plain and in our Chunky Guacamole. Plain, the Hass avocados were earthy, rich, and balanced, while Florida avocados were blander, sweeter, and almost pulpy in texture. The guacamole made with Florida avocados wasn’t thick and creamy but rather vegetal and lean. In a pinch, you can use a simple trick to

make a decent version. To mimic the heart-healthy monounsaturated fat that Hass avocados contain and Florida avocados lack, add extra-virgin olive oil to the guacamole (2 tablespoons for every 1 cup of mashed Florida avocado). The oil greatly improves the texture, making it richer, smoother, and more buttery.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Florida avocados are not as creamy or rich as their smaller Hass cousins.



HASS AVOCADOS

FLORIDA AVOCADOS

Storing Whole Nutmeg

I grate fresh nutmeg over eggnog during the holidays because it tastes much livelier than the pre-ground jarred stuff. How should I store it?

—Aidan Sheehan, Petaluma, Calif.

To determine the best way to store whole nutmeg (which is actually a seed, not a nut), we grated a bit of nutmeg from two seeds to simulate normal usage and then stored the used seeds in two separate glass jars: one in the freezer and one on the counter at room temperature.

One year later, we tried samples from both nutmeg seeds, first grated over sweetened whole milk (with less fat than eggnog, it provided a more neutral canvas to showcase the flavor) and then grated in a white sauce from our recipe for Braised Brussels Sprouts with Nutmeg-Scented White Sauce. Several tasters noted that the flavor of the frozen nutmeg was delicate, slightly sweet, clean, and floral, while the flavor of the nutmeg stored at room temperature was bitter and sharply spicy. A few tasters had a hard time discerning any difference.

Our science editor confirmed that the volatile flavor compounds in nutmeg degrade when exposed to oxygen and moisture. He advised storing the seed in a container with as little air as possible (a zipper-lock bag works well).

THE BOTTOM LINE: Storing nutmeg in the freezer preserves its flavor and aroma longer than storing it at room temperature. After long intervals of time between uses, we recommend swiping the nutmeg a few times on the grater before using it in order to scrape off the dulled exterior and expose the fresh interior of the seed.



WHOLE NUTMEG
This seed stays fresh in the freezer.

Squash Hands

When I peel butternut squash I get a sticky substance on my hands that makes my skin feel tight and dry. What’s going on?

—Jeremy Sullivan, Valdosta, Ga.

That sticky film happens to be a sap that serves a protective purpose for squash. When a squash is punctured in the field, that sap seals off the cut to prevent moisture from escaping and bacteria from permeating the flesh. It becomes sticky only when it comes into contact with air—which, of course, happens when you peel the squash. Underripe butternut squash produces more of this sap, and it’s found only right under the skin and not actually in the squash flesh.

To see if we could prevent “squash hands,” we tried microwaving and blanching whole butternut squash before peeling. We also tested rinsing squash with water and acidulated water immediately after peeling. But we couldn’t find a solution that didn’t involve significantly cooking the squash, which can affect how a recipe works.

Some people have stronger reactions than others to this sticky substance. If the sap irritates your hands, we suggest wearing disposable food service gloves when preparing butternut squash.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The irritating substance in butternut squash is a protective sap. If it bothers your skin, wear gloves when working with squash.

KITCHEN SHORTCUTS

Compiled by Cecelia Jenkins
and Matthew Fairman



A Treat with the Trimmings

—Ginny Muldoon, Latham, N.Y.

When I make a pie, I turn the excess dough that I trim from the lip of the pie plate into a sweet treat. I put the odd-shaped scraps on a small, parchment-lined baking sheet; brush them with butter; and then sprinkle on some cinnamon and sugar. They bake up in no time and are really tasty.



RECOMMENDED

Our Favorite

Kikkoman Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce
Price: \$3.29 for 10.6-oz bottle (\$0.31 per oz)
Scoville Heat Units: 2,200
Sodium: 180 mg **Sugar:** 1 g

Huy Fong Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce
Price: \$3.99 for 17-oz bottle (\$0.23 per oz)
Scoville Heat Units: 1,600
Sodium: 75 mg **Sugar:** 0 g

Tabasco Sriracha Sauce
Price: \$2.49 for 20-oz bottle (\$0.12 per oz)
Scoville Heat Units: 370
Sodium: 170 mg **Sugar:** 1 g

RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

Sky Valley Sriracha Sauce
Price: \$6.99 for 18.5-oz bottle (\$0.38 per oz)
Scoville Heat Units: 1,300
Sodium: 150 mg **Sugar:** 1 g

Lee Kum Kee Sriracha Chili Sauce
Price: \$4.69 for 18-oz bottle (\$0.26 per oz)
Scoville Heat Units: 1,600
Sodium: 190 mg **Sugar:** 1 g

TASTERS' NOTES

This thick and smooth sriracha was “fierce and vibrant” and “had a ton of flavor.” Tasters thought it hit just the right balance of “umami, sweet, [and] spicy” and was “pleasantly garlicky.” It was boldly flavored but “didn’t overpower” other foods.

We still have only good things to say about this sriracha, but now it’s our second-favorite version. It was spicy and “just sweet enough.” It also had the “slight garlicky flavor” we expected and a “nice and thick,” smooth texture.

This sauce is made by combining traditional sriracha ingredients with Tabasco sauce. It was surprisingly mild. We missed the heat, but it tasted good otherwise. It had a “ketchupy” or “canned tomato” sweetness.

Pepper Prepping

—Shannon Smith, Fort Worth, Texas

I follow a three-step process to make mincing jalapeños easier. First I halve the chiles lengthwise so one of the halves is still attached to the stem. I then cut the halves into long strips, leaving the stem end intact. Finally, I cut across the strips, creating a nice even dice. Cutting them this way allows me to hold on to the stem ends of the halves and use them as a handle. My method may sound odd, but it works well.



Baby It's Cocoa Inside

—Harold Records, Aurora, Colo.

I’ve found an easy way to make enough hot cocoa for my family—we have three kids—all at once after we go sledding in the winter. I simply put enough hot cocoa mix for all five of us in the carafe of a coffee maker, pour the corresponding amount of water into the back of the machine, and then hit the “start” button. The water drips down into the carafe, and because the hot cocoa mix is so fine, it dissolves quickly without clumping or burning. I don’t even need to stir it!

Think There's Only One Sriracha? Think Again. *by Kate Shannon*

A DECADE AGO, many Americans hadn’t even heard of sriracha. Then, sometime around 2010, this Thai-style chile-garlic sauce went from specialty ingredient to

PRODUCT TASTING

phenomenon. Huy Fong Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce, the iconic bottle with the rooster logo and the green squeeze top, has come to represent the entire category, but it isn’t the only sriracha anymore. With more options on the market, we wondered which was best. To find out, we purchased five srirachas and sampled them in a trio of blind tastings: plain, in spicy mayo sauce with potato chips for dunking, and drizzled over fried rice.

Our preferences came down to flavor, heat, and texture. Two products were odd—one with a “funky” fermented quality that reminded us of the Korean chile paste *gochujang* and one with fruity notes—and fell to the bottom of the rankings. Another product, from Tabasco, lacked the heat our tasters craved, despite the fact that it’s made from a combination of the company’s original hot sauce and typical sriracha ingredients. It had the lowest Scoville

Heat Unit rating (a measurement of spiciness) of any sauce in our lineup. Our favorites “started sweet” and had “a heat that builds” along with a “pleasantly garlicky” flavor. These tasted great plain and enhanced the flavor of the fried rice without stealing the show.

When it came to texture, we noticed that two of the sauces were coarse and grainy. Another product was a little “loose” and “thin,” and it made for a slightly thinner dipping sauce. Our tasters wanted a thick, smooth sriracha that kept its shape on top of the fried rice but also wasn’t too thick to stir into rice or sauces. Two nailed it. They were “smooth” and “clung to the rice” nicely. Dipping sauces made with these thicker srirachas were “creamy” and had just the right consistency for dunking.

So is the rooster still king? As it turns out, it came in a close second place. Kikkoman Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce outscored Huy Fong Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce in two of our three tastings. Tasters found our winner more robustly flavored all around, and it got top marks for texture, too. America’s most famous sriracha isn’t our go-to product anymore. From now on, we’ll be stocking Kikkoman.

Roast Pork Loin with Dried Fruit

A tart dried-fruit stuffing makes a perfect foil for savory, succulent pork. But is there an easier way to combine the two?

by Matthew Fairman

DRIED FRUITS SUCH as cherries, apricots, raisins, prunes, and apples have a concentrated sweet-tart flavor that is a delicious complement to a savory, juicy pork loin roast—and recipes combining the two abound. But for some reason, these recipes nearly always call for stuffing the roast with the fruit. I've often felt that this method is unnecessarily complicated and the results usually aren't worth it. Placing the dried-fruit stuffing securely inside the roast requires tricky butchery. Plus, stuffing a roast makes it harder to cook the meat just right. Why not simplify matters and prepare each element separately, ensuring a juicy, tender roast to serve with an easy dried-fruit sauce?

The keys to a perfect roast pork loin are adequate seasoning and cooking the roast to the proper internal temperature. For the seasoning, it helps to plan ahead. Applying a rub of salt and sugar at least an hour (or up to 24 hours) in advance provides time for the seasoning to penetrate the meat.

So the night before my first recipe test, I rubbed a few pork loin roasts with a potent combination of salt, pepper, brown sugar, and rosemary. The sugar, I hoped, would help the roast brown in the oven without the need to sear it on the stove. I cooked the roasts at different oven temperatures until the meat reached 130 degrees, knowing that the temperature would go up a few notches via carryover cooking as the meat rested (the larger the cut of meat, the more carryover cooking occurs). My tasters liked the roast cooked at 400 degrees best for its combination of moist meat and a nicely browned exterior—the sugar in the rub worked!

While the pork was in the oven, I grabbed some dried apricots and cherries (which we preferred to raisins and prunes for their brighter flavors). I tried rehydrating the fruit in chicken stock in a saucepan on the stove, but we favored white wine (cut with a little water), which added depth and even more bright acidity. After 5 minutes



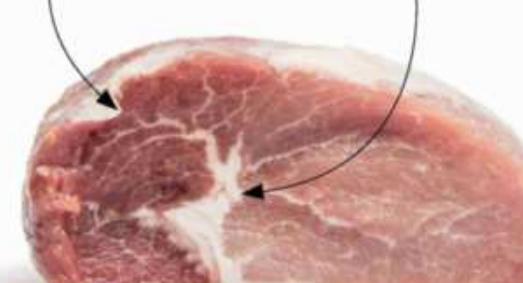
We soften and flavor the dried cherries and apricots by simmering them in a mixture of wine and sugar.

of boiling to plump and tenderize the fruit, I turned off the heat so the flavors could meld. This was a decent first stab at the fruit sauce, but it was a bit too tart and liquid-y.

In my next test, I added a little brown sugar to mellow out the sourness of the fruit and wine along with some cornstarch to thicken the sauce so it would cling to each bite of pork. This sauce was much more balanced, and as my tasters and I went back for seconds and then thirds, I chuckled at the thought that we were all stuffed—but for once, the pork loin wasn't.

DARK SHOULDER MEAT
Adds richness

INTRAMUSCULAR FAT
Equals more flavor



BLADE-END PORK LOIN
This flavorful cut is our top choice for this recipe—but a center-cut roast will work, too.

Blade-End Is Better

Pork loin roasts are usually available in two styles, center-cut and blade-end, and a good butcher will have them clearly labeled. Both cuts have their advantages. Center-cut pork loin roasts are more uniform in shape and have almost no fat running through the meat (there is usually a nice fat cap on top, though). Blade-end roasts, our preference here, often taper a little and contain more intramuscular fat and sections of dark meat (they contain some muscle that runs into the shoulder), which makes them more flavorful.

ROAST PORK LOIN WITH DRIED FRUIT Serves 6 to 8

White sugar can be substituted for the brown sugar in the sauce and on the pork. A blade-end roast is our preferred cut, but a center-cut boneless pork loin roast can also be used. This recipe requires refrigerating the salted meat for at least 1 hour before cooking.

6 tablespoons packed brown sugar
2 tablespoons minced fresh rosemary
Salt and pepper
1 (3-pound) boneless blade-end pork loin roast, trimmed
1 cup water
1 tablespoon cornstarch
1 cup dry white wine
1 cup dried apricots, quartered
1 cup dried cherries

1. Combine 2 tablespoons sugar, rosemary, 2 teaspoons salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper in bowl. Sprinkle sugar mixture evenly over roast. Wrap roast in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 24 hours.

2. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and set wire rack in sheet. Unwrap roast and place fat side up on prepared wire rack. Roast until center registers 130 degrees, 40 to 50 minutes. Transfer roast to carving board, tent with foil, and let rest for 30 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, combine $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water and cornstarch in bowl; set aside. Combine wine, apricots, cherries, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper, remaining $\frac{3}{4}$ cup water, and remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar in small saucepan and bring to boil over medium-high heat. Cook until slightly reduced, about 3 minutes. Stir in reserved cornstarch mixture, return to boil, and cook until thickened, about 30 seconds. Remove from heat and cover to keep warm.

4. Slice roast $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. Serve, passing sauce separately.

SULFURED

UNSULFURED

Dried Apricots

Most dried apricots sold in this country are sulfured, which means they have been treated with sulfur to retard natural browning. We generally like to cook with sulfured dried apricots because they look much more appealing. That said, both types taste the same, so use whichever you prefer.

Skillet-Charred Broccoli

A big, bold char isn't just for steaks. *by Morgan Bolling*

ONE SUNDAY, WHEN I was preoccupied with a skillet of sizzling pork chops, I forgot to stir the broccoli I was sautéing on another burner. By the time I finally remembered, the broccoli was near-black in color and, I feared, destined for the trash. But I sampled a piece and was surprised to find that it didn't taste burnt—just deeply roasted, a touch smoky, and lightly sweet. The florets had ultracrispy, almost-fried shells surrounding tender interiors. My "mistake" turned out to be the hit of the meal. To re-create this skillet-charred effect, I'd need a reliable, perfectly predictable recipe that didn't involve accidentally ignoring the broccoli.

I started my first test with 1½ pounds of broccoli florets (I chose to use only florets because it's harder to get consistent browning on the stalks), the maximum amount I could easily fit into a 12-inch skillet. Cutting the florets into 2-inch pieces encouraged even cooking and gave them plenty of surface area on which to develop good char. My testing revealed that using a heavy hand with extra-virgin olive oil—a full 6 tablespoons—was necessary to create supercrispy florets. And cooking the florets in a nonstick skillet encouraged the browning to stick to the broccoli, not the skillet, and obviously made cleanup easier.

I discovered a few other recipe details throughout several days of testing: Setting the burner to medium-high provided me with the best balance of strong heat and control. Barely stirring the broccoli for the first 15 minutes of cooking time allowed it to develop dark, frizzled edges. And I found that I needed to stir more frequently toward the end of cooking to make sure all the pieces were equally browned and tender.

With my method down pat, I concentrated on adding flavors to enhance the dish. After playing around with numerous additions, I landed on the combination of smoked paprika (which boosted the natural smokiness of the charred broccoli) and floral coriander, plus some fragrant, licorice-y chopped fresh basil sprinkled over just before serving. And as an alternate option, I created another version with cumin, sesame seeds, and a yogurt sauce.



With broccoli, extra color equals extra flavor.

SKILLET-CHARRED BROCCOLI

Serves 4

The skillet may look very full when you add the broccoli to it in step 1, but the pieces of broccoli will shrink as they cook. In step 2, the broccoli pieces will begin to look very dark; this is OK.

6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1½ pounds broccoli florets, cut into 2-inch pieces
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
Salt and pepper
½ teaspoon ground coriander
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
Lemon wedges

1. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add broccoli, paprika, $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt, coriander, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon

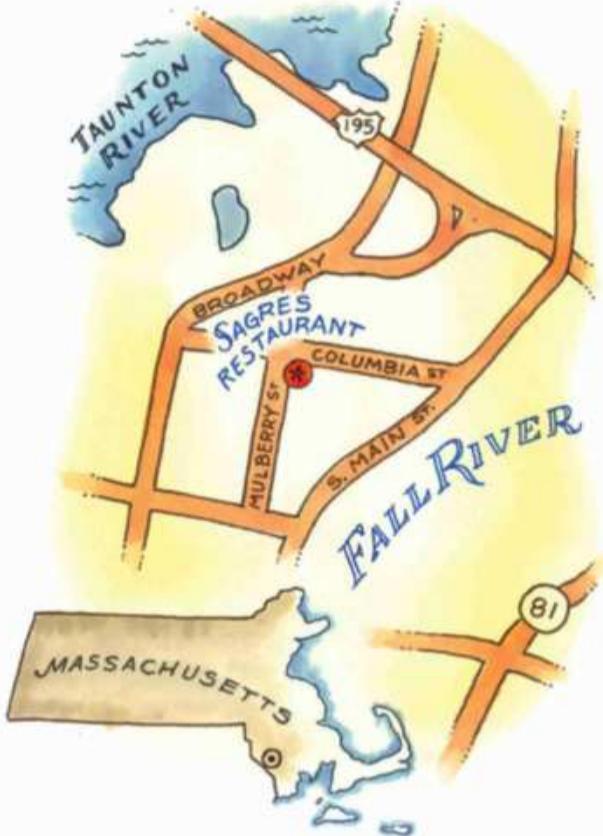
pepper and stir to combine. Cook until broccoli is dark brown and crispy in spots, about 15 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes.

2. Continue to cook until broccoli is tender and well charred, 6 to 8 minutes longer, stirring once every 2 to 3 minutes as needed. Transfer broccoli to platter. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle with basil and serve with lemon wedges.

SKILLET-CHARRED BROCCOLI WITH SESAME SEEDS AND YOGURT SAUCE

Substitute ground cumin for smoked paprika and 1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds for basil. Whisk $\frac{1}{4}$ cup plain whole-milk yogurt, 2 tablespoons tahini, 1 tablespoon lemon juice, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon pepper together in bowl; drizzle yogurt sauce over broccoli on platter.

ON THE ROAD



Victor Da Silva, above, oversees the front-of-the-house side of Sagres Restaurant in Fall River, Massachusetts, while brother Manuel Ferreira, top, helms the kitchen. Fall River, a historic port city, attracted thousands of Portuguese immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries; they brought traditional fare such as Shrimp Mozambique and sweet Portuguese-style breads.

An American Spin on a Portuguese Dish with African Roots

Text by Bryan Roof; photos by Steve Klise

IF IT WEREN'T for the large, chrome-plated "SAGRES" stenciled boldly against the beige brick exterior, you might mistake Sagres Restaurant for just another condo building in a residential neighborhood in Fall River, Massachusetts. But this restaurant has been an enduring bastion of Portuguese cuisine nestled among the homes, bakeries, and bars of this seaside town.

In 1976, when Antonio Ferreira Da Silva purchased the restaurant, he catered to Fall River's Portuguese community, who came in the early 20th century to work in the textile mills. The Portuguese influence is still present at all levels of the community.

Antonio was a highly regarded chef in Portugal before immigrating to the United States after the Carnation Revolution of 1974. His two sons, Victor Da Silva and Manuel Ferreira, eventually joined their father at the

restaurant. The brothers worked in the dining room until Antonio became too sick to carry on in the kitchen, at which point Manuel jumped in to learn the recipes. "He had to learn to cook. He had no choice," Victor tells me in a very matter-of-fact tone. Victor took over the full range of front-of-the-house management responsibilities.

Victor says the octopus is the biggest seller, which comes as a surprise because I don't see it listed on the menu. "It's not on the menu, but we always have it," he affirms. But it's the shrimp Mozambique that thrills me. It's a slightly Americanized version of Portugal's *camarão albinho*—shrimp slow-cooked with garlic and olive oil and then kicked up with spicy *piri-piri* pepper sauce (cultivated in the former Portuguese colony in present-day Mozambique)



and lemon. Everything is executed with simplicity and confidence and a heavy glug of extra-virgin olive oil.

In 2013, the restaurant suffered a major fire and closed for two years to rebuild. Its new incarnation is a little more fancy, with modern fixtures and white tablecloths, but at heart it's still the same neighborhood gathering place it's always been. For those unfamiliar with Portuguese flavors, Victor offers, "if you're open-minded, looking to expand your horizons, then I think you'll enjoy coming here. And you will like the food."



Shrimp Mozambique

Could we create a pantry version of this saucy, spicy Portuguese American dish without a key ingredient?

by Elle Simone with Matthew Fairman

A BRACING DISH of shrimp bathed in a buttery, garlicky, peppery sauce (think spicy scampi), shrimp Mozambique can be found in households and restaurants in Portuguese communities such as Fall River and New Bedford, both in Massachusetts. It's a sophisticated but simple dish, suitable as an appetizer or light main course, and it comes together quickly.

The Mozambique moniker grows from Portugal's history in southeast Africa, where Portuguese colonists cultivated the *piri-piri* pepper in the late 15th century. But this pepper, known for its beautiful hue and complex flavor (fresh, fruity, and hot but not screaming hot), can be hard to find in the United States. We tried to find a substitute in various canned, fresh, and dried peppers but came up short.

During research, we came across one recipe that suggested subbing cayenne peppers for the *piri-piris*. While a straight swap wasn't perfect (cayenne peppers are a bit milder), they are easier to find and have a similar flavor. Another aha moment came when reading labels: Our favorite all-purpose hot sauce, Frank's RedHot Original Cayenne Pepper Sauce, contains vinegar, cayenne peppers, salt, water, and canola oil. Since a good fresh *piri-piri* sauce is basically a puree of the peppers with vinegar, salt, garlic, and oil, maybe we could just doctor up the Frank's a bit.

Pureeing the hot sauce with olive oil, garlic, seasonings (parsley, garlic, and paprika), and torn bread to thicken and help bind the sauce resulted in bright and balanced flavors. But would it taste right in the finished dish? There was only one way to find out.

Step 1 was to soften some onion and



Onion, garlic, white wine, and hot sauce commingle to make a bright, spicy sauce for tender shrimp.

garlic in a skillet and then add white wine to reduce by half (we tested beer, which many recipes for this dish call for, but we preferred the crisp acidity that white wine provided). Next into the skillet: shrimp.

When the shrimp were just opaque (this took only 4 minutes), a healthy slush of our "piri-piri sauce" and 2 tablespoons of butter brought everything together. Salt, pepper, and a sprinkling of chopped parsley finished the dish. We had a dish that was exciting, flavorful, complex, and supereasy.

Purchasing and Prepping Shrimp

This recipe calls for peeled and deveined extra-large shrimp, which are also known as "21/25s" because that's how many shrimp make a pound. Peeling shrimp is easy to do by hand; to remove the vein (which is actually the shrimp's digestive tract), use the tip of a paring knife to get under it and gently pull it free.

Frank's RedHot

Traditional recipes for shrimp Mozambique call for using a spicy *piri-piri* sauce as a base. Since *piri-piri* sauce can be hard to find in the United States, we searched far and wide for a more convenient alternative. The solution: our winning all-purpose hot sauce,



Frank's RedHot Original Cayenne Pepper Sauce. Frank's is made with cayenne peppers, which have a similar kick to *piri-piri*; furthermore, the vinegar, salt, and oil in Frank's are common ingredients in *piri-piri* sauce. This supermarket staple was a perfect fit for our lively Shrimp Mozambique.

SHRIMP MOZAMBIQUE

Serves 4

We prefer untreated shrimp—those without added sodium or preservatives such as sodium tripolyphosphate. Most frozen E-Z peel shrimp have been treated (the ingredient list should tell you). If you're using treated shrimp, do not sprinkle the shrimp with salt in step 2. We developed this recipe with Frank's RedHot Original Cayenne Pepper Sauce, which is similar to the *piri-piri* sauce called for in the traditional recipe. Serve with crusty bread or over white rice.

SAUCE

- 2 tablespoons Frank's RedHot Original Cayenne Pepper Sauce
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1/4 slice hearty white sandwich bread, torn into small pieces
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper

SHRIMP

- 2 pounds extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/2 cup finely chopped onion
- 3 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 2 pieces
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

1. FOR THE SAUCE: Process all ingredients in blender until smooth, about 2 minutes, scraping down sides of blender jar as needed.

2. FOR THE SHRIMP: Sprinkle shrimp with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper; set aside. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and 1/2 teaspoon salt and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add wine and bring to boil. Cook until reduced by half, about 4 minutes.

3. Add shrimp and cook, stirring occasionally, until opaque and just cooked through, about 4 minutes. Stir in butter and sauce and cook until butter is melted and sauce is heated through, about 1 minute. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle with parsley and serve.

Cheesy Stuffed Shells

The appeal of comfort food wanes if it's a pain to make. Our streamlined method delivers.

by Cecelia Jenkins

MY ULTIMATE COMFORT food: jumbo pasta shells stuffed with cheese, topped with tomato sauce and more cheese, and baked until golden brown.

But stuffed shell recipes can be frustrating. Most call for precooking the shells and then using a spoon or pastry bag to fill them without ripping them to shreds. Some demand that you simmer a sauce for hours before it goes over the shells. Some cheater recipes don't even bother with stuffing the shells, instead instructing you to just stir everything together and bake for an hour or longer; in the end, you're left with a mess of torn pasta and grainy cheese. I wanted an easier process and better results.

I first focused on the parboiling step. Would uncooked shells, filled and sauced, soften enough in the oven? We've used a similar approach for other baked pasta dishes (such as baked ziti), so I headed into the test kitchen to see if this shortcut would work.

I picked 25 open raw shells from the box (to fill a typical 13 by 9-inch baking dish). Then I transferred some seasoned ricotta to a plastic zipper-lock bag, snipped off one corner, and piped the cheese into the shells. Once I'd added a quick marinara sauce and some shredded cheese, I covered the dish tightly with foil and baked it. But the sauce



Our shells contain ricotta for creaminess, easy-melting fontina for flavor, and Pecorino for bite.

cooked down too far, leaving some pasta exposed and undercooked.

I needed a thinner sauce with more liquid. I added 2 cups of extra water; this time, the shells absorbed the liquid they needed and cooked through properly, leaving behind a rich but still fluid—not chunky and dehydrated—sauce.

After a great deal of testing, I landed on a flavorful filling that melted well: ricotta, fontina, Pecorino Romano, basil, dried oregano, and garlic. Two eggs stirred into the mixture helped the filling stay put as the stuffed shells baked and made the filling easier to pipe. And a bit of cornstarch helped the

filling maintain a silky texture.

After 45 minutes of covered cooking in the oven, the shells were nearly done. I removed the foil and sprinkled more fontina over the top. After just 15 minutes more, I had a beautifully browned, bubbling-around-the-edges casserole of cheesy, saucy, superflavorful stuffed shells. Bonus: You can even assemble the dish and bake it the next day.

CHEESY STUFFED SHELLS

Serves 6 to 8

Shred the fontina on the large holes of a box grater. Be sure to use only open, unbroken shells. We developed this recipe using Barilla Jumbo Shells and were able to find at least 25 open shells in each 1-pound box we used. Pipe each shell only about three-quarters full on your first pass, and then divide the remaining filling evenly among the shells.

SAUCE

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 (28-ounce) can tomato puree
- 2 cups water
- 1 teaspoon sugar

FILLING

- 10 ounces (1 1/4 cups) whole-milk ricotta cheese
- 4 ounces fontina cheese, shredded (1 cup)
- 2 ounces Pecorino Romano cheese, grated (1 cup)
- 2 large eggs
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- 1 1/2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

SHELLS

- 25 jumbo pasta shells
- 8 ounces fontina cheese, shredded (2 cups)
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil

1. FOR THE SAUCE: Heat oil in large saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, salt, and pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened and lightly browned, about 10 minutes.

2. Stir in garlic and pepper flakes and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in tomato puree, water, and sugar and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook until flavors have melded, about 5 minutes. (Cooled sauce can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

3. FOR THE FILLING: Stir all ingredients in bowl until thoroughly combined. Transfer filling to pastry bag or large zipper-lock bag (if using zipper-lock bag, cut 1 inch off 1 corner of bag).

4. FOR THE SHELLS: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Place shells open side up on counter. Pipe filling into shells until each is about three-quarters full. Divide remaining filling evenly among shells.

5. Spread 1 cup sauce over bottom of 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Transfer shells, open side up, to prepared dish. Pour remaining sauce evenly over shells to completely cover.

6. Cover dish tightly with aluminum foil and set on rimmed baking sheet. Bake until shells are tender and sauce is boiling rapidly, about 45 minutes. Remove dish from oven and discard foil; sprinkle fontina over top. Bake, uncovered, until fontina is lightly browned, about 15 minutes. Let shells cool for 25 minutes. Sprinkle with basil. Serve.

TO MAKE AHEAD

At end of step 2, let sauce cool completely. At end of step 5, cover dish tightly with aluminum foil and refrigerate for up to 24 hours. When ready to eat, bake shells as directed in step 6.



Filling Station

We found that it was much easier to fill rigid uncooked pasta shells than it was to work with floppy boiled ones, so we designed a recipe that involved filling raw shells with the cheese mixture, assembling the casserole, and baking it—no precooking of the pasta required.

Sort through a box and select 25 shells that feature wide openings. Use a pastry bag (or a zipper-lock bag with one corner snipped off) to pipe in the cheese mixture until each shell is about three-quarters full (as shown at right), and then divide the remaining filling among the shells.

Caesar Brussels Sprouts

Caesar dressing and Brussels sprouts may seem like a quirky pairing, but trust us—it's one you want to try.

by Ashley Moore

FOR SEVERAL YEARS now, Brussels sprouts have been enjoying a little time in the spotlight. As such, Caesar Brussels sprouts—cooked or raw sprouts doused in the intense dressing—are showing up on restaurant menus and in cookbooks. I set out to craft the best version possible.

A few of the existing recipes I prepared featured raw Brussels sprouts (shredded or chopped), while others called for microwaving or roasting the sprouts before dressing them. Our favorite recipe called for roasting halved sprouts until browned and sweet before tossing them with the dressing. The Brussels sprouts got beautifully charred and were tender throughout.

While the results were good, I know that the oven can be in high demand during the holidays. So I tried cooking the sprouts in a skillet on the stovetop, and this method was just as successful. The sprouts, which I'd quartered so they'd cook quickly and have extra surface area to pick up browning and soak up dressing, got a pleasant dark char, which helped bring out their subtly sweet flavor. I found that it was best to cook the quartered sprouts covered for the first 10 minutes until tender and then remove the lid to brown them.

With the sprouts perfectly cooked, I turned my attention to getting the dressing just right. I didn't want it to be so strong that I couldn't taste the Brussels sprouts, but I wanted it to be bold and pungent like Caesar dressing should be. I used all the usual suspects—lemon juice, mayonnaise (to cut the sharpness and provide a subtle creaminess), Worcestershire, Dijon, garlic, anchovies, salt, pepper, and extra-virgin olive oil—and tweaked the ratios until I had the balance I sought.

One last thing: A proper Caesar salad needs croutons. But I didn't want large hunks of crusty bread competing with the sprouts. Instead, after a bit of experimenting, I landed on topping the sprouts with crunchy Parmesan bread crumbs. They were the perfect complement to my boldly dressed, sweet, and tender Brussels sprouts.



Parmesan bread crumbs provide a nice crunch, echoing Caesar salad's signature croutons.

Prep School: Brussels Breakdown



Trim Stem

Use a sharp chef's knife to remove the dried end where the sprout is attached to the stalk.



Quarter Sprouts

Slice each sprout in half through the root end and then in half again to quarter it.

CAESAR BRUSSELS SPROUTS

Serves 4 to 6

For the best results, be sure to choose Brussels sprouts with small, tight heads. We found that those measuring no more than 1½ inches in diameter were best. The skillet may seem very full at first in step 2, but the Brussels sprouts will shrink as they cook.

DRESSING

- 1½ tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 anchovy fillets, rinsed and minced
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

- 2 pounds Brussels sprouts, trimmed and quartered
- 5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup panko bread crumbs
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup)

1. FOR THE DRESSING: Whisk lemon juice, mayonnaise, Worcestershire, mustard, garlic, anchovies, pepper, and salt in large bowl until combined. Slowly whisk in oil until emulsified; set aside.

2. FOR THE BRUSSELS SPROUTS: Combine Brussels sprouts, ¼ cup oil, and ¼ teaspoon salt in 12-inch nonstick skillet. Cover skillet, place over medium heat, and cook, stirring occasionally, until Brussels sprouts are bright green and have started to brown, about 10 minutes.

3. Uncover and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until Brussels sprouts are deeply and evenly browned and paring knife slides in with little to no resistance, about 5 minutes longer. Transfer Brussels sprouts to rimmed baking sheet and let cool for 15 minutes. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels.

4. Combine panko, ¼ teaspoon salt, and remaining 1 tablespoon oil in now-empty skillet and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until golden brown, 2 to 4 minutes. Transfer to small bowl and stir in Parmesan.

5. Add Brussels sprouts to dressing and gently toss to combine. Transfer to serving platter. Sprinkle with panko mixture and serve.

Chicken Cooked in Milk

This dish required a big leap of faith. But the payoff was spectacular.

by Cecelia Jenkins

ITALIANS HAVE BEEN braising pork in milk for centuries; the homey process yields a rustic, nutty, gravy-like sauce and supermoist meat. But chicken? This was a new idea to me.

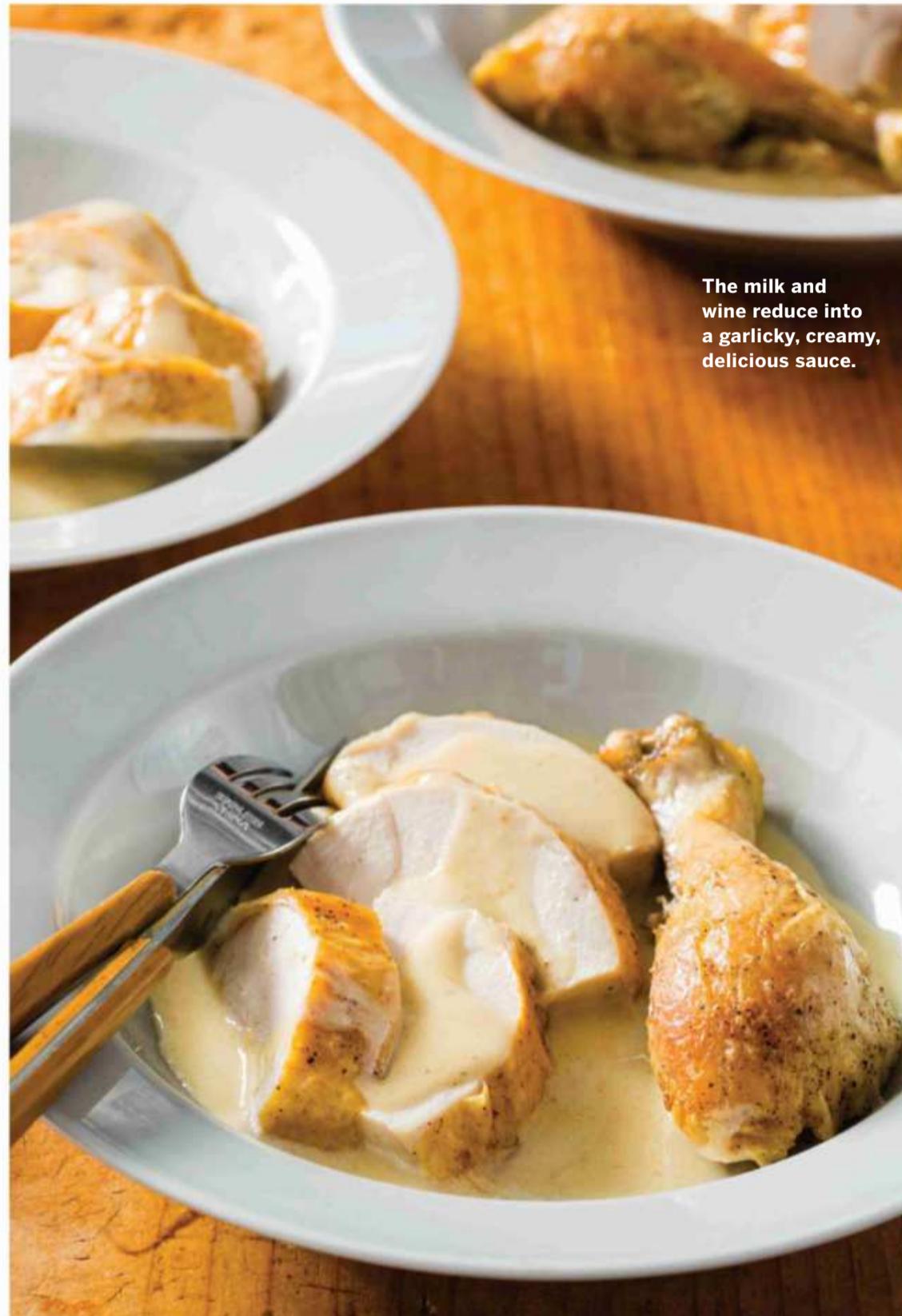
Existing recipes that I tried (including a popular one by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver) followed very similar scripts. The whole bird bakes uncovered in a pot in a shallow pool of milk flavored with herbs, lemon peel, garlic, and/or cinnamon. The milk transforms in the oven, reducing into an unattractive, curdled sauce that belies its appearance with toasty, nutty flavors; a nuanced sweetness from the caramelizing milk sugars; and a savory richness from all the chicken drippings.

After bubbling away in the oven, my testing samples emerged looking like mistakes: clumps of beige curds clung unattractively to the chicken, fat pooled in the pot, and the skin was pale. But when I closed my eyes and tasted, the alarming appearance faded in favor of some sophisticated flavors. The curds reminded me of cheese—pleasantly soft, lightly sweet, and supremely creamy. But the appearance needed work.

While some recipes call for the cumbersome task of searing the whole chicken first, I wanted to try an easier route and start the dish cold. I nestled a bird into the pot, added a few glugs of whole milk (I'd flavor it later), and then slid the uncovered pot into a hot 425-degree oven. The chicken browned just fine, but the curdling was as ugly as ever.

I considered hauling out the blender to smooth out the finished sauce, but for a simpler approach, I drew on past test kitchen knowledge and added a bit of baking soda to the milk before cooking. This raised the milk's pH into neutral territory, minimizing curdling. To give the sauce a bright note, I added white wine (not too much; I didn't want to reverse the pH fix I'd found) and, for complexity, a fistful of crushed and peeled garlic cloves. Plunked into the milk at the onset, they turned mellow and slightly sweet in the oven.

To amplify the toasty notes of the sauce, I reduced it in the pot on



the stovetop while the chicken rested. I wasn't a fan of the cinnamon and sage some recipes suggested, so instead I added a few swipes of lemon peel and a bunch of thyme to give the sauce a final bright lift. Whisking frequently as the sauce reduced dispersed the soft roasted garlic's sweet-savory flavor throughout the sauce.

One final hurdle: cleanup. A dark ring of baked-on milk formed around the pot and took way too much elbow grease to remove. Spraying the sides with nonstick cooking spray at the start made cleanup much, much easier.

For good measure, I passed the finished sauce through a fine-mesh strainer to easily remove the lemon peel and thyme sprigs and smooth out any errant curds (a few are inevitable). Tasters raved about the moist meat and the luxuriously smooth sauce.

The milk and wine reduce into a garlicky, creamy, delicious sauce.

CHICKEN COOKED IN MILK

Serves 4

Use only whole milk here; milk with a lower fat content will curdle. It's important to whisk together the milk and baking soda, which is key to keeping this sauce from curdling, before adding anything else to the pot in step 1. Do not skip this step. As the chicken braises, a brown skin of milk will form around the chicken. This is OK. Simply discard it when the chicken is done. We developed this recipe in a 6-quart enameled cast-iron Dutch oven. If you use a smaller pot, you'll likely need to increase the simmering time in step 4.

- 4 cups whole milk
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- 12 garlic cloves, lightly crushed and peeled
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 1 (4-pound) whole chicken, giblets discarded
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 8 sprigs fresh thyme
- 3 (2-inch) strips lemon zest

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Spray large Dutch oven with vegetable oil spray. Thoroughly whisk milk and baking soda together in Dutch oven. (Do not add wine before baking soda.) Whisk in wine, then add garlic.
2. Combine 2 teaspoons salt and ½ teaspoon pepper in bowl. Pat chicken dry with paper towels. Tie legs together with kitchen twine and tuck wingtips behind back. Rub entire surface of chicken with oil and sprinkle all over with salt mixture. Place chicken in pot, breast side up. Roast, uncovered, until breast registers 160 degrees and thighs register 175 degrees, about 1 hour.
3. Insert tongs into cavity of chicken and tilt chicken to let juices from cavity drain into pot, then transfer chicken to carving board. Discard any milk skin that has attached to chicken. Let chicken rest for 20 minutes.
4. Meanwhile, add thyme sprigs and lemon zest to pot and bring to simmer over medium heat. Cook, whisking often, until sauce reduces to about 1½ cups and coats back of spoon, 8 to 12 minutes.
5. Strain sauce through fine-mesh strainer set over bowl, pressing on solids to extract as much sauce as possible; discard solids. Whisk any accumulated chicken juices into sauce. Season sauce with salt and pepper to taste. Carve chicken and serve with sauce.



Not Pretty in the Pot

As the milk reduces and cooks, a thin skin forms around the chicken on the surface of the cooking liquid. While it is safe (delicious, even) to eat, it doesn't look great. So we remove it before straining and serving the sauce.

Mexican Meatball Soup

Move beyond your normal Mexican-food routine with this robust, tomatoey broth studded with flavorful meatballs and tender vegetables.

by Matthew Fairman

BOLDLY SEASONED SOUPS are a mainstay of Mexican cuisine, and my personal favorite is meatball soup. The best versions I've encountered have featured tender, flavorful meatballs cooked in a complex broth spiked with chiles and herbs and grounded by the earthy flavor of toasted corn. Sounds delicious, right?

But when I prepared a sampling of recipes for this meatball-studded soup from a variety of Mexican cookbooks, my tasters and I were surprised by some glaring faults. The meatballs ranged from tough and dry to starchy and gummy. Several of the broths tasted weak and watery and lacked the signature profound corn presence. Hoping to find a relatively easy way to delicious, tender meatballs and a simple yet full-flavored broth with deep corn flavor, I set up camp in the kitchen and got to work.

Focusing first on the broth, I prepared two of the test kitchen's favorite Mexican soup recipes: a tortilla soup and a red posole soup. My tasters loved the flavor and added body that torn-up corn tortillas gave the tortilla soup, and they raved about the depth and complexity that chili powder provided in the posole. So for my next test I combined the two, and after just half an hour of cooking, I had a complex, corny broth with layers of flavor. Carrots, tomatoes, and zucchini gave the soup a strong vegetable presence, and a little canned chipotle in adobo reinforced the chile flavor and added a twist of heat. As for the corn tortillas, I found that grinding them finely in a food processor ensured that they fully incorporated into the broth.

On to the meatballs. Since beef, poultry, and pork meatballs are all common choices for this soup, I made a batch of each, dropping plain meatballs into the simmering broth. The pork

meatballs stood out as our clear winner because of their mild sweetness and firm yet tender texture. Taking a cue from our favorite meatball from the initial test, I added a big spoonful of minced fresh garlic and a fistful of chopped cilantro to the mix. We usually add a panade, a paste of starch (often bread) and liquid, to meatballs to keep them tender. To reinforce the flavors in the broth, I used a paste of some of the pulverized corn tortillas moistened with chicken broth.

Now my tasters were slurping this soup with gusto, savoring its rustic nature and soulful flavors. It was Mexican comfort food at its finest.

MEXICAN-STYLE MEATBALL SOUP

Serves 6 to 8

A #60 scoop will make quick work of portioning the meatballs, and moistening your hands with water will make them easier to shape.

MEATBALLS

- 7 (6-inch) corn tortillas, quartered
- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves and stems
- 1 large egg
- 2 tablespoons chicken broth
- 4 garlic cloves, chopped coarse
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon pepper
- 1 pound ground pork

SOUP

- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 onion, quartered
- 1 1/2 tablespoons chili powder
- 4 garlic cloves, chopped coarse
- 2 teaspoons minced canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 6 cups chicken broth
- 2 zucchini, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 2 carrots, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- Lime wedges
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro

1. FOR THE MEATBALLS: Pulse tortillas in food processor until finely chopped, with no pieces larger than 1/2 inch, 15 to 20 pulses. Set aside 3/4 cup processed tortillas for soup. Add cilantro, egg, broth, garlic, salt, and pepper to processor with remaining tortillas and process until smooth, about 1 minute, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

2. Transfer tortilla mixture to large bowl. Add pork and mix with your hands until thoroughly combined. Divide mixture into about thirty-two 1-tablespoon portions. Roll portions between your wet hands to form



Chili powder and canned chipotle chile give this deeply flavored soup a lively kick.

meatballs. Transfer to plate, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate until ready to use. (Meatballs can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours.)

3. FOR THE SOUP: In clean, dry processor, process tomatoes and their juice, onion, chili powder, garlic, chipotle, oregano, 1 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper until smooth, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

4. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add tomato mixture and cook, stirring occasionally, until well browned and starting to stick to bottom of pot, 10 to 12 minutes.

5. Stir in broth, zucchini, carrots, and reserved processed tortillas. Add meatballs to pot and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium and simmer until meatballs are cooked through and vegetables are tender, about 15 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve with lime wedges, sprinkling individual portions with cilantro.

Two-Timing Tortillas

Corn tortillas have a heady, hearty corn flavor that adds deep, earthy character to this soup. We grind the tortillas in a food processor and use them two ways here: as a flavorful binder in the meatballs and as a tasty thickener for the broth. Make sure to use corn tortillas for this recipe, not flour tortillas.



TOP TORTILLAS
Maria and Ricardo's is our winner.

Scampi-Style Chicken

A well-known Italian restaurant chain makes a mint selling garlicky, lemony “chicken scampi.” We knew we could make a better version. **by Ashley Moore**

RECENTLY A FRIEND of mine, knowing that I worked in the test kitchen, asked if I had ever had chicken scampi from Olive Garden. He grew up eating this dish and said he still craves it to this day. But wait—“chicken scampi”? *Scampi* means “langoustine” in Italian, and there are no langoustines anywhere near this dish. Rather, my friend described fried chicken tenders served in the style of shrimp scampi, the classic lemony, garlicky, saucy dish often found on Italian American menus. It sounded promising, so we ordered some takeout to try in the kitchen.

It was pretty good but not great (which, in all fairness, wasn’t surprising considering the imperfect takeout scenario). For starters, the cream-based sauce felt a little heavy and unusual for something in the “scampi” style. And the red onions in the dish looked odd and tasted unpleasantly strong. But we liked the breaded chicken tenders and garlicky sauce studded with strips of colorful bell pepper. The dish definitely held promise, and I was determined to fulfill it.

I started with the chicken. To emulate the golden, crisp coating of the restaurant dish, I seasoned chicken tenderloins (you can use cut-up strips of chicken breast, too) and dredged them first in beaten egg and then in flour. Then I seared the chicken in oil in a nonstick skillet until it was browned on both sides and removed the golden tenders (tenting them with aluminum foil to keep them warm) so I could build the sauce in the skillet.

To get the sauce going, I added a little more oil to the hot skillet and tossed in some sliced red bell pepper. When it was soft and browned, I added a few cloves of sliced garlic. After about a minute, the garlic smelled amazing and was just starting to color, so I stirred in some flour (for thickening) and then a combination of chicken broth and white wine. I let the sauce bubble away until it was



You can serve this bright, saucy chicken over pasta, but we like it best with crusty bread.

slightly reduced, and then I finished it with lemon for brightness and butter for richness and a glossy sheen. Finally, I returned the fried chicken tenders to the pan to warm through and meld with the flavorful sauce. It was good, but my tasters wanted more garlic and less sourness, so I upped the number of garlic cloves to eight and held the lemon from the sauce, instead serving the chicken with lemon wedges on the side.

We were really happy with the straightforward flavors of this simple, comforting dish, which we liked best served with crusty bread for mopping up the tasty sauce. But the real test was my Olive Garden-loving friend. “It’s not exactly the same,” he said as he pondered his first few bites. “It’s definitely better.” Check, please!

Preventing Burning

We fry the chicken in two batches before making a sauce in the skillet, so it’s important to carefully wipe the skillet clean after each batch to prevent any crumbs from burning and ruining the sauce.



CHICKEN SCAMPI

Serves 4 to 6

If you can’t find chicken tenderloins, slice boneless, skinless chicken breasts lengthwise into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-thick strips. You can use torn basil in place of the parsley, if desired. Serve with crusty bread and lemon wedges.

- 2 large eggs
- Salt and pepper
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup plus 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 2 pounds chicken tenderloins, trimmed
- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and sliced thin
- 8 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 1/4 cups chicken broth
- 3/4 cup dry white wine
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

1. Lightly beat eggs and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt together in shallow dish. Place $\frac{3}{4}$ cup flour in second shallow dish. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Working with 1 piece of chicken at a time, dip in eggs, allowing excess to drip off, then dredge in flour, shaking off any excess. Transfer to large plate.

2. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add half of chicken and cook until golden brown and registering 160 degrees, about 3 minutes per side. Transfer chicken to clean plate and tent with aluminum foil. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels and repeat with 2 tablespoons oil and remaining chicken.

3. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons oil in now-empty skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add bell pepper and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt and cook until softened and well browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant and golden brown, about 1 minute. Stir in remaining 1 tablespoon flour and cook for 1 minute.

4. Stir in broth and wine and bring to boil, scraping up any browned bits. Cook until mixture is reduced to about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups, 5 to 7 minutes. Reduce heat to low and stir in butter until melted. Return chicken to skillet and cook, turning to coat with sauce, until heated through, about 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to shallow serving platter and sprinkle with parsley. Serve.

Simple Sautéed Kale

Say goodbye to tough, boring kale. We found a better way to sauté.

by Cecelia Jenkins

KALE IS NUTRITIONALLY dense and intensely flavored, but it is also notoriously fibrous and tough, thus many recipes call for long-cooking this hearty green in simmering water. But I wanted to find a faster way of cooking for the dual sakes of convenience and preserving more of the kale's rich, brawny flavor. I wanted to sauté it.

There were a few hurdles to overcome. First, because—like other greens such as spinach and Swiss chard—kale shrinks a lot as it cooks, you have to add it in stages to the pan so that the pan doesn't overflow. Also, kale stems are tougher than kale leaves, so I'd have to somehow account for their different cooking rates. And finally, I'd need to add flavor accents that highlighted the pleasant mineral taste of this popular vegetable.

I started by stripping the leaves from the stems (you can do this with a knife, but it's easier to use your hands) and discarding any especially thick, woody pieces from the ends of the stems. I cut the leaves into rough 2-inch pieces and chopped the remaining more-tender stems into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch lengths. Cooking the kale in oil in a skillet took a long time, especially because I had to wait for each handful to wilt before adding the next. It was better to soften all the kale in boiling water first (a Dutch oven worked great). This blanching step meant I could soften all the kale at once in just 5 minutes.

Now I could get on with the sautéing. After draining the kale and pressing out excess water, I heated some olive oil in the same Dutch oven I'd used to blanch the greens. I added sliced garlic and spicy pepper flakes and then the kale. In just 5 more minutes of stirring, the kale was completely tender and infused with garlicky flavor—delicious. A finishing drizzle of olive oil gave it a glossy sheen and extra richness. This kale was so good that I decided to make a version with the assertive flavors of chopped pepperoni and pickled hot cherry peppers.

SIMPLE SAUTÉED KALE

Serves 6 to 8

You can substitute Lacinato kale (also known as dinosaur or Tuscan kale) for the curly kale in this recipe, if desired. It's important to boil the kale in the full 4 quarts of water; with less water it can become too salty.

1½ pounds curly kale
Salt and pepper
6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
4 garlic cloves, sliced thin
¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes

1. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat.
2. Meanwhile, stem kale by grasping leaves between your thumb and index finger at base of stem and pulling from bottom to top of stem to strip off leaves. Cut leaves into 2-inch pieces. Trim and discard bases of stems thicker than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch. Cut remaining stems into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces. Transfer kale to large bowl and wash thoroughly.
3. Add 2 tablespoons salt to boiling water. Add kale to pot, 1 handful at a time, submerging with tongs as needed. Cook, stirring occasionally, until leaves are tender and stems are just al dente, about 5 minutes. Drain in colander and let sit for 5 minutes, occasionally pressing on kale with rubber spatula to release excess moisture. (Drained kale can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)
4. Heat $\frac{1}{4}$ cup oil in now-empty pot over medium heat until shimmering. Add garlic and pepper flakes and cook until garlic is lightly browned, 30 to 60 seconds. Add kale and cook, stirring frequently, until stems are tender, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to serving platter and drizzle with remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Serve.

SIMPLE SAUTÉED KALE

WITH CRISPY PEPPERONI AND CHERRY PEPPERS

Add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pepperoni, cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch pieces, to shimmering oil in step 4 and cook until rust-colored, 3 to 5 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer pepperoni to plate, then add garlic and pepper flakes to remaining oil in pot. Sprinkle kale with pepperoni and 2 tablespoons chopped jarred hot cherry peppers before serving.



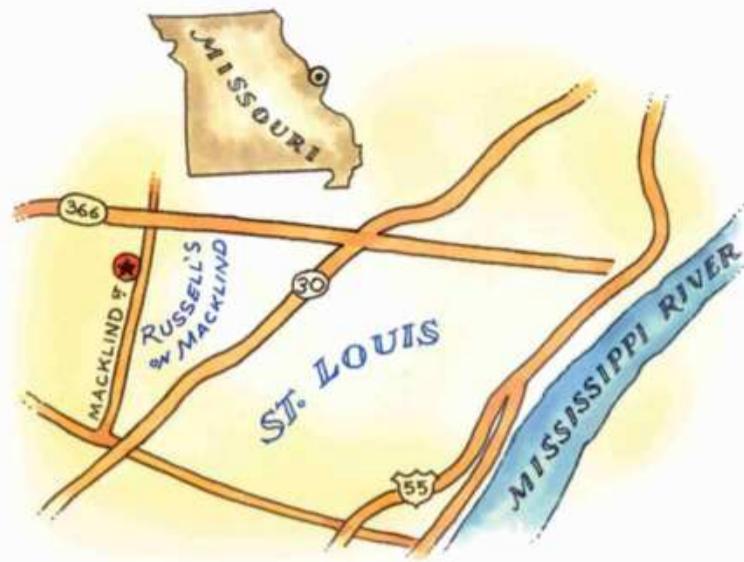
How We Prep the Kale

To stem the kale, grab the end of the stem in one hand and pinch your thumb and index finger on either side as you strip off the leaves from the bottom to the top of the stem.



Cherry peppers and crisp cubes of pepperoni add a jolt of flavor to this lively variation.





ST. LOUIS NATIVE and chef-owner of Russell's on Macklind in the city's Southampton neighborhood, Russell Ping originally resisted the idea of selling gooey butter cake at his upscale bakery-restaurant, a bold move within these city limits. In his eyes, it was a played-out tune and one that didn't bear repeating. But gooey butter cake is so intertwined with the city's diverse and somewhat unusual food culture—like their toasted (deep-fried) ravioli and St. Paul (egg foo young) sandwich—that it's often the first thing mentioned when the topic of food in St. Louis comes up in conversation.

Ping has been making pastries since he was a kid. "I sold cookies at my neighborhood pool when I was little," he tells me. He attended culinary school in Louisville, Kentucky, to learn "the savory side of it," as he puts it, before eventually returning to St. Louis.

After working for the Ritz-Carlton, where he learned the value of customer service, he opened up his first venture, Russell's Cafe and Bakery, in suburban Fenton, Missouri, in 2006 at age 22. In 2013, Ping opened his second café, Russell's on Macklind, which he eventually expanded to feature an upscale dinner menu with an emphasis on quality ingredients and simple preparations. It's a neighborhood place, dine-in or take-out, breakfast through dinner, with everything made from scratch. "We try to order locally when it makes sense and support as many local businesses as we can," he says.

When Ping finally got around to tackling his butter cake demons, he did it with a twist. It's a challenge chefs often face when trying to honor the legacy of an established dish while also staying true to their own visions: taking the familiar, making it personal, and putting it back out there. Drawing on his pastry background, Ping ended up with an ultrabuttery, slightly salty shortbread crust; a custardy, vanilla-heavy middle layer; and a meringue-like, crackled top crust. Ping keeps his recipe closely guarded, but a manager confesses that it's made with butter, cream cheese, sugar, and love. When I ask Ping how the cake is received by customers, he responds, "You have puritans in St. Louis who don't want what we're doing, and you have people who are cool with it."

ON THE ROAD

Text by Bryan Roof; photos by Steve Klise

Something Gooey in St. Louis



Top: Neighborhood regulars come to Russell's for the drinks and snacks but also to catch up on the latest neighborhood news. Owner Russell Ping, at left, knows that for many St. Louis residents, classic gooey butter cake is a treat that shouldn't be messed with. But more adventurous snack-seekers are rewarded with his flavorful, crunchy-soft riff.

Gooey Butter Bars

The challenge: Turn St. Louis's most famous sweet treat into a batch of bars. **by Alli Berkey**

GOOEY BUTTER CAKE, pride of St. Louis, is well-known as a soft, sweet, and, well, gooey dessert. But our executive food editor, Bryan Roof, recently encountered a different riff on the concept (see "Something Gooey in St. Louis"): gooey butter cake bars.

The sweet treat had several distinct layers: a solid, not-too-sweet bottom crust; a slightly softer second layer of crust; a buttery layer of gooey pudding; and finally a thin and delicate meringue-like crackle on top. Thanks to the sturdy base, it's just as easy to walk around with as it is to eat with a fork. I set out to perfect each layer before joining them together into a stacked bar.

Early experiments steered me toward a single layer of crust. If I could find the right construction, it would have just as much impact but be much easier. After considering graham cracker crust (too flimsy) and pie crust (too dull), I headed toward a shortbread crust. A few simple tests gave me a dead-simple method: Just stir together melted butter, sugar, flour, and salt; press the mixture into a 13 by 9-inch pan; and bake it. The trick was adding enough salt to balance out the sweetness of the overall bar but not too much. Three-quarters of a teaspoon was just right.

The custard filling was trickier. The main ingredients are butter and sugar, but like most custard recipes, this one also calls for eggs, which can be vexing. Most custard recipes suggest cooking the filling over a double boiler so the delicate eggs can be carefully supervised to prevent scrambling, but that kind of fussiness didn't seem right for these rustic bars. I wanted to stir the filling together, dump it over the partially baked (and cooled) crust, and then return it to the oven to cook.

The answer was to replace some of the butter with cream cheese. This helped create a smooth and cohesive filling that, even though it contained two eggs plus two yolks (the extra yolks



These multilayered treats feature a cookie crust; a soft, tangy-sweet filling; and a crackly top.

added richness and contributed to the pale yellow color), needed no prebaking and had just the right pudding-like consistency—think cheesecake but with a bit more jiggle. It also added a lovely tangy flavor to counter the sweetness. And for that gorgeous, crackly, meringue-like top? The egg whites managed to create that all by themselves in the oven, with no extra nudge from me.

If you have a sweet tooth like I do, these bars hit all the creamy, tangy, sweet notes you crave. And they're almost too pretty to eat.

Almost.



A Crackly Top

The filling cracks around the edges as the bars cool and will crack even more when you cut them—and that's OK. The cracks are a natural result of the baked custard and, once dusted with confectioners' sugar, contribute to these bars' signature appearance.

FILLING

- 8 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- 4 cups (1 pound) confectioners' sugar, plus extra for dusting
- 2 large eggs plus 2 large yolks
- 2 tablespoons vanilla extract
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Make foil sling for 13 by 9-inch baking pan by folding 2 long sheets of aluminum foil; first sheet should be 13 inches wide and second sheet should be 9 inches wide. Lay sheets of foil in pan perpendicular to each other, with extra foil hanging over edges of pan. Push foil into corners and up sides of pan, smoothing foil flush to pan. Spray foil with vegetable oil spray.

2. **FOR THE CRUST:** Combine flour, sugar, and salt in bowl. Add melted butter and stir with rubber spatula until evenly moistened. Crumble dough over bottom of prepared pan. Using bottom of dry measuring cup, press dough into even layer. Using fork, poke dough all over, about 20 times. Bake until edges are light golden brown, about 20 minutes. Transfer pan to wire rack and let cool completely, about 30 minutes.

3. **FOR THE FILLING:** Combine cream cheese and butter in bowl of stand mixer fitted with paddle. With mixer running on low speed, slowly add sugar and mix until fully combined, about 1 minute, scraping down sides and bottom of bowl as needed. Increase speed to medium-high and mix until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes.

4. Reduce speed to low; add eggs and yolks, one at a time, and mix until incorporated. Add vanilla and salt and mix until incorporated, about 20 seconds, scraping down sides and bottom of bowl as needed. Increase speed to medium-high and mix until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes (mixture should have consistency of frosting). Spread filling evenly over cooled crust. Tap pan gently on counter to release air bubbles.

5. Bake until top is golden brown, edges have cracked, and center jiggles slightly when pan is gently shaken, about 30 minutes. Transfer pan to wire rack and let cool completely, at least 3 hours.

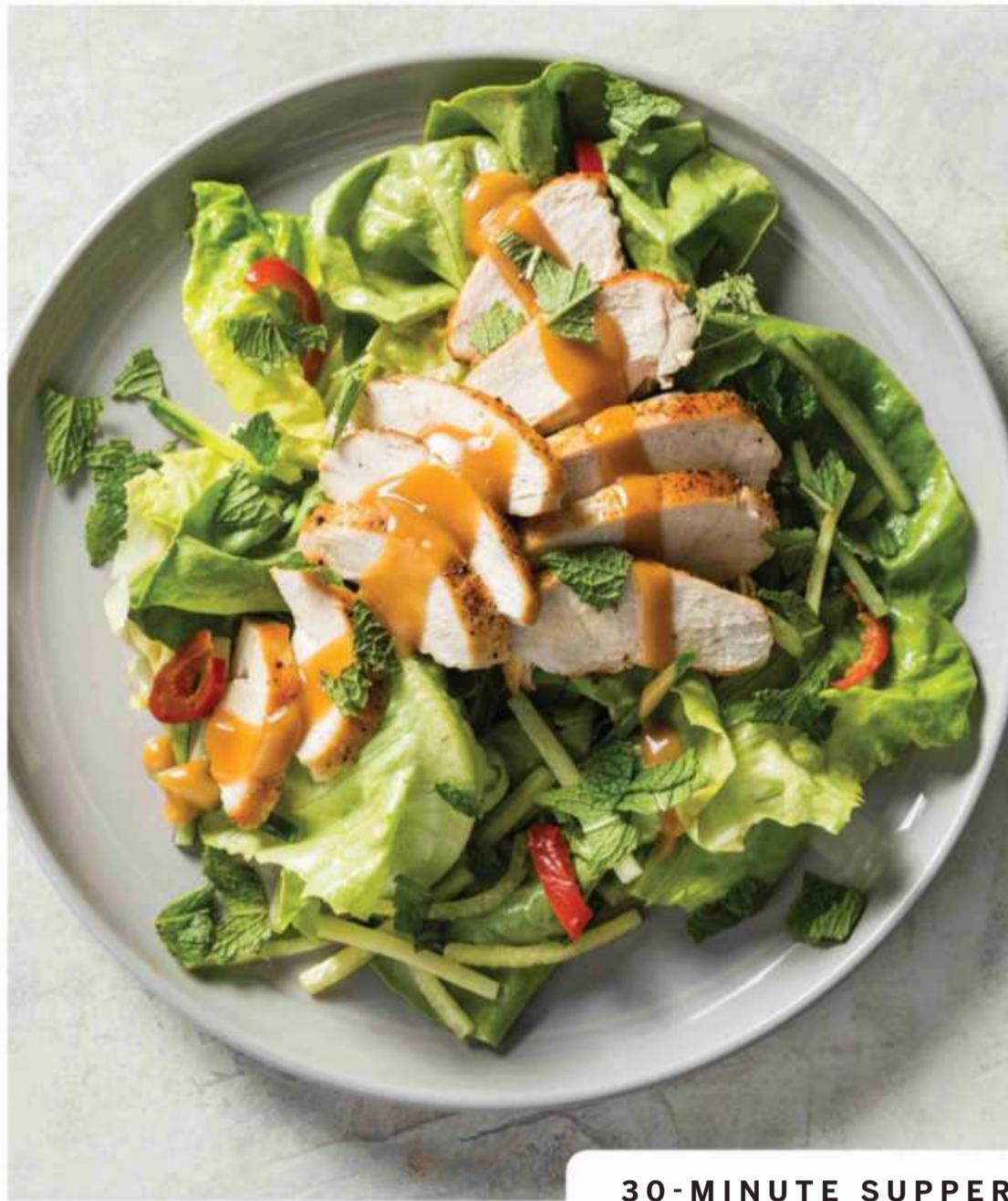
6. Using foil overhang, lift bars out of pan. Cut into 12 pieces. Dust with extra sugar and serve. (Bars can be stored in airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

Chickpea Curry



30-MINUTE SUPPER

Thai Chicken Salad



30-MINUTE SUPPER

Skillet Tortellini with Sausage and Cherry Tomatoes



30-MINUTE SUPPER

Cabbage and Potato Soup with Bacon



30-MINUTE SUPPER



Thai Chicken Salad

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: We toss pan-seared chicken, Bibb lettuce, cooling cucumber, and spicy cherry peppers in a bold peanut dressing for a quick, delicious meal.

- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 5 tablespoons vegetable oil
- ¼ cup seasoned rice vinegar
- 3 tablespoons creamy peanut butter
- 1½ tablespoons fish sauce
- 2 heads Bibb lettuce (1 pound), leaves separated
- 1 English cucumber, cut into 2-inch-long matchsticks
- ¼ cup thinly sliced jarred hot cherry peppers
- ¼ cup fresh mint leaves, torn

1. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook chicken until golden brown and registering 160 degrees, about 6 minutes per side. Transfer chicken to cutting board, tent with foil, and let rest for 5 minutes.
2. Combine vinegar, peanut butter, and fish sauce in bowl. Microwave until peanut butter has just softened, about 15 seconds. Add remaining ¼ cup oil and whisk until smooth and fully combined.
3. Toss lettuce, cucumber, cherry peppers, and 3 tablespoons vinaigrette together in large bowl. Divide salad among 4 plates. Slice chicken and divide among salads. Spoon remaining vinaigrette over top and sprinkle with mint. Serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: Milder red bell peppers can be substituted for the jarred hot cherry peppers, if desired.



Chickpea Curry

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: For a simple, vegetarian weeknight curry, we simmer canned chickpeas with tomatoes, spices, and coconut milk.

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 green bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, and cut into 1-inch pieces
- Salt and pepper
- 1 jalapeño chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1 tablespoon curry powder
- 2 (15-ounce) cans chickpeas, rinsed
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 (14-ounce) can coconut milk

1. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add bell peppers, 1½ teaspoons salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper and cook until bell peppers are beginning to brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Add jalapeño, garlic, ginger, and curry powder and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.
2. Add chickpeas, tomatoes and their juice, and coconut milk and bring to boil. Cover, reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer until bell peppers are tender and flavors have melded, about 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: Serve with rice and chopped fresh cilantro.



Cabbage and Potato Soup with Bacon

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Mashing a portion of the cooked potatoes adds body to this comforting soup.

- 8 slices bacon, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1½ pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, unpeeled, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 small head green cabbage (1¼ pounds), cored and cut into 2-inch pieces
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 2 bay leaves
- ¼ cup minced fresh chives

1. Cook bacon in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until crispy, 5 to 7 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer bacon to paper towel-lined plate.
2. Add potatoes, cabbage, 1 teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon pepper, and pepper flakes to fat left in pot. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until cabbage begins to wilt, about 3 minutes. Stir in broth and bay leaves and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium and cook, covered, until potatoes are tender, about 15 minutes.
3. Off heat, lightly mash few potatoes with potato masher or spoon until soup is slightly thickened (chunks of potato should remain visible). Discard bay leaves. Stir in chives and bacon. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: Russet potatoes can be substituted for the Yukon Gold potatoes, if desired.



Skillet Tortellini with Sausage and Cherry Tomatoes

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: For a one-pan weeknight crowd-pleaser, we brown sweet Italian sausage and cook cheese tortellini in the same skillet.

- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 pound sweet Italian sausage, casings removed
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 12 ounces dried cheese tortellini
- 6 ounces cherry tomatoes, halved
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- Grated Parmesan cheese

1. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add sausage and cook, breaking meat into small pieces with spoon, until no longer pink, about 4 minutes.
2. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add broth and pasta and bring to boil. Cook, stirring occasionally, until pasta is tender, about 15 minutes.
3. Stir in tomatoes and cook until slightly softened, about 2 minutes. Sprinkle with basil and serve with Parmesan.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: We developed this recipe with Barilla Three Cheese Tortellini.

Sage-Crusted Rib-Eye Steaks
with Roasted Vegetables



30-MINUTE SUPPER

Roasted Chicken Thighs
with Buttered Mushrooms and Leeks



30-MINUTE SUPPER

Mediterranean Rice and Lentils
with Spiced Beef and Crispy Onions



30-MINUTE SUPPER

Seared Scallops with Polenta, Bacon,
and Poblano Chiles



30-MINUTE SUPPER



Roasted Chicken Thighs with Buttered Mushrooms and Leeks

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Cooking the vegetables in the skillet used to brown the chicken thighs layers deep flavor into this dish.

8 (5- to 7-ounce) bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed
Salt and pepper
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
1½ pounds cremini mushrooms, trimmed and halved if small or quartered if large
1 small leek, white and light green parts only, halved lengthwise, cut into 1-inch pieces, and washed thoroughly
2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme
2 garlic cloves, minced
1½ teaspoons grated lemon zest, plus lemon wedges for serving

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Melt 1 tablespoon butter in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add chicken, skin side down, and cook until browned on both sides, about 10 minutes. Transfer chicken, skin side up, to rimmed baking sheet and roast until chicken registers 175 degrees, about 15 minutes.
2. Add mushrooms, leek, 1 tablespoon butter, 1 teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper to now-empty skillet. Cover and cook over medium-high heat until mushrooms are tender and have released their liquid, about 8 minutes. Uncover and continue to cook until liquid has evaporated and vegetables are golden brown, about 4 minutes longer.
3. Stir in thyme and garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Off heat, stir in lemon zest and remaining 2 tablespoons butter. Serve chicken with vegetables, passing lemon wedges separately.



Sage-Crusted Rib-Eye Steaks with Roasted Vegetables

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Flipping the steaks often keeps the herb crust from burning.

6 carrots, peeled and halved lengthwise
12 ounces small red potatoes, unpeeled, halved
2 large shallots, peeled and halved through root end
4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
Salt and pepper
1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme
2 (1-pound) boneless rib-eye steaks, 1½ inches thick, trimmed
2 tablespoons minced fresh sage
2 teaspoons grated lemon zest

1. Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Toss carrots, potatoes, shallots, 2 tablespoons melted butter, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper together in bowl. Spread vegetables in even layer on rimmed baking sheet, cut sides down. Roast until tender and well browned on bottoms, about 25 minutes. Sprinkle with thyme.
2. Meanwhile, pat steaks dry with paper towels. Combine sage, lemon zest, 2 teaspoons salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper in bowl. Sprinkle steaks with sage mixture, pressing to adhere.
3. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons melted butter in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until just smoking. Add steaks and cook, flipping steaks every 2 minutes, until well browned and meat registers 125 degrees (for medium-rare), 10 to 13 minutes. Transfer steaks to cutting board, tent with foil, and let rest for 5 minutes. Slice steaks and serve with roasted vegetables.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: Use carrots that are between 1 and 1¼ inches in diameter and small red potatoes measuring 1 to 2 inches in diameter.



Seared Scallops with Polenta, Bacon, and Poblano Chiles

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Using instant polenta leaves plenty of time to sauté a flavorful bacon-poblano topping for the seared scallops.

3 cups water
¾ cup instant polenta
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
Salt and pepper
4 ounces sharp cheddar cheese, shredded (1 cup)
2 poblano chiles, stemmed, seeded, and chopped
4 slices bacon, chopped fine
4 scallions, white and green parts separated and sliced thin
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
2 garlic cloves, minced
1½ pounds large sea scallops, tendons removed

1. Bring water to boil in large saucepan. Whisk in polenta, 2 tablespoons butter, 1 teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper and cook until thickened, about 2 minutes. Off heat, stir in cheddar. Set aside and cover to keep warm.
2. Cook poblanos, bacon, ¼ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until bacon is rendered and browned and poblanos are softened, about 8 minutes. Add scallion whites, Worcestershire, and garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer to bowl and wipe skillet clean with paper towels.
3. Pat scallops dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat 1 tablespoon butter in now-empty skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add half of scallops and cook until well browned, about 1½ minutes per side. Transfer to plate and tent with foil. Repeat with remaining 1 tablespoon butter and remaining scallops. Serve polenta topped with bacon mixture and scallops and sprinkled with scallion greens.



Mediterranean Rice and Lentils with Spiced Beef and Crispy Onions

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Boiling the rice in 3 quarts of water cooks it in almost half the usual time.

12 cups water
1 cup long-grain white rice
1 pound 85 percent lean ground beef
3 garlic cloves, minced
2 teaspoons ground cumin
Salt and pepper
½ teaspoon pumpkin pie spice
1 (15-ounce) can lentils, rinsed
½ cup whole-milk yogurt
1 cup canned fried onions
¼ cup chopped fresh dill

1. Bring water to boil in large saucepan over high heat. Add rice and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, about 12 minutes. Drain rice in fine-mesh strainer.
2. Meanwhile, cook beef in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat, breaking meat into small pieces with spoon, until just beginning to brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Add garlic, cumin, 2 teaspoons salt, 1 teaspoon pepper, and pumpkin pie spice and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.
3. Add rice and lentils to skillet and cook over medium-high heat, stirring often, until heated through, about 3 minutes. Transfer rice mixture to platter. Drizzle with yogurt and sprinkle with fried onions and dill. Serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: Serve with lemon wedges.

Holiday Fudge

Many fudge recipes claim to be foolproof. After making 177 pounds of it, we finally have one that truly is.

by Morgan Bolling

GROWING UP, I thought it more practical to bribe Santa with a plate of chocolate fudge than a squad of gingerbread men. At its best, fudge is soft (but not too soft), sweet (but not too sweet), and rich (but not too . . . oh, who are we kidding? It's a holiday!). To return to this tradition, I began researching recipes in cookbooks and online. Many old-style recipes follow an exhausting formula: Boil sugar, butter, and cream until it reaches a specific temperature, and then add chocolate and stir for upwards of an hour for a smooth consistency.

That's fine for a fudge shop with specialty equipment, but I wasn't up for that much labor. So I looked for recipes with special ingredients that promised to make the process easier, from sweetened condensed milk to Velveeta cheese (no kidding). I tested a dozen existing recipes but found the results unexciting, gummy, and more sugary than chocolaty. The closest contender was one made with marshmallow crème, but the fudge came out much too soft.



Whether you like your fudge unadulterated or gussied up, our recipes have got you covered.

After a bit more research and testing, I knew that my fudge would achieve the correct texture only if I cooked the sugar mixture to a temperature between 234 and 238 degrees (what candymakers call "softball stage"). When the temperature is within this range, enough water has been driven off from cooked sugar that it will hold its shape yet remain pliable once cooled.

More kitchen tests showed me that marshmallows, rather than marshmallow crème, were a better route to the creamy-but-firm texture I needed, thanks to the small amount of cornstarch that coats each marshmallow. (They're also easier to work with.) I learned that canned evaporated milk was the best choice for dairy, as whole milk gave me inconsistent results, heavy cream's richness masked the chocolate flavor, and sweetened condensed milk was just too sweet.

My next experiments were about the chocolate—I tried milk, bittersweet, and unsweetened. Unsweetened was too bitter and milk chocolate too sweet. Bittersweet struck the perfect balance—still sweet enough to taste like candy but also deeply and satisfyingly chocolaty.

One of the fudges I made during my initial tests called for brown sugar, which gave it a slightly more complex flavor, more like the nostalgic,

candy-store quality I was after. My tasters preferred the cleaner flavor of light brown sugar to dark brown here.

While many chocolate fudge recipes call for vanilla extract, after extensive testing I decided to leave it out; my tasters noted that it confused the chocolate flavor. But we did find that just a bit of salt really amplified it.

I finally had a solid recipe that was perfect for my holiday gift giving. But why stop there? I decided to create a few variations, including chocolate toffee and—especially for Santa—chocolate peppermint.

CHOCOLATE FUDGE

Makes about 3 pounds

You will need a digital or candy thermometer for this recipe. We developed this recipe using Kraft Jet-Puffed Marshmallows. With this brand, 21 marshmallows yield 5 ounces. Be sure to use evaporated milk here, not sweetened condensed milk. We developed this recipe using Ghirardelli 60% Cacao Bittersweet Chocolate Premium Baking Bar. You can substitute semisweet chocolate bars or bars labeled "dark chocolate," but we do not recommend using chocolate that's 85 percent cacao or higher. If you're using an electric stove, the mixture will likely take longer than 5 minutes to reach 234 degrees in step 2.

3 cups packed (21 ounces) light brown sugar
12 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 12 pieces
 $\frac{2}{3}$ cup evaporated milk
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
12 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
5 ounces large marshmallows (about 3 cups)
1½ cups walnuts, toasted and chopped coarse (optional)

1. Make foil sling for 8-inch square baking pan by folding 2 long sheets of aluminum foil so each is 8 inches wide. Lay sheets of foil in pan perpendicular to each other, with extra foil hanging over edges of pan. Push foil into corners and up sides of pan, smoothing foil flush to pan. Spray foil with vegetable oil spray.

2. Combine sugar, butter, evaporated milk, and salt in large saucepan. Bring to boil over medium-high heat, stirring frequently. Once boiling, reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring frequently, until mixture registers 234 degrees, 3 to 5 minutes.

3. Off heat, add chocolate and marshmallows and whisk until smooth and all marshmallows are fully melted, about 2 minutes (fudge will thicken to consistency of frosting). Stir in walnuts, if using. Transfer mixture to prepared pan. Let cool completely, about 2 hours. Cover and refrigerate until set, about 2 hours.

4. Using foil overhang, lift fudge out of pan. Cut into 1-inch cubes. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving. (Fudge can be stored in airtight container at room temperature for up to 2 weeks.)

CHOCOLATE PEPPERMINT FUDGE

Omit walnuts. Add 1 teaspoon peppermint extract with chocolate and marshmallows in step 3. After transferring fudge to prepared pan, sprinkle with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup crushed soft peppermint candies before letting fudge cool.

CHOCOLATE TOFFEE FUDGE

Omit walnuts. Add 1½ tablespoons instant espresso powder with chocolate and marshmallows in step 3. Stir $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Heath Toffee Bits into fudge before transferring to prepared pan. After transferring fudge to prepared pan, sprinkle with additional $\frac{1}{4}$ cup toffee bits before letting fudge cool.



To create a sling, simply overlap two long sheets of aluminum foil in an 8-inch square pan.

Easy Removal

In many of our baking recipes, we call for lining the pan with overlapping sheets of aluminum foil to create a "sling" that discourages sticking and aids in lifting.



Web subscribers can find two bonus recipes—Chocolate Peanut Butter Fudge and Chocolate Cherry Fudge at CooksCountry.com/jan19.

GETTING TO KNOW

SCALES: Especially in baking, digital kitchen scales provide the most accurate means of measuring dry ingredients. We also use them for tasks such as weighing burgers to ensure even sizing.

Test Kitchen Favorite:
OXO Good Grips 11 lb. Food Scale
with Pull Out Display (\$49.95)



Fluid Ounces versus Weight Ounces

Ingredients are measured by either weight or volume. The term "ounce" is a familiar measurement of weight—there are 16 ounces in 1 pound, for example—but a "fluid ounce" is a volume measurement of liquid (with water, the most reliably consistent ingredient, being the common denominator).

If you inspect the side of a liquid measuring cup, you will notice that 8 ounces is exactly 1 cup. This means that 1 cup of milk or water—or a liquid of similar density—weighs 8 ounces. But this conversion doesn't hold with other ingredients. To measure ingredients by weight, always use a scale; a liquid measuring cup is good only for measuring by volume.

INGREDIENT	VOLUME	WEIGHT
all-purpose flour	1 cup	5 ounces
cake flour	1 cup	4 ounces
whole-wheat flour	1 cup	5½ ounces
granulated sugar	1 cup	7 ounces
brown sugar	1 cup packed	7 ounces
confectioners' sugar	1 cup	4 ounces
butter	1 tablespoon	½ ounce

America versus the World

The United States is one of only three countries in the world that still use the imperial system of measurement; everyone else uses the metric system. While the metric system is easier to use, don't expect the United States to convert anytime soon; old habits die hard.

Measuring

In the test kitchen, we use measurements of weight, volume, size, time, and temperature to help ensure that our recipes are foolproof. Careful measuring will make you a better cook.

by Scott Kathan

LIQUID MEASURING CUPS:

We like clear glass (or Pyrex) liquid measuring cups best because their markings are easy to read and they are safe to heat in the microwave. Durable markings are important, too.

Test Kitchen Favorite: Pyrex 2-Cup Measuring Cup (\$5.99)



ADJUSTABLE MEASURING CUPS:

The best tool for measuring semisolid, sticky ingredients such as honey, peanut butter, and sour cream is an adjustable measuring cup (shown on its side at left). The plunger-style design makes accurate measuring and tidy unloading a breeze.

Test Kitchen Favorite: KitchenArt Adjust-A-Cup Professional Series, 2-Cup (\$12.95)

MEASURING SPOONS:

Every time we test them, we're surprised at how many bad measuring spoons are on the market. As with much kitchen gear, simpler measuring spoons are better (see our testing on page 23).

Test Kitchen Favorite: Cuisipro Stainless Steel Measuring Spoons Set (\$12.33)

How to Measure Liquids

To fill a liquid measuring cup, place it on the counter, bend down so the cup's markings are at eye level, and then slowly pour in the liquid. Fill until the center of the liquid (which curves slightly downward) is at the desired measurement.

DRY MEASURING CUPS:

Good dry measuring cups are accurate, durable, and stackable and allow you to dip and sweep easily.

Test Kitchen Favorite: OXO Good Grips Stainless Steel Measuring Cups (\$19.99)



Dip and Sweep

When measuring dry ingredients, we use the dip-and-sweep method to ensure accuracy. Dip the measuring cup into an ingredient and scoop so the cup is overflowing, and then scrape the top level using a flat surface such as the back edge of a knife.



Bacon-Wrapped Filets Mignons

Could we get the bacon crispy and the meat perfectly cooked on the same timetable?

by Alli Berkey

FILET MIGNON IS a lean, lush cut of meat that, when cooked to pink perfection, has an unsurpassed buttery texture and clean, mild beefy flavor. But for some, paying top dollar for a “mild” steak doesn’t compute. Hence bacon-wrapped filet mignon, a steakhouse favorite that ups the ante by wrapping each steak in a strip of salty, smoky goodness.

Great bacon-wrapped filets mignons can be a challenge to pull off not only because you have to get the bacon and beef correctly cooked on the same timetable but also because it can be hard to fully render and crisp the bacon while keeping it firmly attached to the perimeter of each steak. I set out to find a foolproof method to get this impressive dish done right.

I gathered a handful of recipes to test. All followed a similar procedure: Secure the bacon around the beef with toothpicks or twine, sear the top and bottom in a skillet, and finish cooking in the oven. The recipes that called for removing the steaks from the oven once the bacon was crisp produced grossly overcooked beef—not OK. But those that called for removing the steaks at the proper temperature (about

125 degrees for medium-rare) were afflicted with flabby, under-rendered bacon. This method wouldn’t do.

I knew that searing the beef was critical to enhance this mild cut’s flavor and to work some of the fat out of the bacon. I also knew that I couldn’t rely on bacon crispiness as a cue to determine when the steaks were done—a digital thermometer was a must. Considering these two points, I turned to a test kitchen method that first gently cooks the steaks to near-perfect doneness in a low oven and then sears them—either under the broiler or in a skillet on the stovetop—to brown the meat (and hopefully crisp the bacon).

Over several days of testing, I figured out each step in succession. First, secure the belt of bacon around each steak with a toothpick. Then, roast in a low 275-degree oven until the meat reaches 115 degrees—I wanted the steaks to get to about 125 degrees for medium-rare, and pulling them from the oven a tad early allowed for a little carryover cooking plus searing time to get them up to temperature. (When the steaks emerge from the oven at their 115-degree target, the bacon is about halfway rendered but nowhere near crispy and browned.)

I tried heating the broiler and doing the searing there, but turning each steak to expose all sides of the bacon to the heat was too much work. It was better to sear the partially cooked steaks in a skillet on the stovetop. I started them on their sides and then turned each steak two or three times to crisp the bacon (see “That’s a Wrap:



Our chunky, ultraflavorful Gorgonzola Vinaigrette provides both richness and brightness.

Amazing Bacon-Wrapped Steaks in Four Easy Steps”). After the steaks had spent about 5 minutes total on their sides, I quickly seared the bacon-free flat surfaces to create a flavorful browned crust. At this point, the interiors of the steaks were a perfect 125 degrees. Success!

These filets mignons were juicy and well browned, with crispy, flavorful bacon wrappers. But since this was a special-occasion meal, I wanted a sauce to take it over the top. After playing

around with all kinds of flavors and sauce textures, I ended up with a super-good gorgonzola vinaigrette; I know it sounds weird, but trust me when I say that this sauce is a game changer. It looks like an oddly chunky salad dressing, but the crumbles of potent blue cheese and bits of shallot create a bright, tangy concoction that perfectly balances the beef and bacon flavors. So save your steakhouse dollars and invest a little time and effort into creating an even better steak at home.

That’s a Wrap: Amazing Bacon-Wrapped Steaks in Four Easy Steps



1. Secure Bacon

Wrap a slice of bacon around each steak and secure it with a toothpick.



2. Roast in Oven

Cook the steaks elevated on a wire rack in a 275-degree oven.



3. Sear Bacon in Skillet

Sear the bacon with the steaks on their sides in the rounded corners of the skillet.



4. Sear Meat

Finally, sear the top and bottom of each wrapped steak.

BACON-WRAPPED FILETS MIGNONS

Serves 4

To double this recipe, double all the ingredients except the oil and roast and sear the eight steaks as you would if you were preparing four steaks. You can serve the steaks with Gorgonzola Vinaigrette (recipe follows), if desired.

- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1 (2-pound) center-cut beef tenderloin roast, trimmed
- 4 slices bacon
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 275 degrees. Set wire rack in rimmed baking sheet. Combine salt and pepper in bowl. Cut tenderloin crosswise into 4 equal steaks. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and sprinkle evenly with salt mixture.

2. Working with 1 steak at a time, wrap 1 slice bacon around circumference of steak, stretching as needed, and secure overlapping ends with toothpick inserted horizontally. Place steaks on prepared wire rack. Roast until steaks register 115 degrees (for medium-rare), about 40 minutes, or 125 degrees (for medium), 45 to 50 minutes.

3. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Position steaks on sides in skillet with bacon seam side down and nestled into rounded corners of skillet. Cook until bacon is evenly browned, rotating steaks as needed, about 5 minutes. Position steaks flat side down in center of skillet and cook until steaks are well browned on tops and bottoms, 1 to 2 minutes per side.

4. Transfer steaks to platter, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Gently remove toothpicks, leaving bacon intact. Serve.

GORGONZOLA VINAIGRETTE

Makes about 1 cup

For a creamier texture, buy a wedge of Gorgonzola cheese instead of a precrumbled product.

- 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 ounces Gorgonzola cheese, crumbled (½ cup)
- 1 small shallot, sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

Whisk vinegar, mustard, salt, and pepper together in bowl. Slowly whisk in oil until emulsified. Stir in Gorgonzola, shallot, and parsley.

Cheddar Scalloped Potatoes

Some recipes call for cooking this side dish for 2½ hours or longer. On holidays, we're too busy for that. **by Ashley Moore**

I LOVE COOKING for the holidays, but I have my limits. I'd also like to sit around the table listening to my Nana tell stories or to lounge on the sofa and watch my son toddle around the room. But my family loves soft, creamy scalloped potatoes and, hey, they deserve them. I wanted a recipe with a significantly shorter cooking time than traditional versions so I'd have more time to sit down and enjoy the company of my family.

For research, I tried a few existing recipes from cookbooks in our library. One version took almost 2½ hours to cook through in the oven. Some were made with only heavy cream, some with only milk, and some with a combination of cream and chicken broth. After these early tests, we liked the combo approach; the resulting potatoes were rich and satisfying but not so rich that we could eat only a few forkfuls.

I knew that I'd need to start my potatoes on the stovetop to cut down on overall cooking time. After many tests, I settled on a brief 8 minutes of simmering for 2 pounds of potatoes sliced ¼ inch thick. But rather than cook the potatoes in water and then drain off all that starch (which also helps thicken the sauce), I took a cue from earlier test kitchen recipes and simmered them in a mixture of broth and cream before baking them off in a casserole dish—no need for draining. My potatoes cooked up tender and soft. Just perfect.

Not every scalloped potato recipe in the world calls for cheese, but my family loves it. So for my next round, I stirred a cup of shredded sharp cheddar into the potatoes after their stint on the stovetop—any earlier and the sauce was a broken mess. I then dumped the lot into a 13 by 9-inch baking dish, sprinkled another cup of shredded cheese over the top, and baked it for just 20 minutes. The top was a beautiful spotted brown, bubbling happily around the edges.

After waiting for the potatoes to cool (which was torture because they looked so good), my team and I dug in. Each thin potato slice was perfectly cooked; the cheesy, rich sauce coated every slice; and the whole thing was done in less than 45 minutes. I think I see some couch time in my future this holiday season.

CHEDDAR SCALLOPED POTATOES

Serves 6

Do not prepare the potatoes ahead of time or store them in water; the potato starch is essential for thickening the sauce. A mandoline makes quick work of slicing the potatoes. We prefer sharp cheddar for this recipe, but mild or extra-sharp cheddar can also be used. This recipe can easily be doubled. To do so, use a large Dutch oven instead of a large saucepan in step 1 and let the casserole cool for 30 minutes before serving in step 3.

- 2 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and sliced ¼ inch thick
- 1¼ cups heavy cream
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 8 ounces sharp cheddar cheese, shredded (2 cups)

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Bring potatoes, cream, broth, salt, and pepper to simmer in large saucepan

over medium-high heat.

2. Reduce heat to medium, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until paring knife can be slipped in and out of potatoes with no resistance, about 8 minutes, adjusting heat as necessary to maintain gentle simmer. Off heat, gently stir in 1 cup cheddar.

3. Transfer potato mixture to 13 by 9-inch baking dish, spread into even layer, and sprinkle with remaining 1 cup cheddar. Bake until bubbling around edges and top is golden brown, about 20 minutes. Let cool for 15 minutes. Serve.

TO MAKE AHEAD

At end of step 2, transfer potato mixture to 13 by 9-inch baking dish and let cool completely. Cover with aluminum foil and refrigerate for up to 24 hours. To serve, keep covered with foil and bake until heated through, about 20 minutes. Uncover, sprinkle with remaining 1 cup cheddar, and continue to bake, uncovered, until bubbling around edges and top is spotty brown, about 20 minutes longer.



Southern Cheese Straws



Everyone loves cheese and crackers. We took cues from Southern snackers and combined them into one crispy, cheesy snack.

by Morgan Bolling

WHEN I WAS growing up in North Carolina, the Christmas season was heralded by the box of homemade goodies our neighbor delivered every year. After a giddy thank you, my sister and I dove in for the cheddar cheese straws, the delicate, crumbly, cheesy, buttery cracker/cookies that have a cult following in the South. Now that I live in Boston, I get a craving for these treats every holiday season.

Cheese straws get their name from their traditional long, thin shape, which is usually dressed up with grooved ridges or spiral twists. They deserve a wider audience, so I set out to create a foolproof recipe for these savory snacks.

I started by baking six versions of cheese straws from a variety of Southern sources. Most called for stirring together a heavy dough of grated cheddar cheese, butter, and flour and then either using a cookie press to pipe the dough out into straw-like shapes or rolling out the dough and cutting shapes with cookie cutters. I didn't want to have to call for a cookie press,

so I decided to go with the easiest method: Rolling out the dough into a square, cutting it into strips, and then baking. Our favorite recipe in this style made decent crackers, but they were a little taller and more biscuit-like than the cheese straws I remembered.

After a bit of trial and error and fiddling with ingredient ratios, I found out that the mixing method was key. Using a food processor to buzz the grated cheese, chilled butter, and flour together resulted in crackers with a beautifully short, extra-tender texture. A small amount of baking powder made the cheese straws even lighter and crunchier. As for the cheese, I tested all types of cheddar and landed on extra-sharp for its bold, pungent character. Paprika gave the crackers a nice reddish tint and deeper, more complex flavor. And a little cayenne pepper added a pleasant hit of heat, just enough to make them irresistible alongside a glass of sweet tea—or a frosty martini.

I had the flavor and texture down, but I wanted my straws to look more festive. For my next test, after I had rolled out the dough into a square, I dragged the back of a fork across the dough before cutting it into strips. This left a washboard design in the crackers that, once they were baked, looked elegant and fun—success!

Cracker-crisp, savory, and lightly peppery, these cheese straws look dainty yet taste anything but. Now, no matter where you live or what time of year it is, making cheese straws can bring some holiday cheer into your life.



These buttery, cheesy crackers have bold flavor and a big crunch.

SOUTHERN CHEESE STRAWS

Makes about 48 cheese straws

Flour the counter and the top of the dough as needed to prevent sticking. Be sure to use unsalted butter here.

- 8 ounces extra-sharp cheddar cheese, shredded (2 cups)**
- 1½ cups (7½ ounces) all-purpose flour**
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 8 pieces and chilled**
- ¾ teaspoon salt**
- ¾ teaspoon paprika**
- ½ teaspoon baking powder**
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper**
- 3 tablespoons ice water**

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Process cheddar, flour, butter, salt, paprika, baking powder, and cayenne in food processor until mixture resembles wet sand, about 20 seconds. Add ice water and process until dough ball starts to form, about 25 seconds.
2. Turn out dough onto lightly floured counter. Knead briefly until dough fully comes together, 2 to 3 turns. Using your hands, pat dough into rough 4-inch square. Roll dough into 10-inch

square, about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick, flouring counter as needed to prevent sticking.

3. Position dough so 1 edge is parallel to edge of counter. Using rounded side of fork, drag tines across entire surface of dough to make decorative lines.
4. Using pizza cutter or chef's knife, trim away and discard outer $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of dough to make neat square. Cut dough into 3 equal pieces perpendicular to decorative lines. Working with 1 section of dough at a time, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-wide strips in direction of lines.

5. Evenly space cheese straws on prepared sheet, about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch apart. Bake until edges of straws are light golden brown, 30 to 35 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking. Let straws cool completely on sheet. Serve. (Straws can be stored in airtight container at room temperature for up to 1 week.)

PARMESAN-BLACK PEPPER CHEESE STRAWS

Reduce extra-sharp cheddar to 1½ cups. Add 1 cup grated Parmesan to food processor with flour in step 1. Substitute 1 teaspoon black pepper for cayenne pepper.

Shaping the Straws



Mark rolled dough with fork

Roll out the dough into a 10-inch square, and then drag the tines of a fork across the dough to make decorative lines.



Cut into rectangles and strips

Cut the square into thirds, and then cut each rectangle into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-wide strips with a pizza cutter.

Baked Goat Cheese

Baked Brie has its familiar charms, but we wanted something surprising.

by Bryan Roof with Heather Tolmie

THERE IS ONE thing you can count on at holiday cocktail parties: Appetizers featuring melted cheese go fast. Put out a dish of cheesy buffalo dip, a bowl of *queso fundido*, or a wheel of baked Brie, and your guests will cluster around it, spooning soft, warm morsels onto chips or bread, tucking spiderweb strands of cheese into their mouths, smiling and nodding in appreciation as they go.

But recently, I attended a party where the host served warm goat cheese broiled in a baking dish with a mildly spicy tomato sauce. The combination of tangy cheese, smoky and sweet sauce, and crunchy toast was great. While it didn't create those photo-op cheese strands, it delivered lively, festive flavor.

At the end of the evening, I congratulated the host on the delicious goat cheese. I then promptly went into my own kitchen to re-create it and, because I am competitive, improve on it.

Goat cheese was a given. And because it already has so much flavor, especially when served hot, I chose not to doctor it up at all and instead focus on the surrounding sauce.

I made a few versions of a marinara-like tomato sauce using a tried-and-true method: softening chopped onions in olive oil and then adding garlic and canned tomatoes. I cooked some sauces longer for deep flavor; others I cooked less for freshness. I settled on a 15-minute cooking time for the right counterpoint to the tangy goat cheese. But it needed another boost. I turned to the spice cabinet.

After auditioning everything from allspice to za'atar, I ultimately chose a mix of paprika, cumin, and red pepper flakes for a complexity that recalls eastern Mediterranean and North African flavors. I spooned my sauce into a baking dish and then formed a log of goat cheese into a circle, nestling it in the center of the sauce. After about 10 minutes under the broiler, the goat cheese was warmed through and nutty brown on top and the sauce was bubbling happily. Time to set this appetizer out for the party people to scoop onto toast points, smiling and nodding in appreciation as they go.

BAKED GOAT CHEESE Serves 8 to 10

Goat cheese logs come in different sizes. Any size from 8 to 10 ounces will work in this recipe. Just press the log into a 1-inch-thick disk. If you can find only small logs of goat cheese (around 4 ounces), you can press two smaller logs together. Serve with crackers or toast points.

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- Salt and pepper
- 3 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- 1 (8- to 10-ounce) log goat cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest

1. Heat oil in medium saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and 1/4 teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Add garlic, paprika, cumin, pepper flakes, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add tomatoes and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for 15 minutes. Season with salt to taste.
2. Adjust oven rack 6 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Place goat cheese between 2 sheets of plastic wrap. Flatten goat cheese into 1-inch-thick disk, 3 to 4 inches in diameter, cupping your hands around exterior of disk as needed to make compact shape.
3. Transfer tomato sauce to shallow 2-quart broiler-safe dish. Place goat cheese in center. Broil until goat cheese is well browned, about 10 minutes. Sprinkle cilantro and lemon zest over sauce and drizzle with extra oil. Serve.

Goat Cheese Primer

The widespread popularity of goat cheese in this country is a relatively recent phenomenon, but there are, of course, areas around the globe where goat cheese has been enjoyed for thousands of years. Just as with cow's-milk cheese, you can buy goat cheese in a variety of styles and ages. For this recipe, we call for a log of fresh goat cheese; this cheese is soft, spreadable, and potent, with the signature funky goat's-milk flavor.



Smoked paprika and cumin give this crowd-pleasing baked cheese a flavorful twist.

From Log to Disk

Our shaping technique for the goat cheese just might take you back to your preschool days of sculpting shapes with Play-Doh. Here's how to do it: Place a sheet of plastic wrap on the counter and stand the log of cheese on its end in the center of the sheet. Place another sheet of plastic over the column of cheese and press the cheese with your palm into a 1-inch-thick disk. Use your hands to perfect the shape of the cheese: It's important that you end up with a disk that is 1 inch thick.



Amish Cinnamon Bread



Our goal: Make a quick version of this beloved “friendship bread” without losing any of its sweet flavor or knockout aroma.

by Heather Tolmie

LIKE THOSE OF many native Midwesterners, my best childhood memories revolve around food. One whiff of the intoxicating aroma of Amish cinnamon bread (also called Amish friendship bread) and I’m instantly transported back to my mom’s kitchen—she spent the better part of my high school years baking the stuff. This is comfort food in the best sense: humble, heartwarming, soul-soothing.

The premise of this sweet bread (whose ties to the Amish are ambiguous at best) is simple: A neighbor or friend gives you a bag of special sourdough starter (a gooey, fermented mixture of flour, sugar, milk, and yeast) along with instructions to care for it over the course of 10 days. You use some of the starter, along with flour, sugar, milk, and surprisingly, in many heirloom recipes, a package of vanilla pudding mix (more on this later), to make a batch of bread. Then you portion off a bit of the starter to share with another friend, who repeats the process—think of it as an edible chain letter.

After I’d baked several existing recipes, my tasters and I thought that this bread, with its sweet, moist crumb and crackly cinnamon-sugar crust, tasted more like a quick bread than like most starter-based breads. But 10 days is anything but quick. I set out to develop a streamlined recipe that would capture the flavor, texture, and spirit of the original without the need for a starter.

Yeasty starters generally have two main roles: leavening and providing a tangy flavor similar to sourdough. But since none of the recipes I found called for letting the dough (really a batter) rest or rise before baking, I knew that the yeast was doing little in the way of leavening. The recipes all called for baking powder and baking soda for lift. So I turned my attention to flavor: Was the starter adding any?

To find out, I baked two batches of bread—one with starter and one without. Surprisingly, we found almost no difference in flavor. The bread’s



Is it a sweetly spiced breakfast bread? Yes, but Amish Cinnamon Bread is great for snacking or dessert, too.

decadent sweetness, along with a substantial shot of cinnamon, rendered any tang undetectable. With the starter in my rearview mirror, I set my sights on the next mystery ingredient: that instant pudding mix.

Several recipes I found called for adding a package of instant pudding mix to the batter, presumably for flavor. A call to my mom confirmed that it was, in fact, a standard ingredient. Don’t get me wrong, I love instant pudding, but all things being equal, I’d rather not use

too many prefab packaged ingredients. Was it really necessary here?

I tried subbing in a bit more sugar and cornstarch—the two key ingredients in instant pudding mix—but I was disappointed to find out that unlike the modified starch found in many such mixes, which can contribute moisture to cakes in some recipes, the regular cornstarch dried things out.

So I ditched the cornstarch, increased my liquid (in this case milk for its rich, creamy flavor), and added a generous

dose of vegetable oil (easier than butter) to give the bread a soft, moist crumb without a hint of gumminess. Bumping up the vanilla added another note to the beautiful aroma.

I had achieved my goal of easy and quick cinnamon-bread gratification. The last thing to do was give a nod to friendship. After all, this bread is a perfect expression of how food should bring people together. So my recipe yields two loaves: one for you and one for a friend.

AMISH CINNAMON BREAD

Makes 2 loaves

We developed this recipe using an 8½ by 4½-inch metal loaf pan. If you use a glass loaf pan, increase the baking time in step 3 to 1¼ hours to 1 hour 20 minutes; if you use a 9 by 5-inch loaf pan, start checking for doneness 5 minutes early. If you own only one loaf pan, refrigerate half the batter and set aside half the coating so you can bake a second loaf after turning out the first onto a wire rack to cool in step 4. Be sure to clean the loaf pan and brush it with oil before baking the second loaf.

CINNAMON-SUGAR COATING

- ½ cup (3½ ounces) sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil

BREAD

3¾ cups (18¾ ounces) all-purpose flour

- 3 cups (21 ounces) sugar
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- ¾ teaspoon baking soda
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- 1¾ cups milk
- 1⅓ cups vegetable oil
- 3 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1. FOR THE CINNAMON-SUGAR COATING:

Combine sugar and cinnamon in bowl. Brush 2 loaf pans evenly with oil (1 teaspoon per pan). Add 2 tablespoons cinnamon-sugar coating to each prepared pan and shake and tilt pans until bottoms and sides are evenly coated. Set aside remaining ¼ cup cinnamon-sugar coating.

2. FOR THE BREAD: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Whisk flour, sugar, cinnamon, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together in large bowl. Whisk milk, oil, eggs, and vanilla together in second bowl. Stir milk mixture into flour mixture until just combined (batter will be lumpy).

3. Divide batter evenly between prepared pans (about 3¾ cups or 2¼ pounds batter per pan). Sprinkle remaining cinnamon-sugar coating evenly over top of batter (2 tablespoons per pan). Bake until paring knife inserted in centers of loaves comes out clean, 1 hour 5 minutes to 1 hour 10 minutes.

4. Let bread cool in pans on wire rack for 1 hour. Run paring knife around edges of pans to thoroughly loosen loaves. Working with 1 loaf at a time, tilt pan and gently remove bread. Serve warm or at room temperature. (Cooled bread can be wrapped in aluminum foil and stored at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

A World of Cinnamon

Vietnamese and Indonesian cinnamons are the two most commonly available varieties in U.S. markets. Our taste tests revealed that Vietnamese cinnamon is the bolder and spicier variety. Why is that?

Vietnamese cinnamon (*Cinnamomum loureiroi*) contains more spicy volatile oils than Indonesian cinnamon (*Cinnamomum burmannii*). That said, much of any cinnamon's spicy flavor dissipates with cooking.

So which of our top-rated cinnamons should you buy? If you like big, spicy flavor and frequently use cinnamon in unheated applications, we recommend **Penzey's Vietnamese Cinnamon, Ground**. But if you use cinnamon only for baking or you prefer a milder cinnamon in unheated applications, go with the cheaper **Morton & Bassett Spices Ground Cinnamon**.



THE AMERICAN TABLE

Food historians often associate "friendship bread" with the cinnamon-laced sweet loaves you see on these pages, but not all friendship breads have this flavor profile. In Amish communities, "friendship bread" is just as likely to be a local loaf of rustic sourdough.

In some families, tradition calls for sharing a loaf with new neighbors as a welcome gift, but friendship bread is also an expression of support to neighbors who are ill, are expecting a child, or would otherwise appreciate an assist.

What's important isn't the flavor or the style of bread, it's the sharing—not just of the loaves themselves but of the natural yeast starter. Bread bakers know that a healthy sourdough starter can last for ages, spawning countless "children"; many home cooks across the Midwest tend to starters that they can trace back for generations.

Measuring Up Measuring Spoons

by Emily Phares

MEASURING SPOONS MAY seem basic, but small details—numbers on the handle that fade over time or a connector ring that is hard to open—can make some sets a pain to use. With new designs on the market, we pitted our previous favorite from Cuisipro against six other models.

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

We tested each set with ingredients of different textures—table salt, dried basil, ground turmeric, red pepper flakes, peanut butter, and brown sugar—and rated them on accuracy, ease of use, and durability. While there were some minor differences in accuracy, our preferences ultimately came down to how easy each set was to use.

In general, we preferred metal models because some ingredients clung to plastic, leaving us with a dusting of turmeric or flour even after we dumped out the ingredient. We also liked spoons that had narrower bowls, either oval or rectangular in shape; larger, rounder designs didn't fit in standard spice jars. Additionally, our favorite models allowed us to use our preferred dip-and-sweep method, where we scoop the ingredients and then use a straightedge to sweep off the excess. The handles on some spoons made it difficult to do this.

Our lineup included a wide variety of connecting mechanisms. Some sets required a lot of force to operate. Our winner, again from Cuisipro, had a ball-chain mechanism that was simple to open and close. This set is sturdy, accurate, and easy to use. The only drawback is that the 1-tablespoon measure didn't fit into all spice jars. Our top five models appear below.

KEY Good ★★★ Fair ★★ Poor ★

RECOMMENDED

Our Favorite

Cuisipro Stainless Steel 5-Piece Measuring Spoons

Model: 747002 **Price:** \$12.33

Material: Stainless steel

Measures Included: 1 tbs, 1 tsp, ½ tsp, ¼ tsp, ⅛ tsp



Accuracy ★★★
Ease of Use ★★★½
Durability ★★★

Comments: Our winner has a simple design that allows for a bump-free sweep. It's sturdy and has a handy ball-chain connector.

Spring Chef

Stainless Steel Measuring Spoons, Set of 6

Model: KUG15-005 **Price:** \$9.97

Material: Stainless steel

Measures Included: 1 tbs, 1 tsp, ¾ tsp, ½ tsp, ¼ tsp, ⅛ tsp



Accuracy ★★★
Ease of Use ★★½
Durability ★★½

Comments: This set's solid construction and sleek design made it easy to level ingredients. The 1-tablespoon measure bent in brown sugar.

RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

1Easylife

Stainless Steel Measuring Spoons, Set of 6

Model: H742 **Price:** \$9.99

Material: Stainless steel

Measures Included: 1 tbs, ½ tbs, 1 tsp, ½ tsp, ¼ tsp, ⅛ tsp



Accuracy ★★½
Ease of Use ★★
Durability ★★½

Comments: This metal set was comfortable to use but had minor accuracy blips and an attachment mechanism that was hard to open.

OXO Good Grips

7 Piece Plastic Measuring Spoons

Model: 11110801

Price: \$4.99

Material: Polypropylene

Measures Included: 1 tbs, ½ tbs, 1 tsp, ½ tsp, ¼ tsp, ⅛ tsp



Accuracy ★★★
Ease of Use ★
Durability ★★★

Comments: A small ramp between handle and bowl prevented a level sweep. The handle requires significant force to snap together.

Amco

Measuring Spoons, Set of 6

Model: 8308

Price: \$13.99

Material: Stainless steel

Measures Included: 1½ tbs, 1 tbs, 1 tsp, ½ tsp, ¼ tsp, ⅛ tsp



Accuracy ★★½
Ease of Use ★★
Durability ★★

Comments: This set had some durability and accuracy issues—plus, it was heavy and cumbersome to use when secured together.

Web members can read the full testing results at CooksCountry.com/jan19.

Everyday White Rice

For something so seemingly simple, perfectly cooked white rice can be awfully elusive. This recipe removes the guesswork and makes it foolproof. **by Matthew Fairman**

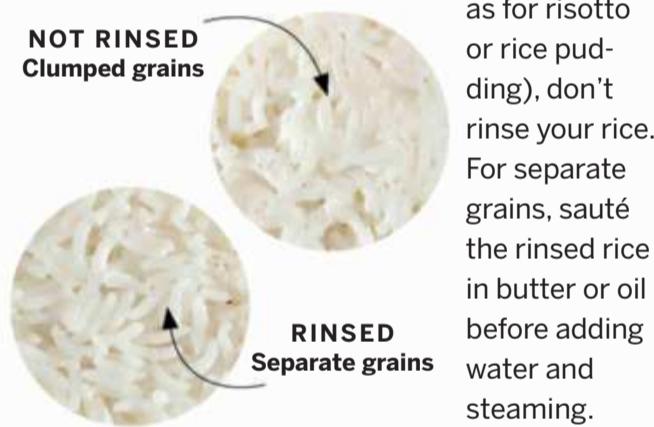
HOW DO YOU like your white rice? We love the fluffy, separate grains of pilafs; we're also fans of clumpy, chopstick-friendly sticky rice. But for everyday eating, we like a third style: steamed long-grain white rice that makes a great bed for dishes such as smothered pork chops, stir-fry, or gumbo. This rice is light and perfectly tender throughout and clumps together slightly for easy eating.

We found that rinsing the excess starch from the exterior of the rice before cooking was key to our desired finished texture. We combine 2 cups of raw rice with 3 cups of water and bring the mixture to a boil uncovered. Then we stir once, cover the saucepan, reduce the heat, and let the rice cook undisturbed. Two final tricks guarantee success: letting the rice sit, still covered, off the heat for 10 minutes so any extra moisture is absorbed and then gently fluffing the rice to break up any big masses.

Rinsing Rice

Why Should You Do It?

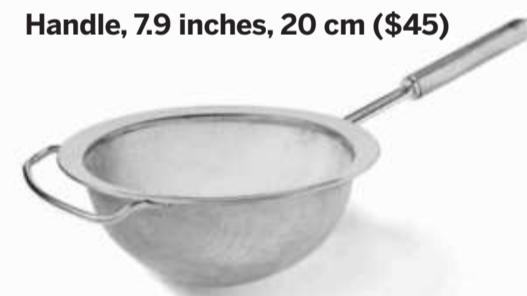
Rice grains are naturally coated in dusty rice starch. Rinsing the raw rice before cooking it washes away the excess starch that would otherwise absorb water and swell, causing all the grains to clump together. If you want a creamy texture (such as for risotto or rice pudding), don't rinse your rice.



The Best Tool for the Job

A fine-mesh strainer has many uses (in addition to rinsing rice), such as washing berries, sifting flour, and straining sauces. Our favorite model, from Rösle, is made of fine, tight mesh and has just the right depth and capacity for most tasks. It is also extremely durable—cheaper models are prone to breaking.

Rösle Fine Mesh Strainer, Round Handle, 7.9 inches, 20 cm (\$45)



Step by Step



1. Measure rice and water

Use a dry measuring cup to measure 2 cups of rice, making sure to level off the top. Use a liquid measuring cup to measure 3 cups of water.

Why? A precise rice-to-water ratio is important for achieving the desired texture in the cooked rice.



2. Rinse rice

Put the measured rice into a fine-mesh strainer and rinse under cool running water until the water runs mostly clear, stirring with your hand a few times.

Why? Rinsing the rice washes away surface starch so you have better control over its texture.



3. Start cold

Combine the rice, water, and salt, if using, in a large saucepan and bring to a simmer over high heat.

Why? Starting the rice in cold water ensures that it cooks evenly.



4. Stir

Use a rubber spatula to stir the simmering rice, taking care to scrape the bottom of the saucepan.

Why? We stir the rice now so it can cook undisturbed once we cover it, which will keep the temperature inside the saucepan more consistent.

The Long and the Short of It



Long-grain white rice, which encompasses types such as Carolina, basmati, and jasmine, is our go-to choice when making our Everyday White Rice. Our favorite all-purpose long-grain white rice, **Lundberg Organic Long-Grain**

White Rice, was praised by our tasters for its "nutty," "toasty" flavor and superb, al dente texture.

Both medium- and short-grain rices have places in our kitchen (we call for short-grain rice when making risotto, paella, and sticky rice for Chinese dishes and sushi, for instance), but these rices don't have the right tender chew for basic white rice.

Steamed Rice: What Happens to the Water?

When you cook rice in water, the rice typically absorbs only about a 1:1 ratio of water (that is, 1 cup of rice will absorb about 1 cup of water); the rest of the water turns to steam and eventually escapes the pot. But the evaporation is important for efficiently cooking the rice, as steam is hotter than boiling water and thus cooks the rice more quickly and evenly.





EVERYDAY WHITE RICE

Makes 6 cups

It's important to rinse the rice before cooking it to remove excess starch from the grains. Omit the salt if you're serving this rice with a salty dish such as a stir-fry.

2 cups long-grain white rice
3 cups water
½ teaspoon salt (optional)

1. Place rice in fine-mesh strainer and rinse under running water until water running through rice is almost clear, about 1½ minutes, agitating rice with your hand every so often.
2. Combine rice, water, and salt, if using, in large saucepan and bring to simmer over high heat. Stir rice with rubber spatula, dislodging any rice that sticks to bottom of saucepan.
3. Cover, reduce heat to low, and cook for 20 minutes. (Steam should steadily emit from sides of saucepan. If water bubbles out from under lid, reduce heat slightly.)
4. Remove from heat; do not uncover. Let stand, covered, for 10 minutes. Gently fluff rice with fork. Serve.

TO DOUBLE THIS RECIPE:

Increase rice to 4 cups and water to 6 cups. In step 2, use Dutch oven instead of large saucepan. After rice comes to simmer, cover pot, transfer to middle rack of 350-degree oven, and bake for 20 minutes. Remove from oven and continue with step 4.



5. Cover and reduce heat

Cover the saucepan and reduce the heat to low. (If using an electric stove, transfer it to another burner set to low heat.)

Why? The lid traps steam, which is the most effective and efficient cooking medium for white rice.



6. Simmer for 20 minutes

Let the rice cook undisturbed for 20 minutes. We suggest setting a timer.

Why? Twenty minutes is the sweet spot for fully tender, perfectly cooked rice.



7. Let stand off heat

Remove the saucepan from the heat and let it sit, covered, for 10 minutes.

Why? This final rest allows the rice to absorb any excess moisture and ensures that all the grains are cooked through.



8. Fluff and serve

Use a fork to gently fluff the rice before serving.

Why? Fluffing helps halt the cooking and improves the rice's texture by letting excess steam escape.

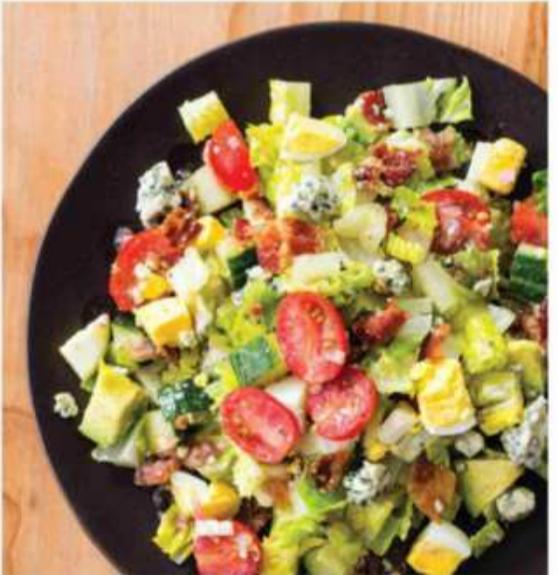
Chopped Salads

Whether it's on the side or at the center of your plate, a good chopped salad unites a wealth of tasty ingredients in one easy-to-eat dish. **by Ashley Moore**



SOUTHWESTERN CHOPPED SALAD

Substitute lime juice for vinegar; 1 (15-ounce) can black beans, rinsed, for cucumber; shredded pepper Jack cheese for feta; and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fresh cilantro leaves for basil. Whisk $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons chili powder into oil mixture in step 1 and add 1 cup thawed frozen corn to dressing with tomatoes. Add 1 avocado, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces, to bowl with lettuce.



COBB CHOPPED SALAD

Substitute blue cheese for feta. Add 4 chopped hard-cooked large eggs; 6 slices cooked bacon, crumbled; and 1 avocado, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces, to bowl with lettuce. Omit basil.

I LOVE BOLD, busy chopped salads, and I wanted to share the love by developing my own version. I started with the dressing, which is typically a straightforward vinaigrette that lets the other ingredients shine. After tasting various vinegars, my tasters chose the red-wine variety, which I whisked together with olive oil, minced shallot, and salt and pepper—delicious.

Chopped romaine—crunchy and just a little sweet—provided a sturdy base upon which to build a roster of add-ins. Tomatoes and cucumber, cut small and marinated in the dressing to soften and soak up flavor before being tossed with the other ingredients, tasted great. Crumbled feta added a salty richness, and fresh basil lent fragrant freshness.

This was a fantastic chopped salad, but I created a few variations that would satisfy a host of cravings. For a southwestern spin, I used lime juice and chili powder in the dressing and tossed black beans and corn kernels into the salad. I crafted a Cobb salad version that featured crisp bacon, chopped hard-cooked eggs, avocado, and pungent blue cheese. To an elegant rendition I added radicchio, apple, pecans, and tangy goat cheese. And finally, inspired by an Italian antipasto, I made a version starring pickled hot peppers, bold provolone cheese, salami, and a handful of parsley leaves.

CHOPPED SALAD

Serves 4 to 6

You can substitute cherry tomatoes for the grape tomatoes, if desired. To cut the romaine lettuce hearts into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces, cut each heart in half lengthwise and then cut each half lengthwise into quarters. Finally, cut each quarter crosswise into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces.

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
1 shallot, minced
Salt and pepper
8 ounces grape tomatoes, halved
½ English cucumber, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces
2 romaine lettuce hearts (12 ounces), cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces
4 ounces feta cheese, crumbled (1 cup)
¼ cup fresh basil leaves, torn into 1-inch pieces

1. Whisk oil, vinegar, shallot, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper together in large bowl. Add tomatoes and cucumber to bowl and gently toss to coat with dressing; let tomato mixture sit for 10 minutes.

2. Add lettuce, feta, basil, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper to tomato mixture and gently toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to platter and serve.



RADICCHIO CHOPPED SALAD

Substitute balsamic vinegar for red wine vinegar; 1 apple, cored and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces, for tomatoes; 1 small head radicchio, halved, cored, and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces, for 1 romaine lettuce heart; and goat cheese for feta. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup coarsely chopped toasted pecans and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup dried cranberries to bowl with lettuce.



ANTIPASTO CHOPPED SALAD

Whisk $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon dried oregano into oil mixture in step 1 and add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped pepperoncini to dressing with tomatoes. Add 6 ounces salami, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces, to bowl with lettuce. Substitute provolone cheese, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces, for feta and fresh parsley leaves for basil.

Skillet-Roasted Chicken and Potatoes

Cooked the right way, these two simple ingredients unite to become more than the sum of their parts.

by Alli Berkey

SURE, YOU CAN roast chicken and potatoes separately—but why would you? When you cook the two together, the deeply savory chicken juices work their way into the potatoes, transforming a relatively bland starch into a supremely flavorful one. My goal was to make an easy weeknight chicken-and-potatoes dinner for two where both ingredients hit their fullest potential of deliciousness.

Since I was cooking for two people, a whole chicken was overkill. But that still left a lot of chicken options to consider. I decided that boneless, skinless breasts and thighs were out because they don't give up as many flavorful juices during cooking—plus, I love crispy, savory chicken skin. So I did a test where I roasted three cuts of bone-in, skin-on chicken pieces—thighs, breasts, and leg quarters—over some diced potatoes (I'd work out the spud details later). In truth, none of the cuts were bad, and I could have made any of them work. But my tasters and I were most fond of the leg quarters, which provided an ample serving portion (one leg quarter per person), silky dark meat, and plenty of tasty skin. Browning the legs skin side down in an ovensafe skillet before roasting jump-started the cooking and the crisping of the skin.

Next, I tackled the potatoes. A few tests showed me that red potatoes were too waxy and dense to take on much chicken flavor and sliced russets were prone to breaking apart. That left Yukon Gold potatoes, whose buttery flavor, slightly porous texture, and sturdy build were perfect here.

After testing various shapes and sizes of potato cuts, I landed on $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch rounds and the following process: I browned chicken legs in a little oil and transferred them to a plate. Then I added the potato slices to the chicken-infused oil and browned them for about 5 minutes before placing the legs (skin side up) on top of the potatoes. After about 30 minutes in a 400-degree



oven, everything was perfectly cooked.

I was almost at the finish line and just needed to nail down the seasoning. After testing various herbs and spices, my team and I agreed that a simple approach was best for the chicken: Just salt, pepper, and fresh thyme highlighted the savory poultry flavor without overshadowing it. For a final flourish, I combined some chopped parsley, grated lemon zest, and minced garlic for an easy take on gremolata, the mixture Italian cooks use to brighten up many roasted meats. The gremolata added a potent, lively pop of freshness that took this easy meal over the top.

In the end, it all added up to two diners, two main ingredients, and one delicious meal.

SKILLET-ROASTED CHICKEN AND POTATOES FOR TWO

You can substitute two 10- to 12-ounce bone-in split chicken breasts for the leg quarters, if desired. Be sure to cook the breasts to 160 degrees in step 4, about 35 minutes.

- 2 (10-ounce) chicken leg quarters, trimmed
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and sliced into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick rounds
- 2 shallots, halved through root end
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon grated lemon zest, plus lemon wedges for serving
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon minced garlic

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and sprinkle with thyme, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper. Toss potatoes, shallots, 1 tablespoon oil, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper together in bowl. Combine parsley, lemon zest, garlic, and pinch salt in small bowl; set aside.

2. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch ovensafe nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add chicken, skin side down, and cook until well browned, about 5 minutes. Transfer chicken to plate, skin side up.

3. Place potatoes and shallots in single layer in now-empty skillet. Cook over medium heat, without moving vegetables, until bottoms of potatoes are golden brown, about 5 minutes.

4. Place chicken, skin side up, on top of vegetables and transfer skillet to oven. Roast until chicken registers 175 degrees and potatoes are tender, about 30 minutes. Sprinkle with parsley mixture. Serve, passing lemon wedges separately.

Symbiotic Positioning

Placing the potato slices on the bottom of the skillet puts them in contact with the hot surface so they can brown. The potatoes elevate the chicken leg quarters (which are browned first) so the chicken drippings can infuse the spuds with their deep savory flavor.

We made a roasting rack out of potatoes.



Steak Fajitas

Many fajita recipes turn out pale, meek-tasting meat. We used a simple technique to fix both problems at once, all in one pan.

by Cecelia Jenkins

ORDERING FAJITAS IN a Mexican restaurant sets the stage for some good theater. The spectacle of a server carrying sizzling meat and vegetables through the restaurant and placing them before you—"Careful, the handle is hot!"—is key to the experience. But I wanted to create a fajitas recipe for the home cook that was more about flavor than theater and used only one pan.

Most recipes I found for fajitas called for flank steak, skirt steak, or steak tips; my tasters preferred the flank for its beefy flavor and relative tenderness and because it's easy to find in supermarkets. But there was a catch. Most fajitas are seared on the stovetop, but a good-size flank steak, two bell peppers, and an onion (enough to feed four to six people) was too much for a skillet.

So I turned to the oven, knowing I could fit the steak and vegetables on a rimmed baking sheet. I generously seasoned a flank steak with salt and pepper and placed it on one end of the sheet, packing the rest of the sheet with slices of onion and bell pepper; it was a tight fit. I popped the sheet into a 475-degree oven, and after about 10 minutes the steak was at my target temperature of 125 degrees (for medium-rare). I pulled it from the oven, sliced it up, and called my tasters.

Disaster. Although the meat was perfectly pink inside, it was an unappealing shade of gray on the outside. It was also quite chewy once sliced and dropped into a tortilla. The vegetables were steamy and wet. I had some work to do.

Fixing the steak was my top priority. I hoped a potent, dark-colored spice rub would make up for the missing flavor and color provided by a true sear. So I stirred together a mixture of chili powder, salt, and pepper. I found that adding a little brown sugar helped with the browning, and cutting the steak into three equal pieces meant the steak would finish cooking at the same time that the vegetables were ready. Moving



Our clever cooking method produces tender, spiced steak and well-browned vegetables.

the oven rack down to the lower-middle position, closer to the oven's heat source, gave the steak deeper browning. My final adjustment for the meat was cooking it past medium-rare to medium (135 degrees); this made the slices less chewy.

To fix the steamy vegetables, I started cooking them before the steak went on. This uncrowded head start allowed the vegetables to pick up flavorful browning. When the vegetables were lightly

brown around the edges, I pushed them to one end of the baking sheet, added the steak to the hot sheet, and cooked until everything was done.

I let the steak rest for 5 minutes, sliced it thin against the grain, tossed the slices with the vegetables, and added some chopped cilantro and a spritz of lime juice to brighten the flavors. Piled high into warmed tortillas, my easy weeknight fajitas made just as much of a statement as the restaurant version.

The Key to One-Pan Fajitas: Staggered Cooking



1. Start with just the vegetables.



2. Add the steak for the last 8 minutes.

ONE-PAN STEAK FAJITAS

Serves 4 to 6

Serve the fajitas with pico de gallo, avocado or guacamole, sour cream, your favorite hot sauce, and lime wedges. We cook the flank steak to medium so that it is less chewy and therefore easier to eat. We call for red bell peppers in this recipe, but for a more colorful presentation, use a mix of red, yellow, orange, and/or green.

- 3 red bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-wide strips
- 1 large red onion, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick rounds
- 3 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- Salt and pepper
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons chili powder
- 1 teaspoon packed brown sugar
- 1 (1½-pound) flank steak, trimmed
- 8 (6-inch) flour tortillas
- 1 tablespoon lime juice
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 475 degrees. Toss bell peppers, onion, garlic, oil, 1 teaspoon salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper together on rimmed baking sheet and spread into even layer. Roast until vegetables are lightly browned around edges, about 10 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, combine chili powder, sugar, 2 teaspoons salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper in bowl. Cut steak lengthwise with grain into 3 equal pieces. Pat steaks dry with paper towels, then sprinkle all over with spice mixture. Wrap tortillas in aluminum foil; set aside.

3. Remove sheet from oven. Using rubber spatula, push vegetables to 1 half of sheet. Place steaks on other half of sheet, leaving space between steaks. Roast until vegetables are spotty brown and meat registers 135 degrees (for medium), about 8 minutes.

4. Remove sheet from oven, transfer steaks to cutting board, and let rest, uncovered, for 5 minutes. Place tortilla packet in oven until warm, about 5 minutes. Transfer vegetables to serving platter and toss with lime juice.

5. Slice steaks thin against grain and transfer to platter with vegetables. Sprinkle with cilantro. Serve steak and vegetables with warm tortillas.

Carbonnade

This Belgian beef-and-beer stew is a natural for the slow cooker—but you have to know how to handle the three main ingredients. **by Matthew Fairman**

MANY KINDS OF recipes can be adapted to work in a slow cooker, but those that call for braising meat—partly submerging a tough cut in liquid and gently cooking it for a prolonged period of time—are right in the sweet spot. Which is why I was excited to create a slow-cooker recipe for my favorite style of beef stew, the beer-infused, onion-heavy Belgian version called carbonnade.

But before I plugged in and turned on the slow cooker, I wanted to get my bearings by trying several regular, non-slow-cooker recipes for the stew. I made five different carbonnade recipes for my tasters, and each version had issues. Some required more than an hour of browning batches of beef and slowly caramelizing onions before adding everything to the Dutch oven. Others fell short in flavor, dominated by the sharp, bitter beer or still-crunchy, sulfurous onions. I hoped I could both minimize the up-front work and create a rich, balanced carbonnade that tasted of beer in a pleasant way.

I went back to the basics: Carbonnade is built on a foundation of three ingredients (beef, beer, and onions), so I decided to tackle those ingredients one at a time. First up: the onions.

I made three batches of stew, starting each by browning the beef. In one, I added raw onions to the cooker; in another, I added briefly softened onions; and in the third, I used the test kitchen's method for quicker caramelized onions (you first steam the onions with a little water, salt, and sugar and then uncover the pan and brown them, for a total cooking time of about 20 minutes). My tasters unanimously preferred the greater sweetness and complexity of the stew made with

caramelized onions—the others tasted sour and sulfuric in comparison.

On to the beef. The initial test recipes had taught me that chuck-eye roast was a great cut to use here—it's inexpensive and deeply flavorful, and it turns buttery-tender with long cooking.

But since I was coaxing such great flavor out of the onions, was it really necessary to brown the cubes of meat, too? In a side-by-side test of browned versus unbrowned beef in two stews, the version made without browning the beef won out, as the flavors of the onions and beer came through more clearly. Adding a little tomato paste, garlic, and thyme to the beef and onions rounded out the flavor of the stew.

Finally, I moved on to what I consider the most important carbonnade ingredient, the beer. To determine the best kind of beer to use, I made batches of stew with different styles: Belgian ale, IPA, lager, porter, and stout. Purists will tell you that the best beer to use in a Belgian beef stew is a yeast-forward, slightly bitter, copper-colored Belgian ale, and my tasters agreed (my top choice is the rather fancy Chimay Pères Trappistes—Première Ale). I found that using the beer in combination with chicken broth made for the most balanced stew and kept the beer's bitterness in check while still allowing its flavor to shine through.

This stew has it all: rich beefy flavor, sweet onions, a nice bite of beer, and the convenience of being made in a slow cooker. We are fond of serving this carbonnade over buttered egg noodles. But what to drink with it? Some beef stews are best served with red wine, but I'll be sticking with beer for this one.



The Suds Make the Stew

There is plenty of culinary discussion surrounding which wines are best for cooking. But what's the best beer to use for carbonnade? You can use a light American lager, such as Budweiser or Miller, and this stew will still taste great. But for the deepest flavor and authentic Belgian flair, we prefer the yeasty, complex, spicy, slightly sour flavor of real Belgian ales. The Belgian brewery Chimay exports several versions; if you want to use something from closer to home, the Quebec brewery Unibroue also sells several exemplary varieties of Belgian-style ale. The same rule of thumb holds true for both wine and beer: Cook with one you'd be happy drinking.



Buttered egg noodles are the classic accompaniment to this robust, complex beef stew.

SLOW-COOKER BEER-BRAISED BEEF WITH ONIONS

Serves 6 to 8

For the best results, we recommend using a copper-colored Belgian-style beer in this recipe, but light lagers will work as well. Avoid strongly hopped, bitter beers such as IPAs. Serve with egg noodles.

- 4 pounds boneless beef chuck-eye roast, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch pieces
- Salt and pepper
- 2 large onions, sliced thin
- 1 cup water
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon packed brown sugar
- ¼ cup tomato paste
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups Belgian-style or lager beer
- 1 cup chicken broth
- ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley

1. Season beef with salt and pepper and place in slow cooker. Combine onions, water, oil, sugar, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in 12-inch nonstick skillet. Bring mixture to boil over medium-high heat. Cover and cook until onions are softened and water is nearly evaporated, about 10 minutes.

2. Uncover and continue to cook, stirring often, until onions are soft and dark brown, 8 to 10 minutes longer. Add tomato paste, garlic, and thyme sprigs and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in flour and cook for 1 minute. Stir in beer and broth and bring to simmer. Cook until thickened, about 2 minutes.

3. Transfer onion mixture to slow cooker and stir to combine. Cook until beef is tender, 6 to 7 hours on high or 8 to 10 hours on low. Discard thyme sprigs. Skim fat from surface of stew. Stir in parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

Loaf Pans

Making bakery-quality sandwich breads and pound cakes at home isn't hard. You just need the right loaf pan. **by Kate Shannon**

10 Pans 8 Tests

- Bake pound cake, loosen with knife
- Bake sandwich bread, loosen with knife
- Bake lasagna, loosen with knife
- Slice lasagna in half with paring knife, then remove it with metal spatula
- Run paring knife around pan and make 6 slices across width
- Measure dimensions
- Measure capacity by filling with water
- Wash 10 times

LOAF PANS ARE essential for baking sandwich loaves, quick breads, and pound cakes. We also use them for small lasagnas and for intricate baked goods such as brioche, babka, and flan.

A decade ago, the Williams Sonoma Goldtouch Nonstick Loaf Pan, 1 lb won our testing of loaf pans, and it continues to impress. It measures 8½ by 4½ inches at the top of the pan, about ½ inch smaller in each direction than a classic loaf pan; the narrower dimensions result in loaves that rise slightly higher and have taller, prettier domes. There's just one hang-up: It has sharp corners that are a nuisance to clean. So we resurveyed the market and found several options in the smaller size we prefer. We purchased 10 pans; most were made from metal or silicone and marketed as 8½ by 4½ inches. We also included two glass pans that were slightly wider.

All the pans released baked goods easily. There were some subtle differences in browning, but all were acceptable. In our durability tests, the glass pans rated higher than metal pans (which scratched a bit), but all were acceptable. With good performance across the board, we focused on the shapes of the breads and cakes, where we saw clear differences. Our preferences came down to size and shape.

Pan size affects the shape of baked goods. If the pan is too small, the batter or dough can overflow. This happened with one pan. Other pans produced noticeably wider loaves that looked comparatively chubby and squat. Our favorites had smaller bottoms that created cakes and breads that rose straight up and had nicely rounded tops.

It turns out there are different ways to measure a loaf pan, and some models in our lineup were not exactly 8½ by 4½ inches. They also varied in height,

Loaf Shape

Whether a pan is folded or molded affects the shape of the baked goods it produces and how easy it is to clean.



A TALE OF TWO LOAF PANS

A molded pan (left) is easy to clean, but a folded pan (right) gives loaves crisp edges.

from 2¾ inches to 3½ inches, and in the sizes of their bases. This meant that even with the same measurements across the top of the pan, they differed in capacity. To compare this, we measured how much water each model could hold. The pan in which pound cake overflowed held the least, about 1.31 liters, and was one of the shortest pans. Our favorites were roomy and held about 1.5 liters of water.

Pan construction was also important. The metal pans in our lineup were either molded or folded. Molded pans are typically made by pressing a pliable sheet of metal into a loaf-shaped form. These pans generally had wide bottoms and produced squat loaves. The prettiest and tallest loaves came from metal pans that were folded at the ends, like wrapping paper at the end of a box. Loaves baked in these pans had sharp edges and looked professional.

But sharp corners are difficult to clean. The molded metal pans and glass pans had gently curved corners that produced squatter baked goods with rounded edges, but these pans were much easier to clean.

Ultimately, you have to make a choice when you buy a loaf pan: Do you want picture-perfect baked goods or easy cleanup? Since we generally prioritize the appearance of our baked goods over easy cleanup, our three favorites are folded metal pans (these three pans performed identically, so we've ranked them in order of price). Our new winner, the USA Pan Loaf Pan, 1 lb Volume, is made by the long-time manufacturer of Williams Sonoma Goldtouch bakeware but costs less.

KEY Good ★★★ Fair ★★ Poor ★

RECOMMENDED

Best for Professional-Quality Results

USA Pan Loaf Pan, 1 lb Volume

Model: 1140LF

Price: \$14.95

Material: Aluminized steel

Dimensions: 8½ x 4½ x 2¾ in

Capacity: 1.5 L

Dishwasher-Safe: No



Baked Good Appearance ★★★
Cleanup ★★½
Durability ★★½

Comments: This folded metal pan produced picture-perfect baked goods but, like all folded pans, took some effort to clean.

Chicago Metallic Commercial II Nonstick 1 lb Loaf Pan

Model: 59042

Price: \$17.99

Material: Aluminized steel

Dimensions: 8½ x 4½ x 2¾ in

Capacity: 1.48 L

Dishwasher-Safe: Yes



Baked Good Appearance ★★★
Cleanup ★★½
Durability ★★½

Comments: A solid folded pan that produced attractive breads and cakes. Tough to clean.

Williams Sonoma Goldtouch Nonstick Loaf Pan, 1 lb

Model: 1983915

Price: \$22.95

Material: Aluminized steel

Dimensions: 8½ x 4½ x 2¾ in

Capacity: 1.44 L

Dishwasher-Safe: Yes



Baked Good Appearance ★★★
Cleanup ★★½
Durability ★★½

Comments: It was the most expensive of the three molded pans we tested. It performed similarly.

Best for Easy Cleanup

OXO Good Grips Non-Stick Pro 1 Lb Loaf Pan

Model: 11160300

Price: \$16.95

Material: Aluminized steel

Dimensions: 8½ x 4½ x 2¾ in

Capacity: 1.58 L

Dishwasher-Safe: No



Baked Good Appearance ★★
Cleanup ★★★
Durability ★★½

Comments: This pan's rounded corners made baked goods with less-crisp edges, but it was easy to wash.

Simply Calphalon Nonstick Bakeware Medium Loaf Pan

Model: 1758084

Price: \$12.01

Material: Carbon steel

Dimensions: 8½ x 4½ x 2½ in

Capacity: 1.52 L

Dishwasher-Safe: Yes



Baked Good Appearance ★★
Cleanup ★★★
Durability ★★½

Comments: Another easy-to-clean molded pan that made baked goods with rounded edges.

Pyrex Easy Grab 1.5-qt Loaf Pan

Model: 5300092

Price: \$15.75

Material: Glass

Dimensions: 8¼ x 5⅓ x 3 in

Capacity: 1.54 L

Dishwasher-Safe: Top rack only



Baked Good Appearance ★½
Cleanup ★★★
Durability ★★★

Comments: The wide shape made squat baked goods, but the pan was easy to maneuver.

OXO Good Grips Glass 1.6 Qt Loaf Baking Dish

Model: 11176000

Price: \$8.99

Material: Glass

Dimensions: 8¼ x 5½ x 3⅓ in

Capacity: 1.74 L

Dishwasher-Safe: Yes



Baked Good Appearance ★½
Cleanup ★★★
Durability ★★★

Comments: Baked goods were a bit round, but cleanup was easy. Nice big handles.

Our seven top-rated loaf pans are pictured above. Web members can access the full testing results at CooksCountry.com/jan19.

Supermarket Bacon

Bringing home the bacon? Make sure you choose the right one.

by Miye Bromberg

IN 1924, GERMAN immigrant Oscar Mayer began producing and selling sliced, packaged bacon in Chicago. He wasn't the first to slice bacon before it hit the shops or even the first to protect it with easy-to-grab packaging. But by marketing these innovations extensively, Mayer made bacon a true convenience product and helped usher in a new era of ubiquity for bacon in American homes.

The popularity of packaged bacon endures. According to a recent report by market research group Mintel, 70 percent of American adults eat it regularly. But is all bacon the same? To see how the classic supermarket bacons measured up, we bought five top-selling products (as assessed by IRI, a Chicago-based market research firm), priced from \$4.00 to \$10.39 per pound. We tasted them plain and in BLTs.

But before we did, we first examined the bacon-production process. Each slab of bacon is produced from pork belly, a fatty strip of meat from the underside of a pig. The bellies are cured using salt and two additives, sodium nitrite and either sodium ascorbate or sodium erythorbate. These ingredients inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria (most important, *Clostridium botulinum*, the microbe responsible for deadly botulism) and give bacon its characteristic pink color and "cured" flavor. A sweetener (sugar or dextrose) is added to the cure to enhance flavor, and sodium phosphates are often included to help the bacon retain moisture.

Historically, the cure ingredients were applied as a dry rub. But since dry curing can take a few months, most large-scale producers instead dissolve the cure ingredients in water, forming a brine. They then either immerse the bellies in that brine or, more typically, use needles to inject the brine directly into the meat. Injection is efficient, taking just 6 to 24 hours compared to weeks for immersion curing. At least three of the bacons in our lineup were injected; the other two manufacturers would not confirm their methods.

After curing, the bellies are cooked at a low temperature (115 to 125 degrees) and smoked before being sliced and packaged. To create smoke, producers traditionally burned wood logs, chips, or even sawdust. Many manufacturers still do; the words "naturally smoked" or "hardwood smoked" appear on their packaging. However, if "smoke flavor" appears on the packaging, that's a sign that liquid smoke has been added directly to the cure instead. We learned from Gordon Smith, professor of grain science and industry at Kansas State University, that many bacon producers—even those that use real smoke—also apply liquid smoke externally. Because the liquid smoke isn't added to the cure, it doesn't have to be listed as an ingredient.

As for the bacons in our lineup, none were very smoky, but most tasters didn't mind. And they had no preferences when it came to the type of wood used to generate the smoke: Three products

used hickory and our winner used a blend of hardwoods. That said, some tasters did note a slightly "artificial" flavor in one product that employed both natural and liquid smoke.

There were more noticeable differences in texture due to a few factors, including thickness. The bacons ranged from 2 to 2.6 millimeters thick when measured raw, with most on the low end of the spectrum. In general, the thicker the bacon, the meatier and chewier its texture; thinner bacons tended to be more delicate and brittle when cooked. But tasters didn't have a clear preference. Our winner is the thinnest; our runner-up, the thickest.

Fat and protein contributed more significantly to our preferences. Responding to consumer demand for leaner meat in the 1980s, farmers began to breed and raise hogs with less fat and more muscle. Judging by our results, tasters still prefer leaner bacon. Our bacons generally ranked in order of how lean they were, with the top three products having 7 to 8 grams of fat and the last two clocking in at 8.9 and 9.5 grams per standardized two-slice serving.

We'd be happy to eat any of these bacons again, but we do have a favorite. Oscar Mayer Naturally Hardwood Smoked Bacon (\$6.99 per pound) is lightly smoky and has good meaty flavor. But it was its texture that truly won us over: At just 2 millimeters thick and with equal proportions of fat and protein, it provided a nice balance of crispness and chew.



The Way We Cook Bacon

Bacon cooks more evenly—and with less splatter and mess—in the oven. Above, associate editor Miye Bromberg readies bacon for cooking (and tasting).

OVEN-COOKED BACON

Serves 4 to 6

The amount of bacon you can cook at one time will vary depending on the size of the bacon slices and the size of your baking sheet.

1 pound bacon

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil. Arrange bacon on prepared sheet (slices can overlap slightly). Bake until browned and crisp, 10 to 15 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking. Transfer bacon to paper towel-lined plate to drain. Serve.

RECOMMENDED



Oscar Mayer Naturally Hardwood Smoked Bacon
Price: \$6.99 for 16-oz package (\$6.99 per lb)
Wood: Maple, birch, and beech
Slice Thickness: 2 mm
Fat: 7 g **Protein:** 7 g
Sodium: 350 mg
Comments: This "classic," "textbook bacon" was our favorite both plain and in BLTs. Most tasters loved its "mildly meaty" flavor and "ideal texture," which had a "good balance of chew and crispness," thanks to equal amounts of fat and protein and its extra-thin slices.



Smithfield Hometown Original Bacon
Price: \$5.99 for 16-oz package (\$5.99 per lb)
Wood: Hickory
Slice Thickness: 2.6 mm
Fat: 8 g **Protein:** 5 g
Sodium: 360 mg
Comments: Although many tasters thought it "could be smokier," especially when eaten plain, the thickest bacon in the lineup was acclaimed for its "hearty," "substantial" chew and good porky flavor. Its distinctive savory, tangy cured flavor reminded some tasters of prosciutto or ham.



Hormel Black Label Original Bacon
Price: \$10.39 for 16-oz package (\$10.39 per lb)
Wood: Proprietary
Slice Thickness: 2.3 mm
Fat: 7.4 g **Protein:** 6.3 g
Sodium: 422 mg
Comments: Tasters appreciated this well-marbled, "visually appealing," "ultrasavory" bacon with "mild smoke" and "nice porkiness" that really "stands up in [a] sandwich." At 422 mg of sodium per serving, it was "a little on the saltier side," but it had "the best crunch."



Farmland Hickory Smoked Classic Cut Bacon
Price: \$4.99 for 12-oz package (\$6.65 per lb)
Wood: Hickory
Slice Thickness: 2.1 mm
Fat: 8.9 g **Protein:** 5.1 g
Sodium: 329 mg
Comments: This bacon was particularly enjoyable in BLTs, where its "good smoke" and "nice porky flavor" came through loud and clear. Tasters also liked its "moderate chew" and edges that got "nice and crispy," thanks in part to its relatively high fat content.



Bar-S Naturally Smoked Bacon
Price: \$3.00 for 12-oz package (\$4.00 per lb)
Wood: Hickory
Slice Thickness: 2.1 mm
Fat: 9.5 g **Protein:** 5.4 g
Sodium: 380 mg
Comments: With small islands of lean meat surrounded by large strips of fat, this bacon reminded some tasters of English-style back bacon. The relatively high fat content made it a bit greasy. A few tasters also noted a slightly "artificial" smoky aftertaste, but most enjoyed the "grilled" flavor.



Mexican Chocolate Cookies

"My Aunt Christine used to give out tins of homemade cookies each year at Christmas. There would be all different kinds of cookies inside, but these spicy chocolate rounds were always the crowd favorite. My siblings, cousins, and I would carefully root down into the tissue paper, stealthily excavating them from the lower levels."

—HANNAH CROWLEY,
Deputy Editor

MEXICAN CHOCOLATE COOKIES

Makes 48 cookies

We found that Dutch-processed cocoa powder yielded the best chocolate flavor, but natural cocoa powder will also work here.

1½ cups (6⅔ ounces) all-purpose flour
¾ cup (2¼ ounces) Dutch-processed cocoa powder
1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon pepper
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
12 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
1 cup (7 ounces) granulated sugar
1 large egg
½ cup sanding sugar

1. Whisk flour, cocoa, 2 teaspoons cinnamon, salt, pepper, and cayenne together in bowl; set aside. Using stand mixer fitted with paddle, beat butter and granulated sugar on medium-high speed until pale and fluffy, about 3 minutes.

Add egg and beat until combined. Reduce speed to low, slowly add flour mixture, and mix until just combined. **2.** Divide dough in half and roll each half into 6-inch log. Wrap logs tightly in plastic wrap and refrigerate until firm, at least 2 hours or up to 3 days. **3.** Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 375 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper. Whisk sanding sugar and remaining 1 teaspoon cinnamon together in shallow dish. Roll logs in sugar mixture to evenly coat exteriors, pressing as needed to adhere. **4.** Slice logs into ¼-inch-thick rounds, rolling logs as you cut to keep circular shape, and evenly space on prepared sheets (24 cookies per sheet). Bake until edges of cookies look dry, 10 to 12 minutes, switching and rotating sheets halfway through baking. **5.** Let cookies cool on sheets for 5 minutes, then transfer to wire rack and let cookies cool completely before serving. (Cookies can be stored in airtight container for up to 3 days.)

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FIND THE ROOSTER!

A tiny version of this rooster has been hidden in a photo in the pages of this issue. Write to us with its location and we'll enter you in a random drawing. The first correct entry drawn will win our favorite loaf pan, and each of the next five will receive a free one-year subscription to Cook's Country. To enter, visit CooksCountry.com/rooster by January 31, 2019, or write to Rooster DJ19, Cook's Country, 21 Drydock Avenue, Suite 210E, Boston, MA 02210. Include your name and address. Elizabeth Bird of Scott Depot, W. Va., and Joan Montgomery of Deland, Fla., found the rooster in the August/September 2018 issue on page 11 and won our Best Buy cooler.

WEB EXTRAS

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Almond Layer Cake
Bittersweet Chocolate Frosting
Italian Flag Cake

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Italian Flag Cake

The traditional Italian rainbow cookie gets an upgrade to a festive holiday cake while still staying true to its classic flavor combination of almond, raspberry, and chocolate.

by Sarah Ewald

TO MAKE THIS CAKE, YOU WILL NEED:

- 1 recipe Almond Layer Cake Batter*
- 1/2 teaspoon green gel food coloring
- 1 tablespoon cocoa powder
- 1 tablespoon water
- 2 teaspoons red gel food coloring
- 2/3 cup seedless raspberry jam
- 3 cups Bittersweet Chocolate Frosting*

FOR THE CAKE:

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease three 8-inch round cake pans, line with parchment paper, grease parchment, and flour pans. Transfer one-third of batter (about 1 1/4 cups) to 1 prepared pan and smooth top with rubber spatula. Divide remaining batter evenly between 2 bowls. Add green food coloring to 1 bowl and mix until combined. Whisk cocoa, water, and red food coloring in small bowl until smooth. Add red food coloring mixture to second bowl of batter and mix until combined. Transfer colored cake batters to remaining 2 prepared pans and smooth tops with rubber spatula. Bake until toothpick inserted in centers comes out clean, 24 to 28 minutes, rotating pans halfway through baking. Let cakes cool in pans on wire rack for 10 minutes. Run paring knife around edges of pans to loosen. Remove cakes from pans, discarding parchment, and let cool completely on rack, about 2 hours.

TO ASSEMBLE:

Place red cake layer on cake plate or pedestal. Spread 1/3 cup jam evenly over cake, leaving 1/4-inch border. Top with white cake layer, press lightly to adhere, then spread remaining 1/3 cup jam evenly over cake, leaving 1/4-inch border. Top with green cake layer and press lightly to adhere. Spread about 1 cup frosting evenly over top and sides of cake, making sure to fill in gaps between cake layers to create smooth sides. Refrigerate cake until frosting is firm to touch, about 1 hour. Spread remaining frosting evenly over top and sides of cake.

TO DECORATE:

Starting in middle of top of cake, lightly press back of spoon into frosting and swoop up to create C shape. Continue swoops outward in concentric circles to edge of cake. Serve.



*The full recipe and the recipes for Almond Layer Cake Batter and Bittersweet Chocolate Frosting are available for free for four months at CooksCountry.com/flagcake.

