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## French-Style Pork Chops with Apples and Calvados

From *America's Test Kitchen* Season 16: French Pork Chops and Bisque

### WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:

Pork and apples is a classic, but usually everyday, pairing. We turned to the French recipe for *porc à la Normande* to inspire a more elegant rendition. Using thick bone-in chops allowed us more leeway to avoid overcooking, while salting them an hour before cooking helps keep them moist. An evenly heated pan is key to a good sear on these big chops, so we heated our skillet over medium heat for a full 5 minutes before turning up the heat. Cutting the apples into attractive rings provided a bed to raise the chops off the skillet's bottom to allow for even cooking once transferred to the oven. For a sauce with layered apple flavor, we rely on a combination of sweet cider, cider vinegar, Calvados, and a few chopped apples, which break down and help produce the right texture. Butter gives the sauce richness, while chicken broth and bacon lend a balancing savoriness. We found that flambéing the sauce is critical to creating an elegantly complex sauce, and doing it in two batches kept the job easy.

### Serves 4

We prefer natural pork, but if the pork is enhanced (injected with a salt solution), decrease the salt in step 1 to 1/2 teaspoon per chop. To ensure that they fit in the skillet, choose apples that are approximately 3 inches in diameter. Applejack or regular brandy can be used in place of the Calvados. Before flambéing, be sure to roll up long shirtsleeves, tie back long hair, and turn off the exhaust fan and any lit burners. Use a long match or wooden skewer to flambé the Calvados. The amount of vinegar to add in step 4 will vary depending on the sweetness of your cider.

### INGREDIENTS

- 4** (12- to 14-ounce) bone-in pork rib chops, 1 inch thick
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 4** Gala or Golden Delicious apples, peeled and cored
- 2** slices bacon, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 3** shallots, sliced
- Pinch ground nutmeg
- 1/2** cup Calvados
- 1 3/4** cups apple cider
- 1 1/4** cups chicken broth
- 4** sprigs fresh thyme, plus 1/4 teaspoon minced
- 2** tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2** teaspoons vegetable oil
- 1/2 - 1** teaspoon apple cider vinegar

### INSTRUCTIONS

**1.** Evenly sprinkle each chop with 3/4 teaspoon salt. Place chops on large plate, cover loosely with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for 1 hour.

2. While chops rest, cut 2 apples into 1/2-inch pieces. Cook bacon in medium saucepan over medium heat until crisp, 5 to 7 minutes. Add shallots, nutmeg, and 1/4 teaspoon salt; cook, stirring frequently, until shallots are softened and beginning to brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Off heat, add 1/4 cup Calvados and let warm through, about 5 seconds. Wave lit match over pan until Calvados ignites, then shake pan gently to distribute flames. When flames subside, 30 to 60 seconds, cover pan to ensure flame is extinguished, 15 seconds. Add remaining 1/4 cup Calvados and repeat flambéing (flames will subside after 1 1/2 to 2 minutes). (If you have trouble igniting second addition, return pan to medium heat, bring to bare simmer, and remove from heat and try again.) Once flames have extinguished, increase heat to medium-high; add cider, 1 cup broth, thyme sprigs, butter, and chopped apples; and bring to rapid simmer. Cook, stirring occasionally, until apples are very tender and mixture has reduced to 2 1/3 cups, 25 to 35 minutes. Cover and set aside.

3. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Slice remaining 2 apples into 1/2-inch-thick rings. Pat chops dry with paper towels and evenly sprinkle each chop with pepper to taste. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium heat until beginning to smoke. Increase heat to high and brown chops on both sides, 6 to 8 minutes total. Transfer chops to large plate and reduce heat to medium. Add apple rings and cook until lightly browned, 1 to 2 minutes. Add remaining 1/4 cup broth and cook, scraping up any browned bits with rubber spatula, until liquid has evaporated, about 30 seconds. Remove pan from heat, flip apple rings, and place chops on top of apple rings. Place skillet in oven and cook until chops register 135 to 140 degrees, 11 to 15 minutes.

4. Transfer chops and apple rings to serving platter, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. While chops rest, strain apple/brandy mixture through fine-mesh strainer set in large bowl, pressing on solids with ladle or rubber spatula to extract liquid; discard solids. (Make sure to use rubber spatula to scrape any apple solids on bottom of strainer into sauce.) Stir in minced thyme and season sauce with vinegar, salt, and pepper to taste. Transfer sauce to serving bowl. Serve chops and apple rings, passing sauce separately.

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## TECHNIQUE

### HOW—AND WHY—WE FLAMBÉ

We found that flambéing this sauce not only removes some alcohol but also makes a real difference in flavor, producing a more complex-tasting sauce through caramelization, the Maillard reaction, and changes in the shape of the flavor molecules, which leads to a changed flavor perception. Adding the alcohol in two stages keeps the size of the flames manageable and shortens the amount of time it burns.

**ADD HALF OF BRANDY:** Off heat, add 1/4 cup Calvados and let warm through, about 5 seconds.



**LIGHT SAUCE:** Fully extend arm and wave flame over pan until Calvados ignites; shake pan gently to distribute flames.



**LET BURN AND COVER:** Let burn until flames subside on their own, 30 to 60 seconds. Cover for 15 seconds to ensure flame is extinguished.



**REPEAT WITH REMAINING BRANDY:** Add remaining 1/4 cup Calvados and repeat flambéing (flames will subside after 1 1/2 to 2 minutes).



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## TECHNIQUE

### FOR AN EMULSIFIED SAUCE, BREAK THE RULES

As the sauce in this recipe sits for 30 minutes while the chops and apples are prepared, butter that's simply whisked in after the sauce has been reduced (the standard procedure for most butter-enriched sauces) will separate out. To keep the butter emulsified longer, one option would have been to whisk more thoroughly to break the butter into even tinier droplets that would stay suspended for more than a few minutes. Or we could have whisked in the butter just before serving. Instead, we came up with an even easier approach, drawing inspiration from—and then breaking—a classic French rule for making stock.

French tomes dictate that you should never allow a stock to vigorously simmer: the bubbling action can break up the fat so that it disperses throughout the liquid, turning the stock cloudy. But since breaking up the fat was what we wanted to do for our sauce, we added the butter at the start of the long reduction time and then turned up the heat to keep the sauce at a vigorous simmer. The constant agitation during the 30 minutes breaks the butter into tiny droplets that stay so well emulsified that the sauce won't break for a full hour.