

NUMBER 149

NOVEMBER & DECEMBER 2017

COOK'S

I L L U S T R A T E D

S



Roast Turkey Breast
Juicy Meat and Rich, Crispy Skin

Tuscan Bean Soup
Hearty One-Pot Meal

Best-Ever Skillet
Brussels Sprouts

Braised Beef Brisket
We Broke the Collagen Code

Which Supermarket
Turkey Is Best?

Gingerbread
Layer Cake

Sophisticated Showstopper

Guide to Prime Rib
Reaching Roast Beef Perfection



Best Turkey Soup
Duchess Potatoes
Chinese Dumplings

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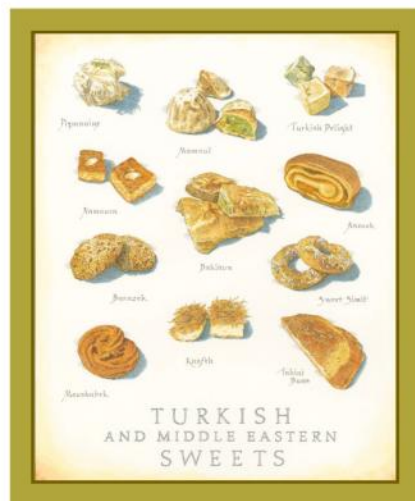
Mexican chorizo can be hard to find. Luckily, making your own is quick and easy.

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Have 10 minutes? You can make the best Brussels sprouts that you've ever tasted.

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Turkish and Middle Eastern Sweets

Flaky, syrup-soaked **BAKLAVA** might be the most familiar of the region's sweets. **PIŞMANIYE** is the Turkish equivalent of cotton candy, with a hint of nuts. Sugar-dusted **MAMOUL** cookies, which crumble like shortbread, house ground nuts at their centers. Cubes of **TURKISH DELIGHT** are flavored with fruits, nuts, herbs, or spices and are springy like gumdrops. The nubbly crumb of semolina-based **NAMOURA** cake is drenched in syrup or honey, each piece crowned with an almond. Yeasted **NAZOOK** pastries are similar to Danish, with nuts or fruit peeking out. The sesame seeds that cover crisp **BARAZEK** cookies are glued in place with a gloss of honey. **SWEET SIMIT** is a cross between a cookie and a pretzel and is scented with warm spices. **MOUSHABEK** dough is piped into ridged coils, fried, and glazed with floral syrup. Crispy noodle threads soaked in aromatic syrup atop a layer of gooey cheese defines **KNAFEH**. Beneath the nutty-sweet surface of **TAHINI BUNS** lie pleasant hints of bitterness and cinnamon.



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 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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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

PRODIGAL VEGETABLE

Consider the Brussels sprout. Not so long ago it was a vegetable pariah in this country, something that parents threatened their children with if they didn't behave. Usually prepared by being boiled to near-death, these bitter miniature cabbages—as most people seemed to think of them—were a prime example of healthy food that no one actually wanted to eat.

Nowadays, though, these little green bundles have become culinary stars. You can't avoid them on the menus of trendy restaurants, often combined with bacon to tempt young pork-obsessed diners. In farmers' markets, you can find them still on the stalk, a kind of vegetable modernist sculpture. Home cooks have come to love them, too. No Thanksgiving dinner, for example, would seem complete these days without Brussels sprouts.

We think this is a very positive development, a good example of how the palate in this country has expanded in recent years. Plus, we have to admit that we love the sprouts. We've prepared them every which way—we've braised them, steamed them, used them both raw and wilted in salads, and roasted them (yes, sometimes with bacon).

In this issue, you'll find our new favorite, a quick and easy skillet-roasted approach. Unlike any other stovetop versions that we've found, these sprouts end up with brilliant green rounded sides and crisp-tender interiors contrasted by nutty-sweet, crusty façades. They're not only delicious but also beautiful. It's hard to imagine that a vegetable like this was once scorned.

Welcome home, sprouts.

—The Editors



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COOK'S ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE

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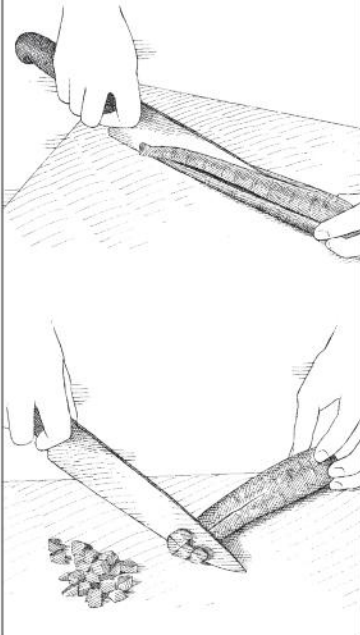
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A Fast, Tidy Way to Chop Carrots

To speed the process of cutting carrots and keep the cut pieces from rolling around on the cutting board, Brett Beauregard of Arlington, Mass., makes two lengthwise slices through the carrot, one on each side, leaving the top inch intact. He then slices the cut portion crosswise to produce uniform pieces.



Cheesecloth Sugar Shaker

Lorna Freed of Grand Rapids, Mich., doesn't own a dedicated sugar shaker, so when she needs to dust confectioners' sugar or cocoa powder over desserts or sprinkle flour on a counter, she fashions a shaker from cheesecloth. She cuts a small square, heaps the powder in the center, and knots the top of the cheesecloth.



QUICK TIPS

≧ COMPILED BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

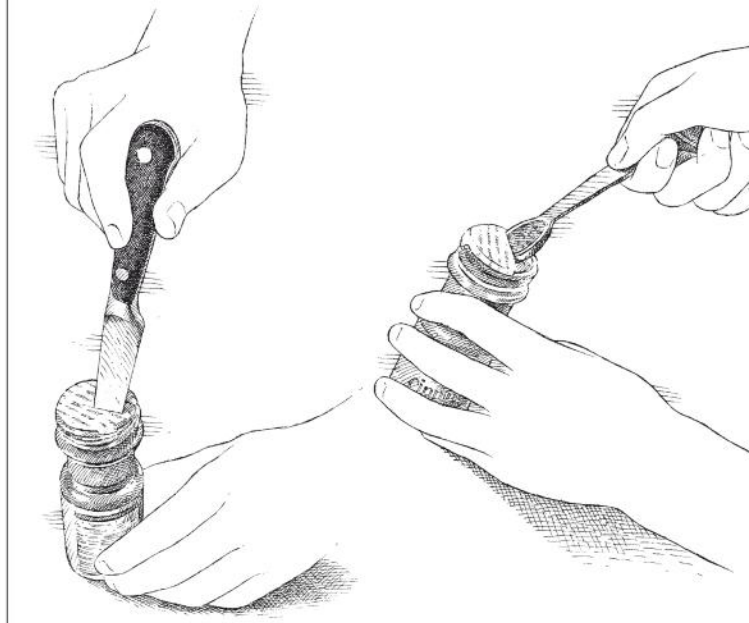
A Tight Foil Cover

When covering a roasting pan of braising meat with aluminum foil, Richard Le of Cambridge, Mass., uses metal binder clips to hold the foil in place.



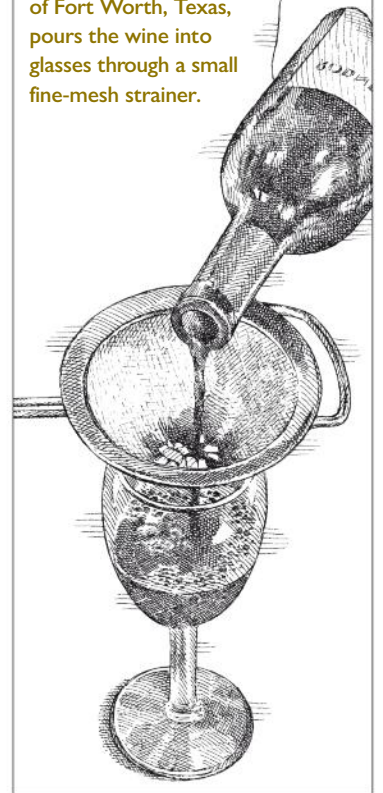
Cut-Your-Own Leveling Tab for Spices

Karen Cofino of Bridgeville, Del., doesn't completely remove the seal on new jars of spices. She cuts half away with a paring knife and then uses the straight edge of the remaining seal to level off measuring spoons.



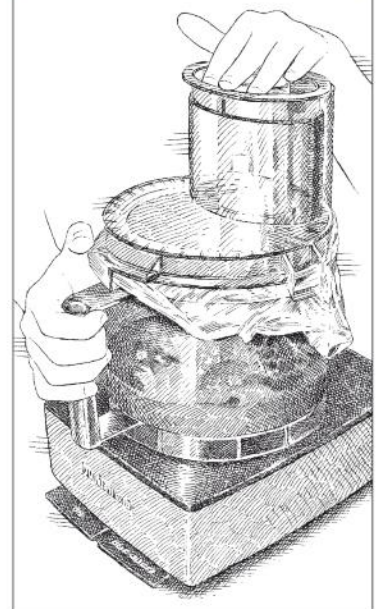
Strain Broken Wine Corks

To strain broken cork bits out of a bottle of wine, John Barcus of Fort Worth, Texas, pours the wine into glasses through a small fine-mesh strainer.



Keeping Food Processor Lids Clean

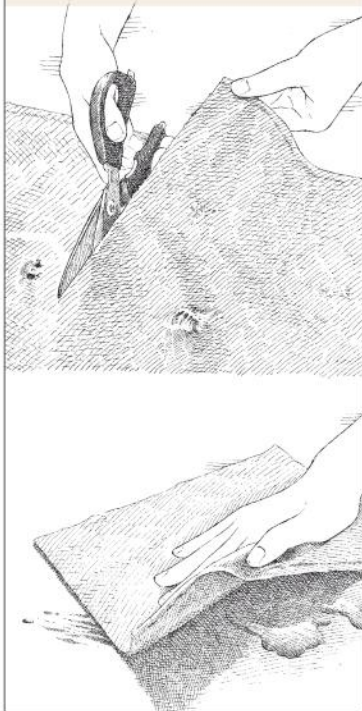
To avoid gunking up her hard-to-clean food processor lid, Teresa Teague of Springfield, Va., covers the workbowl with plastic wrap before processing any food. It protects the lid so effectively, there's no need to clean it at all.



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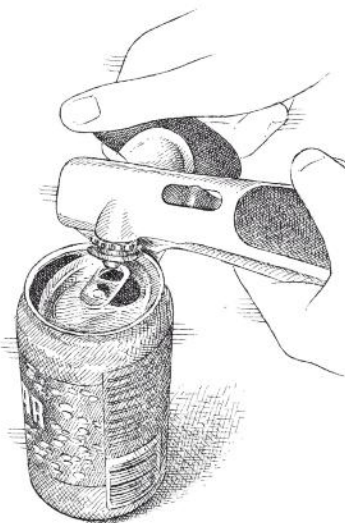
Homemade Hand Towels

To avoid wasting paper towels, Cathy Smith of Swansboro, N.C., cuts up old bath towels to use as small kitchen rags, which she then washes and reuses.



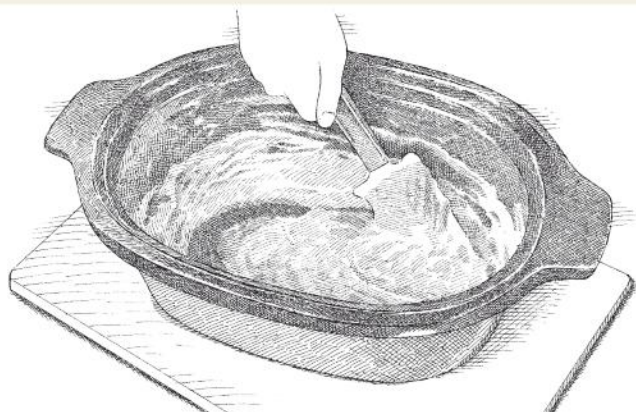
Recycle Soda Cans as Grease Receptacles

Jeff Bartlett of Hopedale, Mass., uses empty soda cans as receptacles for hot cooking fats, such as bacon grease or frying oil. He removes the top of the can completely with a can opener, making it easy to pour the fat into the wide opening.



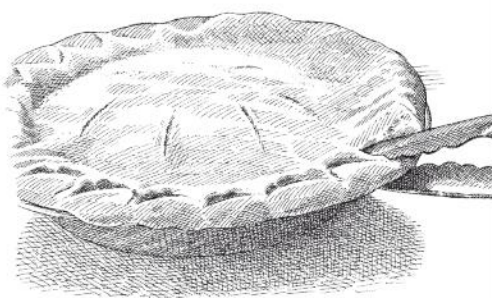
Large Bowl Substitute

When Dianna Marshall of Monroe Township, N.J., runs out of large mixing bowls when baking, she borrows her slow cooker's ceramic insert. The wide, deep basin offers plenty of space for mixing batters.



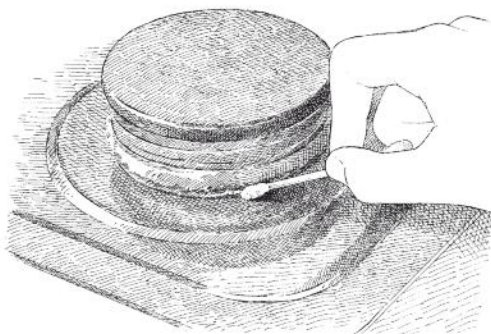
Pinch-Crimp Pie Pastry

Claire Schaffer of Denver, Colo., crimps the edges of pie dough with a pair of tongs. Gently pressing the pincers into the pastry leaves identical impressions for a neat-looking finish.



A Tip for Cleaning Stovetops

The nooks and crannies of stovetop burners can be difficult to clean with a wide sponge. Sara Hasenstab of Memphis, Tenn., uses cotton swabs to swipe in tight spaces.



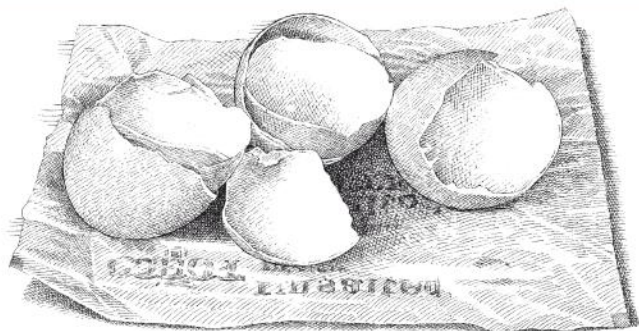
Helping Foil Grip a Baking Sheet

It can be tricky to spread aluminum foil smoothly in a rimmed baking sheet. Eric Gugger of Plymouth, Minn., uses his fingers to drip a little water on the surface of the sheet, which helps hold the foil firmly in place so that he can easily spread it into the corners.



Disposable Mess Rest

Susan Gardner of Kew Gardens, N.Y., saves butter wrappers to use as resting spots for messy items such as eggshells or dirty utensils. When she's done, she simply throws the wrappers away.



Roast Turkey Breast with Gravy

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

BY ANNIE PETITO

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

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

Salt Treatment

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



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

Using my fingers, I carefully peeled back the turkey breast's skin and rubbed salt onto the flesh and then on the bone side. I then smoothed the skin back into place and refrigerated the turkey for 24 hours. The next day, I placed the turkey breast, skin side up, in a V-rack set inside a roasting pan,

no risk of scorching.

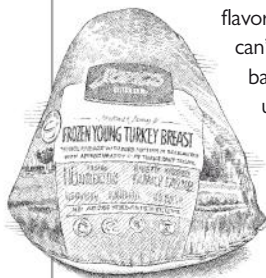
Turkey in the Pan

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

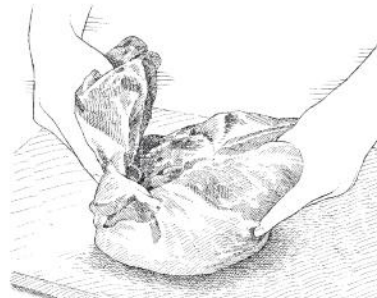
STEP BY STEP Roast Turkey Breast with Gravy

1. BUY CORRECT BREAST

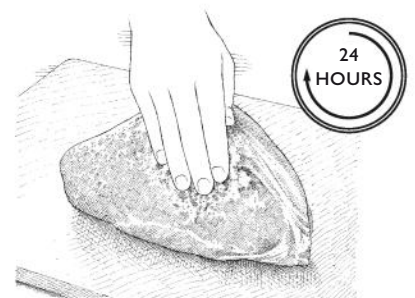
Look for a whole turkey breast with the backbone attached; we use it to flavor the gravy. If you can't find one with a backbone (the label usually indicates if the backbone is attached), use 1 pound of chicken wings for the gravy instead.



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



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



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

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

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

Put Your Back Into It

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

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

ROAST WHOLE TURKEY BREAST WITH GRAVY

SERVES 6 TO 8

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

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

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

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

Get Sauced After the Holidays



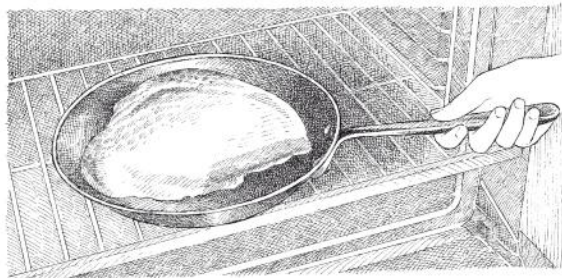
For a nonholiday meal, pair the turkey with a quick, bright-tasting sauce. Our recipes for Salsa Verde, Quick Roasted Red Pepper Sauce, and Cilantro-Mint Chutney are available for free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com/salsaverde, CooksIllustrated.com/redpeppersauce, and CooksIllustrated.com/cilantromintchutney.

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

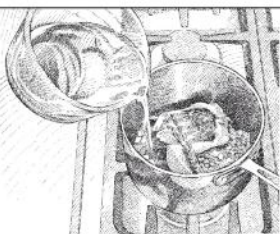
4. Meanwhile, heat oil in large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add reserved back, skin side down, and cook until well browned, 6 to 8 minutes. Add onion, carrot, and celery and cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are softened and lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Add water, thyme sprigs, and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

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

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



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

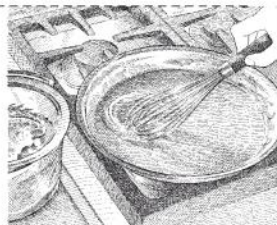


6. BUILD BROTH

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

7. MAKE GRAVY

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



See Every Step

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17



How to Braise Brisket

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

➤ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ⇐

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

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

Anyone who's made brisket knows that producing fork-tender meat takes a long time—upwards of 5 hours, according to the recipes I've tried. But more problematic is the fact that by the time the meat is tender, it's



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

only seasons the meat but also, if left on long enough before cooking, changes the protein structure so that the meat better holds on to moisture. Brisket is particularly dense, so to help the salt penetrate, I halved the brisket lengthwise to create two slabs (doing so would also speed cooking and make for more-manageable slices) and poked each slab all over on both sides with a skewer. Even so, after a series of tests, I determined that the meat tasted juicier and better seasoned when the salt had at least 16—or up to 48—hours to work its magic.

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

and placed it in a 325-degree oven. After about 5 hours, it was tender but—despite having salted it for 48 hours—still too dry.

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

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

Brisket Goes Well With . . .

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



WINE

POMEGRANATE
JUICE

BEER

usually dry, too. That's because brisket is loaded with collagen, the main structural protein in meat that makes it tough. Collagen requires long, steady heat exposure to break down, but in that time the meat's muscle fibers are also contracting and squeezing out moisture. So in a sense, braising meat is a balancing act: using enough heat to break down collagen while still keeping the heat low enough to retain moisture.

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

High and Dry

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

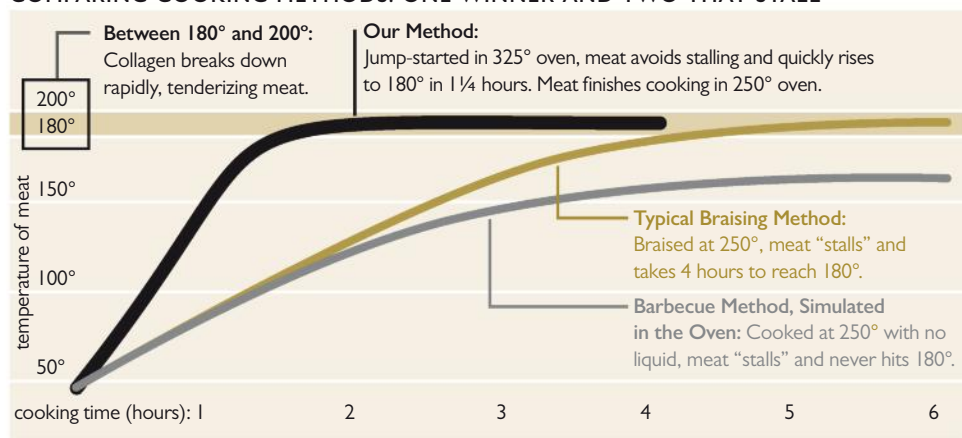
When we want meat to retain moisture, our first move is almost always to apply salt, which not

SCIENCE Don't Let Your Brisket Stall Out

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

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

COMPARING COOKING METHODS: ONE WINNER AND TWO THAT STALL



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

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

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

The Sweet Spot

I started my next braise in a 325-degree oven, as I had before, but this time I waited until the meat's temperature hit 180 degrees, about 1 1/2 hours into cooking, and then lowered the oven to 250 degrees. At this point, any evaporative cooling on the exterior of the meat wasn't enough to lower the meat's internal temperature, and it continued to climb slowly. After another 2 full hours, the brisket's temperature hit 200 degrees, at which point the meat was both fork-tender and still wonderfully moist.

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

The Rest Is Gravy

The curious thing was that the sauce was thin, not velvety and full-bodied. At first I didn't understand why, since all that collagen in the brisket was supposedly breaking down and converting to gelatin, which typically gives the braising liquid a luscious, silky body. But then I did some more research on the collagen in brisket and made a surprising discovery: Most of the collagen in brisket doesn't actually break down and convert to gelatin; it merely softens enough to make the brisket tender (for more information, see “Why Brisket Is the Toughest Tough Cut” on page 31).

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

The combination produced a velvety sauce, but

Buying Brisket

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



POINT CUT

Knobby shape, good marbling, but hard to find



FLAT CUT

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

Give It a Trim



TRIM FAT CAP TO 1/4 INCH

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

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

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

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

BRAISED BRISKET WITH POMEGRANATE, CUMIN, AND CILANTRO

SERVES 6 TO 8

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

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



Watch It All Happen

A step-by-step video is available at CookIllustrated.com/dec17

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Transfer roasts to carving board and slice against



Browned Flavor, No Browning

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

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

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

BEER-BRAISED BRISKET WITH PRUNES AND GINGER

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

BRAISED BRISKET WITH RED WINE AND THYME

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

THE SLICE IS RIGHT



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

Mashed Potato Makeover

For potatoes that are elegant yet easy, we revamp a fussy French classic.

BY LAN LAM

Pommes duchesse are thought to be named for a fictional French aristocrat with a penchant for potatoes: The recipe was dreamed up in the 19th century to encourage consumers to use more of the lowly spuds. The elegantly swirled individual mounds of eggy, buttery, yellow-tinged mashed potatoes with crisp crusts did the trick, and for years the dish remained popular, particularly on holiday menus.

So why aren't pommes duchesse still on every special-occasion table? Well, their retro-luxe look requires a pastry bag, plus a bit of practice. What's more, being rather petite, they cool rapidly. But I had an idea: Maybe baking the potatoes casserole-style would simplify things and help keep them hot.

Traditional recipes call for stirring melted butter, eggs, half-and-half, nutmeg, salt, and pepper into peeled, boiled, and riced potatoes. I settled on 3 egg yolks, 8 tablespoons of melted butter, and $\frac{2}{3}$ cup of half-and-half for $3\frac{1}{2}$ pounds of buttery Yukon Golds. Following the test kitchen's mashed-potato protocol, I poured the butter into the spuds first so its fat would coat the potatoes' starch granules and protect them from being overworked and turning gluey.

After smoothing the potatoes into a buttered dish, I poured on a coating of beaten egg white, which is full of proteins that browned nicely after 30 minutes in a 450-degree oven. But the beautiful crust tore from the potatoes' surface when I dug out a spoonful. Worse, the crust was plasticky instead of crisp and light. The culprit? The egg white proteins were linking to form a tough skin. I tried a coating of melted butter instead, which contains very little protein. This casserole's surface crisped but had to be baked for 50 minutes to brown, which seemed excessive.



Holiday bonus: These rich, buttery potatoes can be made in advance and crisped just before serving.

How about a mixture of butter and egg white? After 30 minutes, this batch emerged with a crisp, burnished crust. That's because the fat in the butter acted as a hydrophobic barrier between the egg white's protein molecules, reducing the formation of tough cross-links.

As a final touch, I scored the casserole with a knife, creating plenty of sharp edges to brown. These lush potatoes, with their crisp crust and majestic name, were fit for royalty.

DUCHESS POTATO CASSEROLE

SERVES 8 TO 10

Freshly ground nutmeg contributes heady flavor, so be sure to use it sparingly.

- $3\frac{1}{2}$ pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and sliced $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick**
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup half-and-half**
- 1 large egg, separated, plus 2 large yolks**
- Salt and pepper**
- Pinch nutmeg**
- 10 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted**

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Grease 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Place potatoes in large saucepan and add cold water to cover by 1 inch. Bring to simmer over medium-high heat. Adjust heat to maintain gentle simmer and cook until paring knife can be slipped into and out of centers of potatoes with no resistance, 18 to 22 minutes. Drain potatoes.

2. While potatoes cook, combine half-and-half, 3 egg yolks, $1\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoons salt, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper, and nutmeg in bowl. Set aside.

3. Place now-empty saucepan over low heat; set ricer or food mill over saucepan. Working in batches, transfer potatoes to hopper and process. Using rubber spatula, stir in 8 tablespoons melted butter until incorporated. Stir in reserved half-and-half mixture until combined. Transfer potatoes to prepared dish and smooth into even layer.

4. Combine egg white, remaining 2 tablespoons melted butter, and pinch salt in bowl and beat with fork until combined. Pour egg white mixture over potatoes, tilting dish so mixture evenly covers surface. Using flat side of paring knife, make series of $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-deep, $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-wide parallel grooves across surface of casserole. Make second series of parallel grooves across surface, at angle to first series, to create crosshatch pattern. Bake casserole until golden brown, 25 to 30 minutes, rotating dish halfway through baking. Let cool for 20 minutes. Serve.

TO MAKE AHEAD: At end of step 3, wrap dish in plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 24 hours. To serve, top and score casserole as directed in step 4 and bake in 375-degree oven for 45 to 50 minutes.

TECHNIQUE | ALTERNATIVE POTATO PATTERNS

Scoring it with a knife isn't the only way to help the casserole brown and crisp. Here are three other ideas.



WHORLED Drag tip of chopstick across surface to create swirled design.



ABSTRACT Push round cookie cutter into surface and gently wiggle to widen circle. Repeat with cutters of varying sizes.



SCALLOPED Beginning in corner, press large offset spatula, held at angle, into surface. Repeat, aligning indents to create scalloped pattern.

See How It's Done

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17



Postholiday Turkey Soup

No one wants to toil over turkey stock on the day after Thanksgiving. But what if you had a recipe that practically made itself?

➤ BY STEVE DUNN ◀

I've been the primary cook for my family's Thanksgiving feast for about 20 years now. I gladly inherited this honor from my mom, but there's one task I never took off her plate: making a batch of stock from the leftover turkey carcass. I've always felt guilty about saddling her with the job, so this year I vowed to keep it for myself. Anticipating a bit of postholiday fatigue, I intended to keep this recipe as simple as possible.

Skin and Bones

As it happened, a colleague was roasting lots of whole turkeys, producing a ready supply of carcasses that I could use for testing purposes. I gathered two that had the leg quarter and breast meat removed but still included meaty bits, the wings, and a fair amount of skin. I prepared two bone-and-water stocks, the first using a carcass straight from the roasted turkey and a second one for which I roasted the carcass for 45 minutes, thinking that this might produce a richer-tasting stock.

The first stock simmered into a lovely pale gold hue, whereas the roasted-carcass stock turned a deep mahogany brown.

I assumed that the darker sample would be more popular, so I was pleasantly surprised when tasters gravitated toward the easier-to-make golden stock. It tasted clearly and deeply of turkey, whereas the stock made with twice-cooked bones tasted more generically of roasted meat.

I experimented with aromatics next. To one stockpot containing 4 quarts of water and a whole carcass, I added raw *mirepoix* (chopped carrots, onion, and celery); to a second, the same mix of vegetables that I had first caramelized to a deep golden brown in the oven. Finally, I made a third stock with only water and a carcass. To my delight, we preferred the near-effortless bone-only stock to those made with vegetables. The raw mirepoix stock was too vegetal and the roasted one too sweet, but



With homemade turkey stock on hand, a full-flavored soup comes together in just a few simple steps.

use the carcass whole, I broke it into smaller pieces—a step easily accomplished with a heavy knife or kitchen shears—so I would need only 2½ quarts of water (enough for a batch of soup) instead of 4 quarts to cover the bones. The upshot was a more concentrated stock. I also found that I could squeeze a broken carcass into a Dutch oven, a boon for cooks who don't own a stockpot.

Things Start to Gel

Next up: consistency. To attain the viscosity I wanted, the stock needed plenty of gelatin, which develops from collagen, a protein found in connective tissue, skin, and bones. It lends subtle body you won't find in commercial products and is the hallmark of a good homemade stock. Many recipes call for simmering bones all day to ensure adequate gelatin extraction. Was that truly necessary?

To find out, I filled four pots with equal weights of bones and water and cooked them for 1, 2, 3, and 4 hours, respectively. After an overnight chill in the refrigerator, the 1-hour stock was slightly thickened, indicating the presence of a small amount of gelatin. However, the 2-, 3-, and 4-hour stocks were all lightly set and wiggled like Jell-O when I shook its container. Although the 3- and 4-hour stocks were slightly firmer when cold, when we tasted them hot, they were nearly impossible

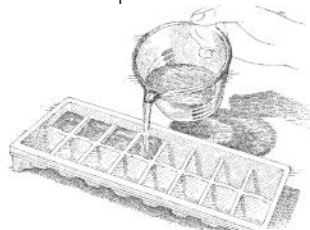
the bone-only stock boasted nothing but pristine, though slightly weak, poultry flavor.

Happy with the way things were progressing, I made one more bone-only stock, but rather than

stocks were all lightly set and wiggled like Jell-O when I shook its container. Although the 3- and 4-hour stocks were slightly firmer when cold, when we tasted them hot, they were nearly impossible

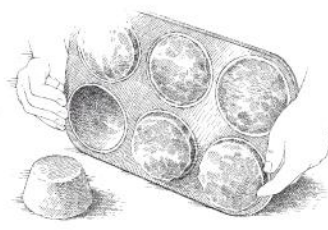
Keeping Stock in Stock

Freezing stock in portions of different sizes makes it easy to defrost it for different applications. Stock can be frozen for up to four months.



ICE CUBE TRAY

After the cubes have frozen, transfer them to a zipper-lock bag. Use the 2-tablespoon portions for pan sauces or stir-fry sauces.



MUFFIN TIN

Once frozen, transfer the 1-cup portions to a zipper-lock bag. Use them for rice, risotto, grains, couscous, or casseroles or as a braising liquid.



ZIPPER-LOCK BAG

Line a 4-cup measuring cup with a zipper-lock bag; pour in the cooled stock. Lay the bag flat to freeze. Use for soups, stews, or gravy.



See the Zen Action

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

to distinguish from the 2-hour stock—each was richly flavored and infused with an ample amount of gelatinous body.

Scoring yet another victory for simplicity, I went with a 2-hour simmer. I occasionally skimmed the surface of the bubbling liquid to remove any foam or impurities. Then, once the time was up, I strained out the bones, let the stock cool for 20 minutes, and spooned off the surface fat. Energized by the fact that my stock required nothing more than water, bones, and time, I decided to use the reserved turkey fat to sauté aromatics for a quick batch of soup.

Friday Soup

My first try at an easy postholiday soup—with fennel, rosemary, and kale—was a little too complex; the bold ingredients overwhelmed the poultry flavor I had been at pains to create in my stock. I altered the ingredient list, ultimately ending up with three variations; each one combined 2 cups of shredded leftover turkey meat with a starchy component—barley, orzo, or rice—along with carefully selected aromatics, complementary vegetables, mild-mannered seasonings, and a last-minute addition of fresh lemon juice to brighten things up.

Now I was guaranteed to eat well on the Friday after Thanksgiving while still having plenty of time to kick back on the couch.

SIMPLE TURKEY STOCK

MAKES 8 CUPS

Pick off most of the meat clinging to the carcass and reserve it. However, don't pick the carcass clean: The stock will have a fuller flavor if there is some meat and skin still attached. If you have the bones from the drumsticks and thighs, add them to the pot. Our recipe for Turkey Rice Soup with Mushrooms and Swiss Chard is available for free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17.

- 1 carcass from 12- to 14-pound roasted turkey
- 10 cups water

1. Using chef's knife, remove wings from carcass and separate each wing at joints into 3 pieces. Cut through ribs to separate breastbone from backbone, then cut backbone into 3 to 4 pieces. Using kitchen shears or heavy knife, remove ribs from both sides of breastbone. (You should have roughly 4 pounds of bones broken into 10 to 12 pieces.)

2. Arrange bones in stockpot or large Dutch oven in compact layer. Add water and bring to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to low, cover, and cook for 2 hours, using shallow spoon to skim foam and impurities from surface as needed.

3. Strain stock through fine-mesh strainer into large container; discard solids. Let stock cool slightly, about 20 minutes. Skim any fat from surface (reserve fat for making soup). Let stock cool for 1½ hours before refrigerating. (Stock can be refrigerated for up to 2 days or frozen for up to 4 months.)

RECIPE TESTING Zen and the Art of Turkey Stock

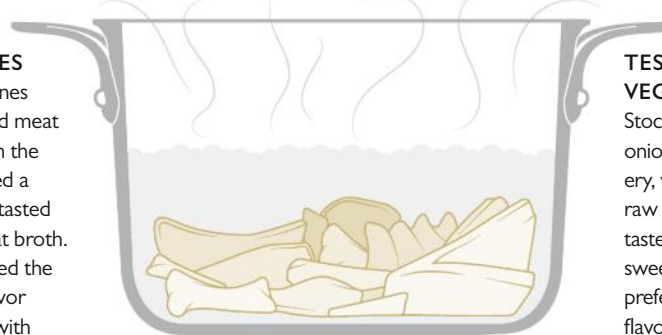
At every turn, we were happy to find that doing less produced a better-tasting stock.

TEST 1:

ROAST BONES

Roasting the bones once the cooked meat was picked from the carcass produced a dark stock that tasted like generic meat broth.

Upshot: We liked the pure poultry flavor of stock made with unroasted bones.



Our stock is made with just bones and water.

TEST 2: ADD VEGETABLES

Stocks containing onion, carrot, and celery, whether added raw or roasted first, tasted too vegetal or sweet. **Upshot:** We preferred the clean flavor of stock made with no vegetables.

TEST 3: EVALUATE SIMMERING TIME

We simmered identical water-and-bone stocks for 1, 2, 3, and 4 hours, respectively. After chilling overnight, the 1-hour stock was slightly thickened, indicating that it contained only a small amount of mouth-coating gelatin. The 2-, 3-, and 4-hour stocks, on the other hand, contained enough gelatin to set up like Jell-O—the hallmark of a good stock—and the longer-cooked stocks tasted no better than the 2-hour version. **Upshot:** It only made sense to opt for a 2-hour cooking time.



A 2-hour simmer produces a rich, gelatinous stock.

TURKEY BARLEY SOUP

SERVES 6

If you don't have turkey fat, you can substitute unsalted butter.

- 2 tablespoons turkey fat
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- Pinch red pepper flakes
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 8 cups Simple Turkey Stock
- ¾ cup pearled barley
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 celery ribs, cut into ¼-inch pieces
- 2 carrots, peeled and cut into ¼-inch pieces
- 2 cups shredded turkey
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- Salt and pepper

1. Heat fat in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, thyme, and pepper flakes and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened and translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add stock, barley, and bay leaf; increase heat to high and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, partially covered, for 15 minutes.

2. Add celery and carrots and simmer, partially covered, until vegetables start to soften, about 15 minutes.

3. Add turkey and cook until barley and vegetables are tender, about 10 minutes. Off heat, stir in lemon juice and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

TURKEY ORZO SOUP WITH KALE AND CHICKPEAS

SERVES 6

If you don't have turkey fat, you can substitute extra-virgin olive oil. Our favorite canned chickpeas are Pastene Chick Peas.

- 2 tablespoons turkey fat
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- Pinch red pepper flakes
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon ground coriander
- 8 cups Simple Turkey Stock
- 3 ounces curly kale, stemmed and cut into ½-inch pieces (6 cups)
- 1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas, rinsed
- ½ cup orzo
- 2 cups shredded turkey
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- Salt and pepper

1. Heat fat in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and pepper flakes and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened and translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic, cumin, and coriander and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add stock; increase heat to high and bring to simmer. Stir in kale, chickpeas, and orzo; reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, partially covered, for 10 minutes.

2. Add turkey and cook until orzo and kale are tender, about 2 minutes. Off heat, stir in lemon juice and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

Chinese Pork Dumplings

A plateful of juicy dumplings can lift you from the pits of despair. We wanted a recipe that didn't put you there in the first place.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Chinese dumplings are like carefully wrapped gifts: juicy, deeply seasoned pork encased in soft, slightly stretchy dough. Boiled, they are delicately chewy; pan-fried, they are crisp on one side. But whether found in a restaurant or in a supermarket, they're rarely bad. Unfortunately, they're rarely great. I've always wanted to make my own so I could stock my freezer with high-quality dumplings.

As I cooked and ate my way through several versions, I realized that though there are few truly bad dumplings, there are bad dumpling recipes. Some made too much filling for the amount of dough or vice versa. Some doughs were dry, so the dumplings wouldn't seal, while others were wet and stuck to my fingers. I wanted just enough supple-but-not-sticky dough; a juicy, cohesive filling; and a shaping technique that made me feel capable—not clumsy.

Premade dumpling wrappers are thin and lack the stretch and chew of the homemade kind. Happily, you need only two ingredients to make your own: all-purpose flour and boiling water. Boiling water hydrates the starch in flour faster than cold water does, making a dough that is moist but not sticky, and it makes the gluten (the network of proteins that gives the dough structure) looser and less prone to snapping back. I buzzed 1 cup of boiling water and 12½ ounces of all-purpose flour (measuring the flour by weight guarantees the proper ratio) in a food processor, and the dough came together in less than a minute. Then I kneaded it briefly until it was smooth, wrapped it in plastic wrap, and set it aside to rest.

For the filling, I started with 12 ounces of ground pork, saving myself the traditional step of finely chopping a fatty cut such as pork shoulder. I seasoned it with soy sauce, grated ginger, scallions, sesame oil, hoisin sauce, white pepper, and sherry, plus a tablespoon of vegetable oil to compensate for the ground pork's relative leanness. For the vegetable component, I chopped cabbage in the food processor. I then



To fit 20 dumplings in the skillet, fan 16 dumplings in a spiral pattern around the skillet's edge and place the other four in the center.

salted it to draw off excess moisture and squeezed it dry before gently mixing it with the seasoned meat. Next I wrapped and pan-fried a test batch to check the flavor and texture of the filling (more on the wrapping later). The dumplings tasted good, but instead of being cohesive, the filling was crumbly.

I had mixed the filling gently to avoid releasing excess myosin, the sticky meat protein responsible for sausage's springy texture. But I noticed that some dumpling recipes call for vigorously mixing the filling, so I wondered if a little myosin development might actually help. This time I pulsed the pork and seasonings in the food processor until the mixture was slightly sticky, added the cabbage and scallions, buzzed it a bit more, and cooked another batch. Now the filling was on point: juicy and well seasoned, with the perfect balance of tenderness and cohesion.

I knew I'd have to carefully portion the dough and the filling to have the perfect amount of each for 40 dumplings, but trying to eyeball either was maddening. I divided the dough into quarters and divided each quarter into tenths. I then did the same with the filling (see "Perfect Portions of Filling"). Using

my hand and a rolling pin, I flattened one dough piece into a round, placed about 1 tablespoon of filling in its center, and contemplated how best to close it. The simplest way would be to fold the dough over the filling to form a half-circle. But the classic approach is to pleat the wrapper so that the dumpling curves and is stable enough to stand up and brown on its flat side. To do it, you gather one side of the wrapper into a series of pleats and seal them to the other side, which remains flat. The motion becomes muscle memory if you do it often enough, but otherwise it's tricky to execute. I came up with a simpler two-pleat method that achieved the appearance and functionality of a crescent (see "Shaping the Dumplings").

I brushed vegetable oil over the surface of a cold nonstick skillet (in a hot pan, oil would pool and dumplings with no oil under them wouldn't crisp) and snugly arranged 20 dumplings before turning on the heat. When the bottoms started to brown, I added water and a lid, lowered the heat, and let the dumplings steam. Minutes later, I removed the lid and cranked the heat so that the remaining water would evaporate and the bottoms would crisp. As the finished dumplings cooled, I tipped them onto their sides to preserve their crispy bases.

The results were ideal—a flavorful, juicy, cohesive filling tucked inside a soft, slightly chewy wrapper—and the method was user-friendly and fun. No more takeout for me; from now on, I'll be making dumplings and stockpiling them in my freezer.

Cooking Fresh and Frozen

The amounts of oil and water and the size of the skillet will change depending on the number of dumplings and whether they are fresh or frozen.



20 fresh	12"	1 tablespoon	½ cup
20 frozen	12"	1 tablespoon	⅔ cup
10 fresh	10"	2 teaspoons	⅓ cup
10 frozen	10"	2 teaspoons	½ cup



Watch Andrea Shape Them
A step-by-step video is available at CookIllustrated.com/dec17

STEP BY STEP | SHAPING THE DUMPLINGS



1. Place scant 1 tablespoon filling in center of wrapper.



2. Seal top and bottom edges to form 1½-inch-wide seam.



3. Bring far left corner to center of seam and pinch together.



4. Pinch rest of left side to seal. Repeat process on right side.



5. Gently press dumpling into crescent shape.

CHINESE PORK DUMPLINGS

MAKES 40 DUMPLINGS

For dough that has the right moisture level, we strongly recommend weighing the flour. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a full kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount. To ensure that the dumplings seal completely, use minimal flour when kneading, rolling, and shaping so that the dough remains slightly tacky. Keep all the dough covered with a damp towel except when rolling and shaping. There is no need to cover the shaped dumplings. A shorter, smaller-diameter rolling pin works well here, but a conventional pin will also work.

Dough

- 2½ cups (12½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 cup boiling water

Filling

- 5 cups 1-inch napa cabbage pieces
- Salt
- 12 ounces ground pork
- 1½ tablespoons soy sauce, plus extra for dipping
- 1½ tablespoons toasted sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, plus 2 tablespoons for pan-frying (optional)
- 1 tablespoon Chinese rice wine or dry sherry
- 1 tablespoon hoisin sauce
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- ¼ teaspoon ground white pepper
- 4 scallions, chopped fine

Black or rice vinegar
Chili oil

1. FOR THE DOUGH: Place flour in food processor. With processor running, add boiling water. Continue to process until dough forms ball and clears sides of bowl, 30 to 45 seconds longer. Transfer dough to counter and knead until smooth, 2 to 3 minutes. Wrap dough in plastic wrap and let rest for 30 minutes.

2. FOR THE FILLING: While dough rests, scrape any excess dough from now-empty processor bowl and blade. Pulse cabbage in processor until finely

chopped, 8 to 10 pulses. Transfer cabbage to medium bowl and stir in ½ teaspoon salt; let sit for 10 minutes. Using your hands, squeeze excess moisture from cabbage. Transfer cabbage to small bowl and set aside.

3. Pulse pork, soy sauce, sesame oil, 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, rice wine, hoisin, ginger, pepper, and ½ teaspoon salt in now-empty food processor until blended and slightly sticky, about 10 pulses. Scatter cabbage over pork mixture. Add scallions and pulse until vegetables are evenly distributed, about 8 pulses. Transfer pork mixture to small bowl and, using rubber spatula, smooth surface. Cover with plastic and refrigerate.

4. Line 2 rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Dust lightly with flour and set aside. Unwrap dough and transfer to counter. Roll dough into 12-inch cylinder and cut cylinder into 4 equal pieces. Set 3 pieces aside and cover with plastic. Roll remaining piece into 8-inch cylinder. Cut cylinder in half and cut each half into 5 equal pieces. Place dough pieces on 1 cut side on lightly floured counter and lightly dust with flour. Using palm of your hand, press each dough piece into 2-inch disk. Cover disks with damp towel.

5. Roll 1 disk into 3½-inch round (wrappers needn't be perfectly round) and re-cover disk with damp towel. Repeat with remaining disks. (Do not overlap disks.)

6. Using rubber spatula, mark filling with cross to divide into 4 equal portions. Transfer 1 portion to small bowl and refrigerate remaining filling. Working with 1 wrapper at a time (keep remaining wrappers covered), place scant 1 tablespoon filling in center of wrapper. Brush away any flour clinging to surface of wrapper. Lift side of wrapper closest to you and side farthest away and pinch together to form 1½-inch-wide seam in center of dumpling. (When viewed from above, dumpling will have rectangular shape with rounded open ends.) Lift left corner farthest away from you and bring to center of seam. Pinch to seal. Pinch together remaining dough on left side to seal. Repeat pinching on right side. Gently press dumpling into crescent shape and transfer to prepared sheet. Repeat with remaining wrappers and filling in bowl. Repeat dumpling-making process with remaining 3 pieces dough and remaining 3 portions filling.

7A. TO PAN-FRY: Brush 12-inch nonstick skillet with 1 tablespoon vegetable oil. Evenly space 16 dumplings, flat sides down, around edge of skillet and place four in center. Cook over medium heat until bottoms begin to turn spotty brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Off heat, carefully add ½ cup water (water will sputter). Return skillet to heat and bring water to boil. Cover and reduce heat to medium-low. Cook for 6 minutes. Uncover, increase heat to medium-high, and cook until water has evaporated and bottoms of dumplings are crispy and browned, 1 to 3 minutes. Transfer dumplings to platter, crispy sides up. (To cook second batch of dumplings, let skillet cool for 10 minutes. Rinse skillet under cool water and wipe dry with paper towels. Repeat cooking process with 1 tablespoon vegetable oil and remaining dumplings.)

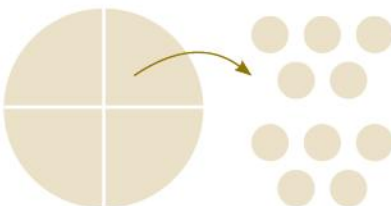
7B. TO BOIL: Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large Dutch oven over high heat. Add 20 dumplings, a few at a time, stirring gently to prevent them from sticking. Return to simmer, adjusting heat as necessary to maintain simmer. Cook dumplings for 7 minutes. Drain well.

8. Serve dumplings hot, passing vinegar, chili oil, and extra soy sauce separately for dipping.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Freeze uncooked dumplings on rimmed baking sheet until solid. Transfer to zipper-lock bag and freeze for up to 1 month. To pan-fry, increase water to ⅔ cup and covered cooking time to 8 minutes. To boil, increase cooking time to 8 minutes.

Perfect Portions of Filling

Rather than try to visualize mounds of filling as 40 equal portions, we devised this technique.



Mark the filling with a cross to divide it into four portions.

Working with one portion at a time, divide each into tenths (approximately 1 scant tablespoon each).

Better Holiday Sugar Cookies

Most roll-and-cut cookies force you to battle rock-hard dough and then rarely even taste good. We wanted it all: ease, good looks, and a crisp, buttery crumb.

➤ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ⇐

Are roll-and-cut sugar cookies a fun, festive project? Not in my kitchen: They've always been a maddening chore with nothing but floury, shapeless disappointments to show for the effort. Most recipes require you to haul out a stand mixer to cream sugar and softened butter before mixing in the remaining ingredients and then to refrigerate the dough before rolling, cutting, and baking. The lump of dough is always stiff after chilling, so it's challenging to roll. Many of the cookies puff during baking, which leaves them uneven or with indistinct outlines. What's more, they're often hard and dense rather than simply sturdy.

I wanted to turn things around with a dough that would be easy—maybe even fun—to work with. It would be firm enough to shape with cookie cutters and to carry frosting and other decorations after baking. The cookies would bake up crisp and flat, with sharp edges, and they would have a satisfying, buttery flavor.

The Way the Cookie Crumbles

I began with a recipe that had decent flavor. It called for beating 2 sticks of softened butter with 1 cup of sugar; mixing in 2½ cups of flour, an egg, salt, and vanilla; and then chilling the dough before rolling, cutting, and baking. The resulting cookies were buttery, with just enough sweetness. However, they had a slightly granular texture and a tendency to puff in the oven, which left them bumpy and uneven.

Graininess can come from an excess of sugar, but reducing the sugar by ⅓ cup upset the flavor. Instead, I tried replacing the granulated sugar with confectioners' sugar, but this turned the cookies somewhat chalky and hard rather than crisp. However, superfine sugar, which is granulated sugar that has been ground to a fine—but not powdery—consistency, was just the ticket: fine enough to smooth out any graininess but coarse enough to maintain a slightly open crumb. And happily, superfine sugar is a cinch to make by pulverizing granulated sugar in a food processor.

To address the cookies' puffiness, I examined the creaming step, the goal of which is to incorporate



A touch of almond extract, added along with the usual vanilla, makes these cookies taste more interesting without giving them overt almond flavor.

air. It makes sense for a soft, cakey cookie, but was it detrimental to one that I wanted to be flat and even?

To find out, I made another batch in which I briefly mixed the sugar and butter until just combined. Sure enough, these cookies baked up entirely flat.

But they were now a little dense, begging for a tiny amount of air. I turned to baking soda and baking powder; ¼ teaspoon of each produced flat cookies with a crisp yet sturdy texture.

Rolling in Dough

Now it was time to address my other issue with roll-and-cut cookies—the need to chill the dough before rolling it, which inevitably leads to strong-arming a cold, hardened lump into submission. Refrigerating the dough for a shorter time wasn't an option, since it wouldn't have time to chill evenly. And rolling the dough straightaway was out of the question because I was using softened butter—a must for easy combining in a stand

mixer—which produced a soft dough that would cling to a rolling pin. I needed a dough made with cold butter.

That meant I would need to “plasticize” the butter, or soften it while keeping it cold, so that my dough would roll out without ripping or sticking. Croissant bakers plasticize blocks of butter by pounding them with a rolling pin. I certainly didn't want to beat butter by hand, but I realized that the solution was already on the counter: the food processor. Unlike the paddle of a stand mixer, which would struggle to soften cold butter quickly, the fast, ultrasharp blades of a food processor could turn it malleable.

I processed the sugar and then added chunks of cold butter. Thirty seconds later, the two had combined into a smooth paste. I whizzed in the egg and vanilla, plus a smidge of almond extract for an unidentifiable flavor boost, and then added the dry ingredients. The dough was pliable but not soft or sticky.

I halved the dough and placed each portion between sheets of parchment paper to help prevent sticking. It rolled out like a dream. To ensure easy cutting and clean, well-defined edges, I still needed to chill the dough, so I placed it in the refrigerator for 1½ hours. By eliminating the need to bring the butter to room temperature, skipping creaming, and making the dough easy to roll, I'd shaved off some time—and plenty of effort—from the recipe.

I'd been baking the cookies at 350 degrees on the middle rack, but the edges of the cookies around the perimeter of the sheet were dark brown

Cookie-Sheet Workaround

The lack of a rim on a cookie sheet (versus a rimmed baking sheet) leads to better air circulation, resulting in more even baking across the sheet and on the tops and bottoms of the cookies. No cookie sheet? No problem. Simply flip over your rimmed baking sheet.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

by the time the center ones were golden. The fix was three-pronged. One: I reduced the oven temperature to 300 degrees; more-gradual baking evened the color. Two: I lowered the oven rack, so the cookies baked from the bottom up. This meant that they browned nicely on their undersides (for hidden flavor) while remaining lighter on top. Three: I swapped the rimmed baking sheet I had been using for a rimless cookie sheet. This promoted air circulation, so the cookies baked more evenly (see “Cookie-Sheet Workaround”).

A Royal Finish

All that remained was to come up with an icing that tasted good and firmed up nicely. It was the perfect opportunity for a classic royal icing. Named for its use on Queen Victoria’s cake at her marriage to Prince Albert in 1840, this mix of whipped egg whites and sugar sets into a dry, matte surface. I added vanilla and salt to my version. Piped or poured onto the cooled cookies, it was a joyful finish to the best—and easiest—cut-out cookies I’d ever made.

EASY HOLIDAY SUGAR COOKIES

MAKES ABOUT FORTY 2½-INCH COOKIES

For the dough to have the proper consistency when rolling, make sure to use cold butter directly from the refrigerator. In step 3, use a rolling pin and a combination of rolling and a pushing or smearing motion to form the soft dough into an oval. A rimless cookie sheet helps achieve evenly baked cookies; if you do not have one, use an overturned rimmed baking sheet. Dough scraps can be combined and rerolled once, though the cookies will be slightly less tender. If desired, stir 1 or 2 drops of food coloring into the icing. For a pourable icing, whisk in milk, 1 teaspoon at a time, until the desired consistency is reached. You can also decorate the shapes with sanding sugar or sprinkles before baking. For our free recipe for Easy Holiday Cocoa Sugar Cookies, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec17.

TECHNIQUE





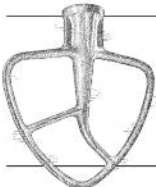
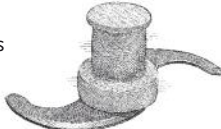

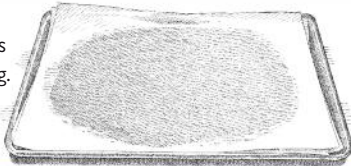
LOOSEN PARCHMENT SO COOKIES DON'T STICK

After chilling the rolled-out dough between sheets of parchment paper, we peel back and replace the top sheet of parchment before flipping the dough over. The loosened parchment won't stick to the undersides of the cut-out cookie shapes when we transfer them to a baking sheet.



Revamping Sugar Cookies

A number of updates to the usual approach resulted in better, easier cookies.

Old Way	New Way
 <p>65° SOFTENED BUTTER means dough must be chilled before rolling.</p>	 <p>40° COLD BUTTER means dough is firm enough to be rolled immediately after mixing.</p>
 <p>GRANULATED SUGAR produces slightly grainy crumb.</p>	 <p>SUPERFINE SUGAR, made by processing granulated sugar in food processor, smooths out graininess but still allows for open crumb.</p>
 <p>BLUNT PADDLE OF STAND MIXER requires room-temperature ingredients.</p>	 <p>SHARP BLADES OF FOOD PROCESSOR rapidly whiz cold ingredients into malleable dough.</p>
 <p>CHILL, THEN ROLL method firms dough before rolling.</p>	 <p>ROLL, THEN CHILL method eliminates need to battle cold, hard lump of dough into thin sheet.</p>

Cookies

- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon almond extract
- 2½ cups (12½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¼ teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 cup (7 ounces) granulated sugar
- 16 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled

Royal Icing

- 2⅔ cups (10⅔ ounces) confectioners' sugar
- 2 large egg whites
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ⅛ teaspoon salt

1. FOR THE COOKIES: Whisk egg, vanilla, salt, and almond extract together in small bowl. Whisk flour, baking powder, and baking soda together in second bowl.

2. Process sugar in food processor until finely ground, about 30 seconds. Add butter and process until uniform mass forms and no large pieces of butter are visible, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add egg mixture and process until smooth and paste-like, about 10 seconds. Add flour mixture and process until no dry flour remains but mixture remains crumbly, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

3. Turn out dough onto counter and knead gently by hand until smooth, about 10 seconds. Divide dough in half. Place 1 piece of dough in center of large sheet of parchment paper and press into 7 by 9-inch oval. Place second large sheet of parchment over dough and roll dough into 10 by 14-inch oval of even ⅛-inch thickness. Transfer dough with parchment

to rimmed baking sheet. Repeat pressing and rolling with second piece of dough, then stack on top of first piece on sheet. Refrigerate until dough is firm, at least 1½ hours (or freeze for 30 minutes). (Rolled dough can be wrapped in plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 5 days.)

4. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Line rimless cookie sheet with parchment. Working with 1 piece of rolled dough, gently peel off top layer of parchment. Replace parchment, loosely covering dough. (Peeling off parchment and returning it will make cutting and removing cookies easier.) Turn over dough and parchment and gently peel off and discard second piece of parchment. Using cookie cutter, cut dough into shapes. Transfer shapes to prepared cookie sheet, spacing them about ½ inch apart. Bake until cookies are lightly and evenly browned around edges, 14 to 17 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking. Let cookies cool on sheet for 5 minutes. Using wide metal spatula, transfer cookies to wire rack and let cool completely. Repeat cutting and baking with remaining dough. (Dough scraps can be patted together, rerolled, and chilled once before cutting and baking.)

5. FOR THE ROYAL ICING: Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip all ingredients on medium-low speed until combined, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and whip until glossy, soft peaks form, 3 to 4 minutes, scraping down bowl as needed.

6. Spread icing onto cooled cookies. Let icing dry completely, about 1½ hours, before serving.

See How It Works

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17



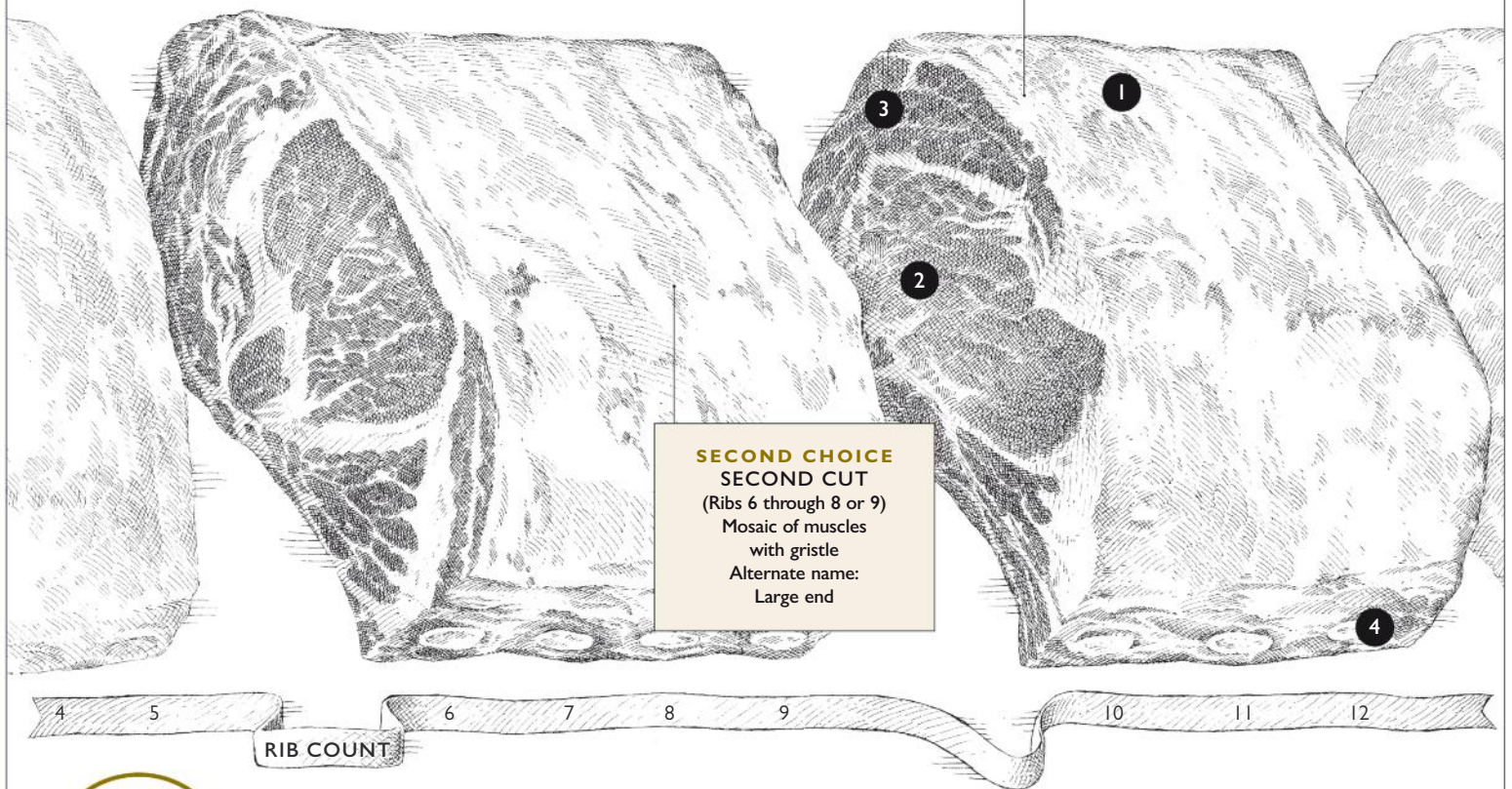
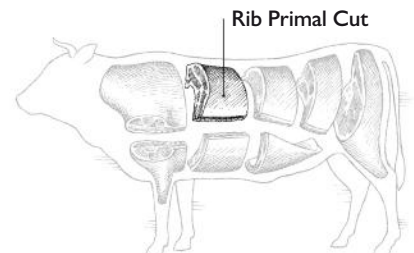
Prime Rib Primer

If you're going to splurge on this premium cut, make sure you're cooking it right. Our guidelines will steer you toward perfection. BY ELIZABETH BOMZE AND KEITH DRESSER

WHAT IS PRIME RIB?

There are 13 beef ribs, numbered in ascending order from the front of the animal to the back. The first five ribs (1 through 5) are the chuck section, the next seven (6 through 12) are the rib section, and the 13th is part of the loin. Ribs 6 through 12 are sold as prime rib. A whole seven-rib roast can weigh between 14 and 22 pounds, so butchers often divide the roast into two smaller roasts called the first cut and the second cut.

OUR FAVORITE FIRST CUT
(Ribs 10 through 12)
Single rib-eye muscle that's uniform and tender
Alternate names:
Loin end, small end



HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?
1 POUND PER PERSON

Anatomy of Prime Rib:

- 1** Fat cap
Thick layer that surrounds top and sides of roast; protects meat; crisps up during cooking
- 2** Eye muscle
Large central portion that is well-marbled with fat; tender because it receives little exercise
- 3** Spinalis dorsi muscle
Also called "rib-eye cap"; surrounds portion of eye muscle; tender and beefy
- 4** Rib bones
Insulate meat, protecting it from overcooking; great for gnawing on

PRIME-GRADE VERSUS CHOICE-GRADE PRIME RIB

Prime is the highest quality grade that the U.S. Department of Agriculture assigns to beef available to consumers. It indicates that the meat is heavily marbled with intramuscular fat (10 to 13 percent), which makes it particularly flavorful and tender. **Choice**, the second-highest grade of beef, is the grade issued to moderately marbled meat.

You can purchase both prime-grade and choice-grade prime rib. Prime-grade prime rib is a premium-quality roast often sold at high-end markets and butchers. Not surprisingly, we've found it more tender and flavorful than choice-grade prime rib, and we think it's worth the high price tag (about 25 percent more than choice prime rib).

WHAT IS MARBLING?

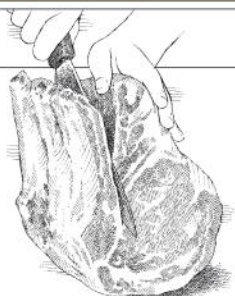
Marbling refers to the desirable streaks of intramuscular fat in the lean muscle and is a primary factor when determining beef's grade. The fat streaks are solid when cold but melt during cooking, enhancing the perception of juiciness and providing mouth-coating lubricity, which makes the meat seem more tender. Heat also causes the fatty acids to oxidize and form new flavor compounds that improve the flavor of meat and make it taste more complex.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOWNE

BEFORE YOU COOK

Cut Meat from Bones

Valuable as they are for cooking and eating, the rib bones inhibit the seasoning and carving of the meat beneath them. To get around this, we cut them off the meat before seasoning it and then tie them back on before roasting. We then remove them again before carving.



➤ Holding meaty lobe in 1 hand and knife in other hand, run blade down length of bones, following contours closely, until meat is separated.



Score Fat Cap

The thick fat cap insulates the meat as it cooks and crisps when exposed to high heat. Scoring (making shallow cross-hatched cuts) helps any seasonings penetrate the meat and encourages rendering.

Season Liberally and Early

Salt seasons and tenderizes the meat and helps it retain moisture during cooking. Given enough time, salt also dries out the meat's surface so that it will brown deeply.

➤ For 7-pound, 3-rib roast, rub 2 tablespoons kosher salt over roast, including side where bones were removed and into fat cap slits, and refrigerate, uncovered, for at least 24 hours or up to 4 days. (Salting for longer than 4 days risks desiccating exterior unless roast is wrapped in plastic wrap.)

SEVEN STEPS TO ROASTING

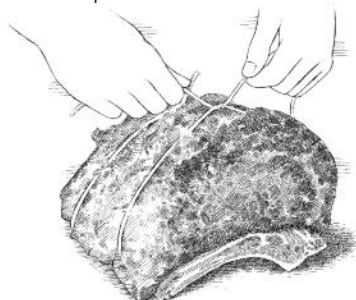
Steakhouses use extreme measures to produce prime rib with well-browned, substantial crusts and rosy, juicy meat from edge to edge—for example, roasting the meat at 180 degrees for most of a day and then blasting the exterior under a high-powered broiler or with a blowtorch. Our simpler method produces equally good results.

1. SEAR IN A SKILLET

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 200 degrees. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over high heat until just smoking. Sear sides and top of roast until browned, 6 to 8 minutes total (do not sear side where roast was cut from bone).

2. TIE IT UP

Place meat back on ribs, so bones fit where they were cut, and let cool for 10 minutes; tie meat to bones with 2 pieces of twine between ribs.



Because the bones conduct heat poorly, they'll insulate the meat as it cooks.

3. RACK IT UP

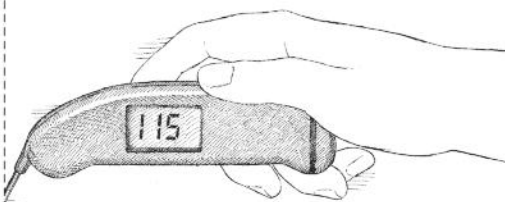
Transfer roast, fat side up, to wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet and season with pepper.

4. ROAST LOW AND SLOW

Roast until meat registers 110 degrees, 3 to 4 hours.

5. CUT THE HEAT

Turn off oven; leave roast in oven, opening door as little as possible, until meat registers about 120 degrees (for rare) or about 125 degrees (for medium-rare), 30 minutes to 1 1/4 hours.



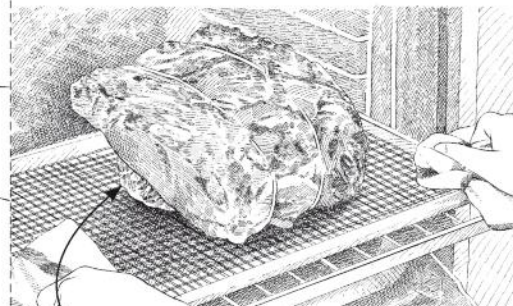
Holding the roast between 110 and 120 degrees activates enzymes that break down the meat's proteins and tenderize the meat.

6. GIVE IT A REST

Remove roast from oven (leave roast on baking sheet), tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for at least 30 minutes or up to 1 1/4 hours.

7. CRISP THE CRUST

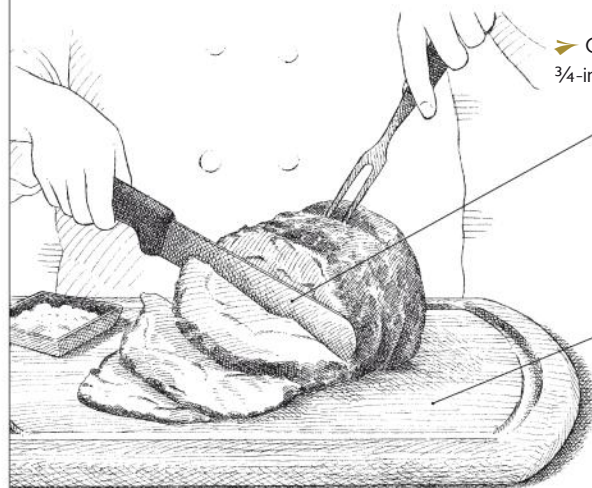
Adjust oven rack about 8 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Remove foil, form it into 3-inch ball, and place it under ribs to elevate fat cap. Broil until top of roast is crisp, 2 to 8 minutes.



Use the foil from tenting to elevate the roast.

CARVE LIKE A PRO

Prime rib is relatively easy to carve, especially if the bones have been removed. Carve only as much as you need. Leaving the rest of the roast intact will help it stay warm and retain flavorful juices.



➤ Cut twine and remove roast from ribs. Carve into 3/4-inch-thick slices and season with coarse sea salt.

Carving (or slicing) knife

Eight-inch chef's knives will be swallowed up by a large roast. Longer carving (also called slicing) knives are thin for smooth slicing.

Our favorite: Victorinox 12" Fibrox Pro Granton Edge Slicing/Carving Knife (\$54.65)

Carving board

Plenty of length and deep trenches that capture shed juices distinguish a carving board from a cutting board.

Our favorite: J.K. Adams Maple Reversible Carving Board (\$69.95)

HOW TO REHEAT LEFTOVERS

The key to reheating a roast is to fully warm it without drying out its exterior or cooking it beyond its original degree of doneness.

1. Heat roast, uncovered, on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet on middle rack in 250-degree oven until meat registers 120 degrees (1 to 1 1/2 hours). Pat surface of roast dry with paper towels.

2. Sear roast on all sides in hot, oiled skillet, 1 to 1 1/2 minutes per side. (Do not sear cut ends.)

More Recipes Our recipes for Mustard-Cream Sauce and Roast Beef Hash are available for free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com/mustardsauce and CooksIllustrated.com/roastbeefhash.

Chorizo and Potato Tacos

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

BY ANDREA GEARY

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

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

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

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

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

Undeterred, I mashed some of the potatoes in



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

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

CHORIZO AND POTATO TACOS

SERVES 4

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

Filling

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

Sauce

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

Tacos

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tip: Make a Double Batch

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



Watch the Process

A step-by-step video is available at CookIllustrated.com/dec17

Go-To Brussels Sprouts

Have 10 minutes? You can make the best Brussels sprouts that you've ever tasted.

BY ANNIE PETITO

It was a memorable kitchen moment: I had been experimenting with cooking Brussels sprouts on the stovetop when I produced a batch unlike any I'd ever had. Over intense, direct heat, the tiny cabbages developed a deeply caramelized crust that was unusually thick and dark, contributing a rich, nutty sweetness. With their attractively browned cut sides juxtaposed against bright green, tender-but-crisp rounded sides, these sprouts were impossible to resist.

Getting there hadn't been easy: Producing even browning from edge to edge and from sprout to sprout was a challenge, as was getting their dense interiors tender before the exteriors burned. I'd started by halving 1 pound of sprouts to create flat surfaces for browning. I heated a bit of oil in a skillet until smoking and then frantically arranged the sprouts cut sides down, later tossing them about. I had to remove the sprouts from the skillet when they started to burn in spots, but unfortunately, they were still crunchy. Adding a little water to a subsequent batch and covering the pan only made them too soft.

Since a hot skillet wasn't working, what about starting with a cold one? I set an oiled pan full of sprouts, cut sides down, over medium-high heat, covered, for 5 minutes. I then removed the lid and continued to cook the sprouts, without stirring, until they were just tender, which took only a few minutes more.

This was real progress. The cold start allowed the sprouts to heat slowly and release their moisture, so they steamed without additional liquid. Plus, I'd eliminated the hectic arrangement in a hot, oil-slicked skillet. That said, the sprouts' bottoms were somewhat dry, and a few burnt patches remained, especially in their very centers.

I'd been using just a small amount of oil. Would more oil help? Sure enough, a full 5 tablespoons worked wonders. As the sprouts heated, their tightly packed leaves separated and expelled moisture (a requirement for them to get hot enough to brown). This created space for oil to be trapped in the nooks and crannies and to spread from edge to edge for even contact with the skillet. Some oil was also absorbed by pores in the browned leaves rather than just sitting on the surface. The upshot? Gorgeously, evenly browned sprouts that weren't greasy. Rather, they took on a satisfying richness that sprouts typically lack.

Another advantage of this approach was that it was easier and less messy to arrange the sprouts in a dry skillet; I just drizzled the oil on top and it seeped underneath. And if any of the sprouts near the edges of the pan didn't brown as quickly as those in the center, I simply used tongs to reconfigure them.



For even seasoning, we finish the dish by stirring salt combined with lemon juice into the sprouts.

Here was that unforgettable moment: These sprouts boasted brilliant green rounded sides and crisp-tender interiors contrasted by nutty-sweet, crusty façades. To balance the sweetness, I stirred in lemon juice and sprinkled Pecorino Romano on top.

SKILLET-ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH LEMON AND PECORINO ROMANO

SERVES 4

Look for Brussels sprouts that are no more than 1½ inches in diameter. Parmesan cheese can be substituted for the Pecorino, if desired. Our recipes for Skillet-Roasted Brussels Sprouts with Chile, Peanuts, and Mint; with Gochujang and Sesame Seeds; and with Mustard and Brown Sugar are available for free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17.

- 1 pound small (1 to 1½ inches in diameter) Brussels sprouts, trimmed and halved
- 5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup shredded Pecorino Romano cheese

1. Arrange Brussels sprouts in single layer, cut sides down, in 12-inch nonstick skillet. Drizzle oil evenly

over sprouts. Cover skillet, place over medium-high heat, and cook until sprouts are bright green and cut sides have started to brown, about 5 minutes.

2. Uncover and continue to cook until cut sides of sprouts are deeply and evenly browned and paring knife slides in with little to no resistance, 2 to 3 minutes longer, adjusting heat and moving sprouts as necessary to prevent them from overbrowning. While sprouts cook, combine lemon juice and ¼ teaspoon salt in small bowl.

3. Off heat, add lemon juice mixture to skillet and stir to evenly coat sprouts. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer sprouts to large plate, sprinkle with Pecorino, and serve.

SKILLET-ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH CIDER VINEGAR AND HONEY

Substitute 2 teaspoons cider vinegar, 2 teaspoons honey, and ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes for lemon juice and omit pepper and Pecorino.

SKILLET-ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH MAPLE SYRUP AND SMOKED ALMONDS

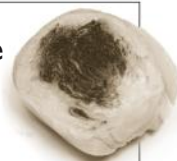
Omit pepper. Substitute 1 tablespoon maple syrup and 1 tablespoon sherry vinegar for lemon juice and ¼ cup smoked almonds, chopped fine, for Pecorino.

SKILLET-ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH POMEGRANATE AND PISTACHIOS

Substitute 1 tablespoon pomegranate molasses and ½ teaspoon ground cumin for lemon juice. Omit pepper. Substitute ¼ cup shelled pistachios, toasted and chopped fine, and 2 tablespoons pomegranate seeds for Pecorino.

Avoiding the Bull's-Eye

When there isn't enough oil in the skillet for even contact, the sprout browns (or even burns) only in the center instead of browning evenly across the cut side. Adding more oil solves the problem.



NOT ENOUGH OIL

See: Sprouts Like No Others

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17



Gingerbread Layer Cake

Leave gingerbread people to the kids. The best vehicle for seriously sophisticated flavor is a tender, moist showstopper cake.

➤ BY ANDREA GEARY ◀

As I get older, I find myself increasingly drawn to the dark side. Before you start to worry for my immortal soul, let me clarify: I'm talking gingerbread. I've made the same gently spiced, fancifully frosted gingerbread cookies every Christmas since I was 12 years old, but I no longer find them all that satisfying. What I really crave is dark, moist gingerbread cake, the kind with an intriguing hint of bitterness and a peppery finish. Unfortunately, it's usually a homely, unadorned square or loaf, and it might even be a bit sunken and damp. Such rusticity, no matter how delicious, seems out of place on a fancy holiday table.

But if I could transform humble gingerbread into a stately layer cake, I'd have a dessert to satisfy both my sense of occasion and my desire for complex ginger flavor. Ideally, it would deliver all the dark moistness and spicy punch of traditional gingerbread but in a more sophisticated package.

Feel the Burn

I started with a recipe for a regal-looking four-layer cake that contained both molasses and stout, which I hoped would provide a touch of bitterness and a dramatically dark crumb. The other attraction? It looked really easy to make.

I combined the molasses and stout and stirred in some baking soda, a traditional step that neutralizes acidic ingredients and seems to allow ginger flavor to shine through. (At least that's what my tasters concluded when I did a side-by-side test with a cake in which I'd added the baking soda to the dry ingredients instead.) Next, I whisked in eggs, vegetable oil, and both brown and granulated sugars. Then I stirred in the other dry ingredients: flour, ginger and other ground spices, baking powder, and salt. I divided the batter between two 8-inch round cake pans and baked them.

The stout and molasses produced a beautiful dark crumb with great depth, but the cake lacked



We pack in plenty of ground ginger along with the freshly grated kind and then add flavorful sparkle with a garnish of chopped crystallized ginger.

a gingery zing despite containing 2 tablespoons of ground ginger. Also, it was overly moist at the center, which made splitting each layer tricky.

For my next batch, I ruthlessly stripped out all the extraneous spices—cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and cardamom—so the ginger could be the sole focus. I augmented the fiery ground ginger with 1 tablespoon of the sweet and spicy grated fresh kind. And yet the ginger flavor was still not as intense as I wanted it to be. In fact, this cake was heading toward downright boring. I doubled the fresh ginger and added back a bit of cinnamon—barely detectable but enough to support the ginger.

And how better to increase pepperiness than to add actual pepper? I opted for white pepper, which is made by soaking fully ripened black peppercorns in water to ferment before removing their outer seed coats. Although stripping the seed coats removes many of the volatile oils and aroma compounds responsible for pepper's heat, the fermentation period gives white pepper an earthy, floral flavor. I also added a pinch of sinus-clearing cayenne.

Now the flavor was just where I wanted it. But the cake was still so sticky that I couldn't picture splitting it successfully. Also, I had objections to a couple of ingredients.

Smart Subs

Brown sugar is just molasses mixed with granulated sugar, so did this recipe really require all three? I took out the brown sugar and increased the granulated, and I got the same flavor with one less ingredient.

Now, about that stout. I wondered if there was anything that could do the same job without requiring (for me, at least) a trip to the liquor store. As it happens, I'm a coffee drinker, and coffee ticked both the "dark color" and "bitter edge" boxes and supplied a different but equally likeable flavor.

But unfortunately the cake was still overly moist and sticky. The batter was quite loose, so I could fix the excess moisture problem by cutting back on the molasses or coffee or adding a bit more flour. But both strategies would lighten the color and dull the flavor. Instead, I added a conventional ingredient that's unconventional in gingerbread: cocoa powder. Cocoa contains a high proportion of absorbent starch. Just ¼ cup of it soaked up the cake's excess moisture, so the crumb

was no longer objectionably sticky. The cocoa also deepened the color and flavor without making the cake taste chocolaty. As a bonus, it made the crumb more tender (see "Cocoa Powder Packs a Punch").

Now the cake layers were less sticky, but the prospect of splitting them to make my coveted four-layer cake remained daunting. Well, I thought, if I wanted to end up with four layers, why couldn't I

Cocoa Powder Packs a Punch

Just ¼ cup of cocoa powder offers multiple benefits to our Gingerbread Layer Cake, all without making it taste discernibly chocolaty.

- Its bitterness provides complexity and helps balance the sugar's sweetness.
- Its superabsorbent starch soaks up excess moisture from the molasses and coffee.
- It dilutes the gluten in the mix, making a more tender cake.
- It deepens the color of the crumb.



Andrea Bakes the Cake

A step-by-step video is available at CookIllustrated.com/dec17

just bake them that way? It was a tiny bit more work to bake four layers in two batches, but because the slimmer layers baked and cooled more quickly than two thicker ones, the whole process clocked in about 30 minutes faster. (See “A Faster, Better Route to Four Layers.”) And because they set up faster, the thinner cakes didn’t have a chance to dome (caused by the outside setting faster than the middle), so I ended up with nice flat layers. Accuse me of splitting hairs, but I’ll tell you what I’m not doing: splitting layers.

Fearless Frosting

As for frosting, the usual cream cheese frosting seemed too ordinary. I seized the opportunity to try out an old-fashioned (and frankly odd-sounding) recipe: ermine frosting. You cook flour, cornstarch, milk, and sugar in a pot until the mixture is thick. When it cools to a gel, you whip it with soft butter and a bit of vanilla. I was skeptical, but devotees described it as fluffy, creamy, and not too sweet. I gave it a try, finding that the cooled gel, with its gray, translucent cast, didn’t look promising. Things didn’t improve when I mixed the gel into the butter (which I had beaten in a stand mixer until fluffy), as the mixture appeared curdled. But with continued whipping, it formed one of the lushest, silkiest frostings I had ever seen (see “Three Stages of Ermine Frosting”). Its simple flavor was the perfect complement to my spicy cake.

I sprinkled chopped crystallized ginger along the top edge of the cake for flavor and sparkle, and with that, my holiday gingerbread revamp was complete.

GINGERBREAD LAYER CAKE

SERVES 12 TO 16

Transferring the milk mixture to a wide bowl will ensure that it cools within 2 hours. A rasp-style grater makes quick work of grating the ginger. Use a 2-cup liquid measuring cup to portion the cake batter. Baking four thin cake layers two at a time eliminates the need to halve thicker layers. Do not use blackstrap molasses here, as it is too bitter.

Frosting

- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- ¼ cup (1¼ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1½ cups milk
- 24 tablespoons (3 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Cake

- 1¾ cups (8¾ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup (¾ ounce) unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 tablespoons ground ginger
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground white pepper
- ⅙ teaspoon cayenne pepper

TECHNIQUE | A FASTER, BETTER ROUTE TO FOUR LAYERS

Instead of taking the usual approach of painstakingly halving two thick cake rounds horizontally, we came up with a new approach: We simply bake four thin cake layers, two at a time. The slim layers bake and cool more quickly than the thicker ones, so the whole process is about 30 minutes faster. What’s more, the rapid baking ensures that the layers stay flat, with none of the doming caused when the outside edge of the cake bakes faster than the middle.



2 THICK LAYERS HALVED HORIZONTALLY

Thicker layers are difficult to cut evenly, take longer to bake, and tend to dome in the oven.

4 SLIM LAYERS BAKED IN 2 BATCHES OF 2

Slim, even layers bake more quickly, cool faster, and don’t need to be split in half.

- 1 cup brewed coffee
- ¾ cup molasses
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- ¾ cup vegetable oil
- 3 large eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons finely grated fresh ginger
- ¼ cup chopped crystallized ginger (optional)

1. FOR THE FROSTING: Whisk sugar, flour, cornstarch, and salt together in medium saucepan. Slowly whisk in milk until smooth. Cook over medium heat, whisking constantly and scraping corners of saucepan, until mixture is boiling and is very thick, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer milk mixture to wide bowl and let cool completely, about 2 hours.

2. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour two 8-inch round cake pans and line pans with parchment paper. Whisk flour, cocoa, ground ginger, baking powder, cinnamon, salt, pepper, and cayenne together in large bowl. Whisk coffee, molasses, and baking soda in second large bowl until combined. Add sugar, oil, eggs, and fresh ginger to coffee mixture and whisk until smooth.

3. Whisk coffee mixture into flour mixture until smooth. Pour 1⅓ cups batter into each prepared pan. Bake until toothpick inserted in center of cake comes out clean, 12 to 14 minutes. Let cakes cool in pans on wire rack for 10 minutes. Invert cakes onto wire rack and peel off parchment; reinvert cakes. Wipe pans clean with paper towels. Grease and flour pans and line with fresh parchment. Repeat baking and cooling process with remaining batter.

4. Using stand mixer fitted with paddle, beat butter on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Add cooled milk mixture and vanilla; mix on medium speed until combined, scraping down bowl if necessary. Increase speed to medium-high and beat until frosting is light and fluffy, 3 to 5 minutes.

5. Place 1 cake layer on platter or cardboard round. Using offset spatula, spread ¾ cup frosting evenly over top, right to edge of cake. Repeat stacking and frosting with 2 more cake layers and 1½ cups frosting. Place final cake layer on top and spread remaining frosting evenly over top and sides of cake. Garnish top of cake with crystallized ginger, if using. Refrigerate cake until frosting is set, about 30 minutes. (Cake can be refrigerated, covered, for up to 2 days. Let cake come to room temperature before serving.)

TECHNIQUE | THREE STAGES OF ERMINE FROSTING

For this cake, we chose old-fashioned ermine frosting, which deserves a revival. This frosting gets its name from an unlikely source: a weasel with a shiny white coat. It relies on a water-in-oil emulsion for its silky texture. As butter is whipped into a milk-based gel, air is incorporated and the frosting gradually emulsifies (the water in the milk is dispersed as tiny droplets in the butterfat), looking curdled before becoming light and fluffy.



COOL COOKED GEL



COMBINE WITH BUTTER



WHIP UNTIL VELVETY

Tuscan White Bean and Escarole Soup

Acquacotta transforms humble ingredients into a supremely satisfying meal.

BY LAN LAM

Don't let the name *acquacotta*, meaning "cooked water" in Italian, deceive you. In this Tuscan soup, a cousin of the better-known minestrone and *ribbolita*, water, vegetables, beans, and herbs are transformed into a rustic meal when whole eggs or yolks are whisked into the broth before it's ladled over stale bread, which is often first topped with a poached egg.

Though its name references water, many modern recipes for this soup call for broth. No matter which liquid is used, the soup is usually bolstered with *soffritto*: sautéed minced onion, celery, and garlic. From there, recipes vary wildly. To choose between chicken broth and water, I made two batches of *soffritto* and added broth to one and water to the other. I also added fennel, for its anise notes, and bitter escarole, which seems delicate but holds up well when cooked. Canned tomatoes contributed acidity, canned cannellini beans brought heartiness, and a Pecorino rind lent salty savoriness. Tasters preferred the broth-based soup, though it still tasted somewhat lean.

That's because I had yet to add the egg. Most recipes call for stirring raw eggs or yolks directly into the soup, but curdling is always a risk. Would diluting the egg proteins with liquid make it harder for them to link up and form firm clumps when heated? I whisked two yolks into the canning liquid from the beans, which was already pretty viscous; this mixture thickened the broth beautifully.

I sprinkled in lots of parsley and oregano for freshness and, taking a cue from thrifty Italian

cooks, added the sweet fronds from the fennel bulb. Finally, with no stale bread on hand, I toasted a few slices under the broiler and placed each slice in a bowl. Placing a poached egg on the toast before ladling in the soup made a more substantial meal. With a sprinkling of Pecorino and a spritz of lemon juice, this was a remarkably satisfying soup, all the more enjoyable for its frugal provenance.

TUSCAN WHITE BEAN AND ESCAROLE SOUP (ACQUACOTTA)

SERVES 8 TO 10

If escarole is unavailable, you can substitute 8 ounces of kale. We prefer Pecorino Romano's salty flavor, but Parmesan can be substituted, if desired. If your cheese has a rind, slice it off the wedge and add it to the pot with the broth in step 3 (remove it before serving). We like to serve this soup the traditional way, with a poached or soft-cooked egg spooned on top of the toast before the broth is ladled into the bowl.

Soup

- 1 large onion, chopped coarse
- 2 celery ribs, chopped coarse
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 (28-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 8 cups chicken broth
- 1 fennel bulb, 2 tablespoons fronds minced, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 2 (15-ounce) cans cannellini beans, drained with liquid reserved, rinsed
- 1 small head escarole (10 ounces), trimmed and cut into ½-inch pieces (8 cups)
- 2 large egg yolks
- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh oregano
- Grated Pecorino Romano cheese
- Lemon wedges

Toast

- 10 (½-inch-thick) slices thick-crust country bread
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper

1. FOR THE SOUP: Pulse onion, celery, and garlic in food processor until very finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as



Toasted bread makes the soup even heartier.

needed. Transfer onion mixture to Dutch oven. Add tomatoes and their juice to now-empty processor and pulse until tomatoes are finely chopped, 10 to 12 pulses; set aside.

2. Stir oil, ¾ teaspoon salt, and pepper flakes into onion mixture. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until light brown fond begins to form on bottom of pot, 12 to 15 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, increase heat to high, and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture is very thick and rubber spatula leaves distinct trail when dragged across bottom of pot, 9 to 12 minutes.

3. Add broth and fennel bulb to pot and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until fennel begins to soften, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in beans and escarole and cook until fennel is fully tender, about 10 minutes.

4. Whisk egg yolks and reserved bean liquid together in bowl, then stir into soup. Stir in parsley, oregano, and fennel fronds. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

5. FOR THE TOAST: Adjust oven rack about 5 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Place bread on aluminum foil-lined rimmed baking sheet, drizzle with oil, and season with salt and pepper. Broil until bread is deep golden brown.

6. Place 1 slice bread in bottom of each individual bowl. Ladle soup over toasted bread. Serve, passing Pecorino and lemon wedges separately.

Frugal Gourmet

Nothing is wasted in *acquacotta*: Ingredient scraps such as fennel fronds, canned bean liquid, and a Pecorino rind contribute robust flavor and a luxurious texture.

See the Soup Take Shape

A step-by-step video is available at CookIllustrated.com/dec17

Should You Buy a Santoku?

With its petite build and curved tip, this friendly-looking Japanese blade is giving Western-style chef's knives a run for their money. But does it offer something unique?

➤ BY LISA McMANUS ⇐

Santoku knives became an overnight sensation in the United States in the early 2000s, when Rachael Ray declared on TV that she loved her Wüsthof model. Sales shot up, and several knife manufacturers, both Asian and Western, scrambled to create their own versions or promote their models to Americans. The appeal was the friendly shape of the blade: 5 to 7 inches long, with a rounded front edge and a boxier build than the typical chef's knife, which usually stretches between 8 and 10 inches long and has a sleeker profile and a sword-like point. The style was developed for postwar Japanese home cooks as a more versatile alternative to vegetable cleavers—*santoku* reportedly means “three virtues,” which are described variously as “meat, fish, and vegetables,” or “chopping, slicing, and dicing”—and quickly became the country's most popular kitchen knife.

We, too, were fans of the santoku style when we first tested them; many of us still swear by our 2004 winner, the MAC Superior Santoku 6½" (\$74.95). But now that santoku sales in the United States are rivaling those of chef's knives and all major knifemakers are peddling versions, we wanted to recheck the competition. We bought 10 models, priced from \$24.99 to \$199.95, focusing on blades that were at least 6 inches long, the size we previously found most useful. Some knife experts claim that santokus are suited only for cutting softer vegetables and boneless meat, not for thornier kitchen tasks such as breaking down bone-in chicken and hard vegetables. So our question was: Are santoku knives a viable alternative to chef's knives, or are they in fact more specialized?

To answer this question, we put every model



We put each knife through a series of tests to evaluate precision cutting.

through our usual battery of chef's knife tests: mincing fresh herbs, dicing onions, butchering whole raw chickens, and quartering unpeeled butternut squashes. We also threw a ringer into the testing—our favorite chef's knife, the Victorinox Swiss Army Fibrox Pro 8" Chef's Knife (\$39.95)—for comparison. Then, to see if santokus add unique value to a knife collection, we tacked on precision work: cutting carrot matchsticks and slicing semifrozen strip steaks across the grain into slivers. Finally six testers, including three self-described knife novices, chopped onions and rated the knives, including how well each model performed and if it was comfortable and easy to use.

How They Handled

A great kitchen knife almost leaps into your hand, feeling natural, ready to work, and effortless as it moves through food. Some of this is individual preference, but the knife's handle, weight, balance, and blade geometry all contribute to the user experience.

For example, we generally preferred handles that measured no more than 3 inches around at their widest point. Any skinnier or thicker and testers strained to keep a secure grip. Big bumps, curves,

and strongly tapered shapes also forced our hands into specific and uncomfortable positions, and handles made from all metal or smooth plastic slipped if our hands were wet or greasy. Then there was the portion of the blade's spine that meets the handle. If that top edge was sharp, cooks who use a pinch grip—meaning that they gain leverage by choking up over the front of the handle to pinch the blade between their thumb and forefinger—felt the metal digging into their fingers. The bottom line is that the qualities you want in a santoku handle are no different from what you'd want in any knife handle: something that feels substantial but not bulky, is neutrally shaped so that it affords a variety of comfortable grips, and is made from lightly textured materials that offer good purchase.

Cutting-Edge Features

A truly sharp blade is the key to any kitchen knife. And what helps determine the sharpness of that edge is the angle of the bevel—the slim strip on either side of the blade that narrows to form the cutting edge. Over the years, we've found that more-acute angles on the cutting edge make slicing easier, so we checked our blades: Nearly all were the expected 15 degrees, a standard angle for an Asian-style knife (and the angle increasingly found on Western knives such as our favorite chef's knife from Victorinox), but a couple were even narrower—just 10 degrees.

Surprisingly, not all these extra-thin edges felt extra-sharp when cutting. In a few cases, that was because the knives arrived moderately dull or dulled quickly during testing—big drawbacks in our book. But it wasn't until we measured the top edges of all the knives, pinching their spines with a caliper, that we understood why some of the seemingly thin blades also struggled: Our top-ranked knives were all thinner (2 millimeters or less) at the spine than lower-rated models that measured up to 2.6 millimeters. That might sound like a minuscule difference, but knives with narrower spines felt more like razors gliding through food and less like wedges prying it apart. This was especially true when cutting vegetables: Wedge-like blades crushed onions instead of slicing them, causing them to spray juices, and one model with a broader spine (and a duller blade) got stuck in a butternut squash—twice.

From there, we took a closer look at the core traits that distinguish a santoku blade from that of a conventional chef's knife, starting with its most recognizable feature, a turned-down “sheep's foot”

Santoku's Ancestor

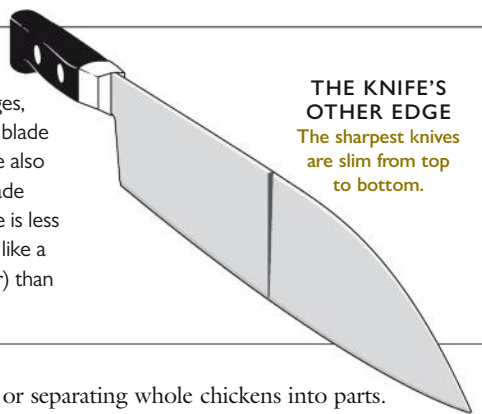
Santoku knives appeared in Japan after World War II as a home cook-friendly alternative to the traditional vegetable cleaver called a *nakiri*. Knifemakers retained the vegetable cleaver blade's height and straight edge but made the santoku less intimidating by rounding down its top front edge.



NAKIRI CLEAVER

The Spine Matters, Too

We've long been fans of knives with ultrathin cutting edges, since the slimmer the edge is, the easier it will be for the blade to slip through food. But while testing santoku knives, we also came to appreciate slim blade spines—the top of the blade opposite the cutting edge. The reason is the same: There is less metal to push through the food, so the blade feels more like a razor gliding through food (dense vegetables in particular) than like a wedge pushing it apart.



THE KNIFE'S OTHER EDGE

The sharpest knives are slim from top to bottom.

tip. This design is simply meant to make the knife look less intimidating and minimize the risk of piercing something unintentionally, but frankly we found it more of a problem than a perk. It puts more metal behind the tip than there is on a typical chef's knife, which meant that we had to push harder when making delicate vertical cuts through onions

or separating whole chickens into parts.

In fact, one of the appealing features of our two favorite knives is that their tips curved less than those of other models, and thus they functioned more like chef's knives.

Next was the traditional straight bottom edge—or lack thereof. Originally, santoku blades were modeled after Japanese vegetable cleavers and as such were conducive to straight-down slicing, not a Western-style rocking motion. But newer models, including most of the ones we tested, feature gently curved bottom edges that allow for a subtle rocking motion, which we found effective and comfortable for mincing herbs. The lone exception was our runner-up, a “rocking santoku,” which features a deeply curved bottom edge that permits a full rocking motion.

Finally, we considered Granton edges. These oval hollows (also called cullens) that run along the sides of the blade supposedly prevent food from sticking to the metal, but we didn't notice any less sticking to the seven Granton-edge blades in our lineup; in fact, two of our top three performers lacked this feature, so we consider it unnecessary.

How They (Com)pared

By the end of testing, we'd found multiple santokus that we'd happily take home, most notably the Misono UX10 Santoku 7.0" (\$179.50). That price makes it an investment, but its lithe, agile frame and neutral handle feel great to hold, and its edge stayed bitingly sharp throughout testing, even after separating chicken joints and breaking down butternut squash. But for less than half the price, you can do very well with the MAC Superior Santoku 6½" (\$74.95). Its wooden handle seemed slightly bulky to testers with smaller hands, but slicing and precision cutting with it felt truly effortless.

What was the answer, then, to our primary question: Is the santoku a viable alternative to a chef's knife? In the end, we decided that it's really a personal choice. A good santoku can certainly mince, slice, and chop as well as any good chef's knife (in fact, some testers even liked the Misono a tad more than our winning chef's knife from Victorinox), and if you prefer a smaller tool, one of our top-ranked santokus might suit you just fine. However, if you're comfortable with the extra length and heft of a chef's knife and would miss the pointed tip, you might want to consider a santoku only as an addition to your arsenal, not as a replacement.

Santoku or Chef's: Which Knife Is for You?

In many applications, a santoku and a traditional chef's knife perform comparably. But there are design differences between the two styles that might make you prefer one to the other. Here's how our two favorites compare.



MISONO UX10 SANTOKU 7.0" (\$179.50)

- Shorter blade with rounded tip feels less intimidating
- Lightweight and particularly agile in hand
- Thinner spine helps blade easily slip through food
- Rounded tip requires user to push harder when slicing vegetables or butchering meat

VICTORINOX SWISS ARMY FIBROX PRO 8" CHEF'S KNIFE (\$39.95)

- Longer blade easily handles any task
- Sharp tip effortlessly slips into food and can nick open packaging
- Bigger blade with sharp tip can feel intimidating to novice cooks

KEY	
GOOD	★★★★
FAIR	★★★
POOR	★

PERFORMANCE

We minced fresh herbs, diced onions, broke down whole raw chickens into parts, and quartered unpeeled butternut squashes. To assess precision, we cut carrots into matchsticks and sliced slightly frozen boneless steak against the grain into uniform slivers (a technique used when preparing beef for Vietnamese *pho*). Knives that sliced smoothly and helped us complete the tasks with crisp cuts and neat results scored highest. We also assessed the sharpness of each knife before and after testing by slicing sheets of copy paper; blades that started sharp and stayed that way rated highest.

EASE OF USE

Throughout testing we rated the knives on how comfortable and easy they were to hold and use, evaluating the handle shape, spine sharpness (if we used a pinch grip), weight, and balance of the blade. Six testers of varying heights and handedness, including three proficient with knives and three self-described knife novices, chopped onions and rated the knives. Knives rated higher if most testers found them comfortable and easy to use.

How to Sharpen a Santoku

Since our three favorite santoku knives have a variety of blade angles on their cutting edges, we wondered whether our winning knife sharpener, the electric Chef'sChoice Trizor XV (\$149.99), could sharpen them all. Happily, we discovered that it can; when we uniformly dulled and resharpened their edges, they were as good as new. Note that for knives with an asymmetrical edge, such as our winning santoku from Misono, the owner's manual directs you to use only one side of the machine's paired slots at each stage of honing, confining the sharpening action to that single side of the blade. In the final polishing slot, pass the other side of the blade through once, just to finish it off smoothly. To see step-by-step sharpening photos, go to CooksIllustrated.com/sharpeningsantokus.

▶ See Lisa Cut It Up

A free video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17

TESTING SANTOKU KNIVES

We tested 10 santoku knives and also compared their feel and performance to that of our favorite chef's knife, the Victorinox Swiss Army Fibrox Pro 8" Chef's Knife. We measured the knives' blade length, blade angle, and spine thickness. All knives were purchased online, and prices shown are what we paid. Test results were averaged, and the knives appear below in order of preference.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED		CRITERIA	TESTERS' COMMENTS
MISONO UX10 Santoku 7.0" MODEL: HMI-UXSA-180 PRICE: \$179.50 BLADE ANGLE: Approximately 21°/9° (asymmetrical) BLADE LENGTH: 7 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 1.99 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★★	Our favorite santoku wowed testers of all abilities, who raved that it felt "agile, sharp, and really good in hand." "Solid but light," it made "fine, level cuts" with "great precision and control." This knife features an asymmetrical blade with a 70/30 bevel that the company hand-sharpens specifically for either right- or left-handers.
		EASE OF USE ★★★	
ZWILLING Pro 7" Hollow Edge Rocking Santoku Knife MODEL: 38418-183 PRICE: \$129.99 BLADE ANGLE: 10° BLADE LENGTH: 7 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 2.04 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★★	With a deeply curved cutting edge, this "rocking" santoku permits the full Western rocking motion when chopping and slicing. Its tip is also much less curved than most, which helped it pass through food without resistance, as did its slim spine and very acute 10-degree cutting angle. Its handle was comfortable, if a bit too long for some testers.
		EASE OF USE ★★★½	
MAC Superior Santoku 6½" MODEL: SK-65 PRICE: \$74.95 BLADE ANGLE: 15° BLADE LENGTH: 6.5 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 1.97 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★★	Thanks to its sharp cutting edge and skinny spine, this knife produced razor-thin slices and broke down a whole chicken and cut carrot matchsticks "like butter." The wooden handle felt a hair too thick and bulky to testers with smaller hands, and its blade was on the shorter end of what we prefer.
		EASE OF USE ★★★½	
RECOMMENDED			
KRAMER BY ZWILLING J.A. HENCKELS Euroline Essential Collection 7" Santoku Knife MODEL: 34987-183 PRICE: \$199.95 BLADE ANGLE: 15° BLADE LENGTH: 7 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 2.12 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★★	Heavy, with a wide handle and a tall blade, this knife felt more like a modified chef's knife than a santoku. It was "sharp as get-out," easily breaking down a chicken, but several testers felt that they lacked control grasping such a large handle, especially during butchering when the grip became slippery.
		EASE OF USE ★★	
VICTORINOX SWISS ARMY Fibrox Pro 7" Granton Blade Santoku Knife MODEL: 47529.US2 PRICE: \$54.00 BLADE ANGLE: 15° BLADE LENGTH: 7 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 1.81 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★½	A featherweight, this agile knife felt like the most petite santoku of the lineup, particularly where the textured handle tapered to a too-narrow neck near the blade. Mincing parsley was a pleasure, but the cutting edge felt a bit dull from the beginning, so the knife lost some performance points.
		EASE OF USE ★★½	
RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS			
SHUN Classic 7-in. Hollow-Ground Santoku MODEL: DM0718 PRICE: \$182.00 BLADE ANGLE: 16° BLADE LENGTH: 7 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 2.36 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★	Despite its sturdy, sharp blade, this "blingy" knife felt handle-heavy. Testers complained about the handle's D shape, too. It felt slippery as we cut carrots and onions, knocked into the undersides of our wrists, and was obviously oriented for right-handed cooks. Its spine felt sharp when we used a pinch grip.
		EASE OF USE ★★	
MERCER Culinary Genesis 7" Forged Santoku MODEL: M20707 PRICE: \$39.99 BLADE ANGLE: 15° BLADE LENGTH: 7 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 2.60 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★	While this bargain blade "rocketed" through butternut squash and slid through an onion, its balance felt awkward, and it didn't hold an edge as well as others. It struggled to slice through raw chicken skin, and by the end of testing it had dulled slightly. The grippy, cushioned handle felt secure, but its width made smaller testers' hands splay out uncomfortably, and its spine was too sharp in a pinch grip.
		EASE OF USE ★★	
GLOBAL G-48 7" Santoku Hollow Ground Knife MODEL: G-48 PRICE: \$165.00 BLADE ANGLE: 15° BLADE LENGTH: 7 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 2.10 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★	"It can cut, but it's not comfortable," noted one tester of this sharp blade with a hard metal handle. The spine was sharp, and its tapered neck meant that our hands slid forward toward the blade, taking away a sense of control. Butternut squash proved challenging, but the knife got through.
		EASE OF USE ★½	
WÜSTHOF Classic 7" Santoku, Hollow Edge MODEL: 4183-7 PRICE: \$129.99 BLADE ANGLE: 10° BLADE LENGTH: 7 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 2.47 mm		PERFORMANCE ★★	Despite the ultranarrow angle on each side of the cutting edge, this "light," "agile" knife didn't feel especially sharp. That might be because its spine was nearly 2.5 millimeters wide; it thus took "some force" to dice onion, which sprayed juice into our eyes.
		EASE OF USE ★½	
NOT RECOMMENDED			
OXO Good Grips Pro 6.5" Santoku Knife MODEL: 11162200 PRICE: \$24.99 BLADE ANGLE: 15° BLADE LENGTH: 6.5 in THICKNESS OF SPINE 1 INCH FROM HANDLE: 2.17 mm		PERFORMANCE ★	This knife felt duller, heavier, and more wedge-like than the rest from the get-go, and testers complained that its handle was too long. It stuck in the center of two squashes, leaving us with the dodgy job of gently nudging the blade back out.
		EASE OF USE ★	

The Best Supermarket Turkey

The holidays are no time to gamble on a bird that cooks up dry and bland—or, worse, exhibits off-flavors.

➤ BY KATE SHANNON ⇐

Is there any holiday food more fraught than the turkey? First it hogs the refrigerator, and then it hogs the oven. Never mind the logistics of thawing, seasoning, and roasting. After all that, it often turns out dry and bland. A well-tested recipe and the right equipment go a long way toward a better bird, but there's another variable: The turkey itself matters just as much. To find the best supermarket bird, we purchased eight best-selling turkeys from both national and regional brands. All birds were in the 12- to 14-pound range, which we like for its 10- to 12-serving yield and easy maneuverability. Four were processed without added flavorings or seasonings, and four were treated: one was kosher, which means it was completely covered in salt and rinsed in cold water during processing in accordance with Jewish dietary law, and the other three were injected with salty broths that could also contain other flavorings such as sugar and spices.

We cooked the turkeys according to our recipe for Easier Roast Turkey and Gravy (November/December 2016), which calls for salting the birds for at least 24 hours before roasting. This step seasons the meat and helps it retain moisture while also ensuring crispy skin and good browning. Because the kosher and injected turkeys in our lineup were already treated with salt, we didn't salt those birds. A

For a High-Quality Bird, Check the Ingredient List

Many supermarket turkeys are injected with salty flavored liquid that seasons the meat and changes its protein structure so it holds more water. When phosphates are included, they allow the meat to hold even more water. This type of processing may sound promising—after all, we commonly brine turkey and chicken in the test kitchen to improve flavor and moistness. But we've found that injected birds (these are often referred to as “self-basting”) can contain funky-tasting spices and seasonings. Furthermore, their retained liquid (up to 9.5 percent) gave them a curiously “gummy” and “mushy” texture. We also had reservations about the Empire Kosher bird processed with salt: It was both wet and dry at the same time. For the best holiday bird, avoid those listing anything other than “turkey” on the ingredient list and follow our recipes' instructions for brining or salting.



We tasted 120 pounds of turkey to find the best holiday bird.

panel of 21 tasters evaluated the flavor, texture, and overall appeal of each turkey's light and dark meat.

Surprisingly, half the turkeys disappointed. Tasters complained that the meat tasted “weak and washed out,” or worse, had musty or funky off-flavors, like “canned tuna” or “dirty water.” Turkey is naturally lean, so we expected some of the meat to be a little dry. We didn't expect samples to suffer from the opposite problem. Tasters described some of the slices as “wet” or “gummy,” drawing comparisons to a “dampened washcloth” or a “waterlogged sponge.” But there was good news, too. Four turkeys were “amazingly flavorful,” juicy, and tender. What made these good birds good?

Breed, Feed, and Seasoning

First we looked at breed. Seven of the eight producers confirmed that they sell Broad-Breasted White turkeys or other similar breeds that mature quickly and have an abundance of white meat (the eighth, Butterball, declined to comment). Despite the similarities among the breeds, Professor Michael Lilburn of The Ohio State University's Turkey Center explained that producers work with outside companies to make genetic modifications that fit their specific requirements, so there are bound to be natural differences in flavor, even within the same breed. But other factors were surely also at play.

We next considered the birds' diets. Corn and soybean meal make up the bulk of turkeys' feed, but diets do vary. Michael Hulet, a professor of poultry science at Pennsylvania State University, pointed out that “Commercial diets may [also] contain antibiotics, animal products, and byproducts.” And these components (which are sterilized), he said, “may affect

taste.” Intrigued, we examined our lineup and saw that, according to their labels, only the untreated birds were antibiotic-free and were fed vegetarian diets. There's nothing wrong with an omnivorous bird (wild turkeys eat insects and worms in their natural habitat), but as we learned, bonemeal, feathers, or even blood (such byproducts are sterilized first) can go into the feed of commercially raised turkeys, contributing off-flavors. The producers of the three injected turkeys would not disclose whether their turkeys' diets contained animal products. Nevertheless, we found that birds labeled “vegetarian-fed” and “antibiotic-free” tended to taste better.

The salt-based solutions injected into the turkeys are meant to enhance flavor and moisture. But in fact, all the treated birds in our tasting were rife with texture issues. The kosher bird had a sometimes-dry, sometimes-spongy texture. And the injected birds were still dry or “borderline gummy” and “mushy,” with an unpleasantly “sticky” quality. Although all the turkeys in our lineup were chilled in water (a routine part of processing that results in added moisture), the treated turkeys had 8 to 10 percent added moisture compared with a high of 6 percent for the untreated turkeys.

Fat played heavily into our rankings, too. The untreated turkeys all had far fatter dark meat, ranging from 2.61 to 4.11 percent fat, than the injected birds, which had between 1.50 and 2.71 percent fat. Analysis of the white meat produced similar results. As for the kosher turkey, its fat levels were similar to those of the untreated turkeys, but it had the most retained moisture (10 percent), resulting in a “strangely wet” texture and bland flavor that counteracted any advantages the fat should have provided.

A Better Bird

Any of the untreated, vegetarian-fed turkeys we tasted would be good candidates for your holiday table. All have clean turkey flavor, and we like that you can control the seasoning with these birds. That said, Mary's Free-Range Non-GMO Verified Turkey (\$2.69 per pound) jumped to the head of the pack with “rich,” “robust turkey flavor” and “very tender and juicy” meat. For a less expensive option, we recommend our second-place product, the Plainville Farms Young Turkey (\$1.19 per pound), which features “concentrated” turkey flavor and “moist,” “buttery” meat. Now that's something to be thankful for.

TASTING SUPERMARKET TURKEY

We selected eight top-selling whole turkeys from both national and regional brands. All weighed between 12 and 14 pounds and all were widely available at our local supermarkets at holiday time. Our lineup included four untreated turkeys, one kosher turkey (salted and rinsed according to Jewish dietary law), and three birds that had been injected with flavored broths containing salt, sugar, or other seasonings. We roasted them (skipping the salting step on the kosher and injected birds) and then asked 21 America's Test Kitchen staff members to evaluate the white meat and the dark meat for flavor, texture, and overall appeal. An independent lab measured the fat levels in the white and dark meat; results are reported below as percentages. Age and diet information was obtained from product packaging and manufacturers. Most of the prices listed are what we paid in Boston-area supermarkets. Prices for the Mary's and Diestel turkeys are California retail prices; they're also available online for roughly double the cost. Products appear below in order of preference.

RECOMMENDED



MARY'S Free-Range Non-GMO Verified Turkey

PRICE: \$2.69 per lb (\$34.97 for a 13-lb turkey)
 INGREDIENT: Turkey AGE: 10 to 12 weeks
 PERCENT OF RETAINED LIQUID: Up to 6%
 ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: Yes
 VEGETARIAN-FED: Yes
 FAT IN DARK MEAT: 2.61%
 FAT IN WHITE MEAT: 0.48%
 COMMENTS: "Tastes like what I think turkey should taste like," wrote one happy taster. Our new winner, which is from the same company that produces our winning chickens and heritage turkeys, has relatively high fat levels and is fed a vegetarian diet. As a result, it had "clean," "robust" turkey flavor and a slightly "nutty aftertaste." It had "great texture" and was "very tender and juicy."



PLAINVILLE FARMS Young Turkey

PRICE: \$1.19 per lb (\$15.47 for a 13-lb turkey)
 INGREDIENT: Turkey AGE: 13 weeks
 PERCENT OF RETAINED LIQUID: Less than 6%
 ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: Yes
 VEGETARIAN-FED: Yes
 FAT IN DARK MEAT: 4.11%
 FAT IN WHITE MEAT: 0.46%
 COMMENTS: Our new Best Buy was "amazingly flavorful." Tasters especially liked the "rich, meaty" flavor of the dark meat, which was so good that there was "no need for gravy." Its dark meat had the highest fat level in our lineup and was deemed "firm, juicy, tender." Many noted that it was "just what I want in a turkey." Best of all, it's half the price of our winner.



DIESTEL Turkey Ranch Non-GMO Verified Turkey

PRICE: \$3.49 per lb (\$45.37 for a 13-lb turkey)
 INGREDIENT: Turkey AGE: About 24 weeks
 PERCENT OF RETAINED LIQUID: Up to 3%
 ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: Yes
 VEGETARIAN-FED: Yes
 FAT IN DARK MEAT: 3.58%
 FAT IN WHITE MEAT: 0.78%
 COMMENTS: Raised for six months—the amount of time that heritage birds generally require to grow to full size—this turkey had dark meat with a purplish hue, "very savory" flavor, and "subtle minerality" that reminded us of duck and expensive heritage turkeys. In evaluations of texture, panelists commented that even the white meat was "perfect."



BELL & EVANS Turkey Raised Without Antibiotics

PRICE: \$2.99 per lb (\$38.87 for a 13-lb turkey)
 INGREDIENT: Turkey AGE: 10 to 12 weeks
 PERCENT OF RETAINED LIQUID: Less than 4%
 ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: Yes
 VEGETARIAN-FED: Yes
 FAT IN DARK MEAT: 3.61%
 FAT IN WHITE MEAT: 1.51%
 COMMENTS: "Oh, this is good!" wrote one taster. Our panelists loved the "roasty," "surprisingly flavorful" meat and "nutty aftertaste." This bird also hit the mark with "tender and moist" meat. The white meat had by far the highest fat level of the bunch, and its dark meat was almost purple in color—a sign of older or relatively well-exercised birds.

RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

JENNIE-O Frozen Whole Turkey

PRICE: \$0.69 per lb (\$8.97 for a 13-lb turkey)
 INGREDIENTS: Young turkey containing approximately 9.5% of a solution of turkey broth, salt, sodium phosphate, sugar, flavoring
 AGE: About 12 weeks
 PERCENT OF RETAINED LIQUID: Approximately 9.5%
 ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: No
 VEGETARIAN-FED: No
 FAT IN DARK MEAT: 1.50%
 FAT IN WHITE MEAT: 0.16%
 COMMENTS: The best of the injected birds was a far cry from the untreated turkeys. Given its lack of fat—the lowest in the lineup—tasters unsurprisingly found the white meat "very bland" and wished the dark meat were "a little richer." Some praised its texture, but others found it "almost mushy." A few detected "funky" off-notes.



HONEYSUCKLE WHITE Frozen Young Turkey

PRICE: \$1.16 per lb (\$15.08 for a 13-lb turkey)
 INGREDIENTS: Turkey, broth, salt, sugar, natural flavoring
 AGE: 10 to 13 weeks
 PERCENT OF RETAINED LIQUID: 9.5%
 ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: No
 VEGETARIAN-FED: No
 FAT IN DARK MEAT: 2.71%
 FAT IN WHITE MEAT: 0.49%
 COMMENTS: "Weak" and "generic" were apt descriptions of this bird's flavor. Some also found it "liver-y" and "musty." Its texture also took criticism: Like the Jennie-O bird, the Honeysuckle White turkey contains 9.5 percent absorbed moisture, prompting remarks such as "leaning toward mushy" and "a little waterlogged." The dark meat was a very similar color to the white meat, which may indicate that the birds get little exercise, and it tasted similarly mild as well.



EMPIRE Kosher Young Turkey

PRICE: \$3.29 per lb (\$42.77 for a 13-lb turkey)
 INGREDIENTS: Turkey, water, salt
 AGE: 13 weeks
 PERCENT OF RETAINED LIQUID: Up to 10%
 ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: Yes
 VEGETARIAN-FED: Yes
 FAT IN DARK MEAT: 4.01%
 FAT IN WHITE MEAT: 0.57%
 COMMENTS: The sole kosher bird in our lineup didn't exhibit any of the off-flavors that we detected in the injected birds (perhaps due to its vegetarian diet), but it was still "bland with a touch of generic turkey flavor." It had fairly high fat levels, but it also had the highest retained moisture level, 10 percent. The resulting texture was puzzling. Tasters described it as "too moist and too dry at the same time." As one taster summed up: "doesn't taste like much of anything."



NOT RECOMMENDED

BUTTERBALL Premium Young Turkey

PRICE: \$1.19 per lb (\$15.47 for a 13-lb turkey)
 INGREDIENTS: Whole young turkey, contains up to 8% of a solution of water, salt, spices, and natural flavor
 AGE: Manufacturer would not disclose
 PERCENT OF RETAINED LIQUID: 8%
 ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: Manufacturer would not disclose
 VEGETARIAN-FED: Manufacturer would not disclose
 FAT IN DARK MEAT: 2.61%
 FAT IN WHITE MEAT: 0.47%
 COMMENTS: Although ubiquitous in supermarkets during the holidays, this injected turkey met with strong dislike from our tasters. It had "no meaty flavor" and very noticeable off-notes. Tasters described it as "musty" and "greasy" and noted that it tasted "like fish" or "canned tuna." Although the dark meat was "relatively moist," the white meat was "too dry."



INGREDIENT NOTES

➤ BY STEVE DUNN, ANDREA GEARY, ANDREW JANJIGIAN, LAN LAM & ANNIE PETITO ⇐

Tasting Dry Vermouth

Dry vermouth is a convenient alternative to white wine since it can be substituted in recipes in equal amounts. Like Marsala and sherry, vermouth is wine that's been fortified with a high-proof alcohol (often brandy) that raises its alcohol content and allows it to be stored in the refrigerator for weeks or even months after opening. Dry vermouth is also infused with botanicals, which can include leaves, roots, flowers, seeds, herbs, and spices. It is sometimes aged in barrels, a process that is intended to impart an oaky, vanilla-y quality and can allow harsh flavors or sharp tannins to mellow.

We bought eight nationally available dry vermouths, priced from \$6.99 to \$24.99 for 750-milliliter or 1-liter bottles. After sampling them plain and in place of white wine in Parmesan risotto, we found that they fell into two broad groups. Some were intensely flavored, with lots of warm spice and almost "medicinal" hints of pine and menthol that risked overpowering the milder flavors in the risotto. We preferred products that were "aromatic" and "more interesting" than a run-of-the-mill white wine and that provided background notes in risotto rather than dominating it.

Dolin Dry Vermouth de Chambéry, a French product that has recently become widely available in the United States, earned top marks for its "crisp" acidity and "green notes" of fruit, citrus, and mint. It's the best option for people who want to cook with vermouth and might occasionally drink it as an aperitif or mix it into cocktails. If you use dry vermouth primarily for cooking, our Best Buy, from Gallo in California, was slightly sweeter (but not cloying), with more subtle botanicals. It's also cheaper than the white wines we buy for cooking and will last far longer in the refrigerator. Cheers to that. For the complete tasting results, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec17. —Kate Shannon

RECOMMENDED

DOLIN Dry Vermouth de Chambéry

PRICE: \$14.99 for 750 ml

SOURCE: France

COMMENTS: Tasters loved this versatile French dry vermouth. When tasted plain, it was "crisp" and had notes of fresh fruit, citrus, and mint. It contributed a "distinctive" but measured herbal flavor to risotto. If you'd like to cook with dry vermouth and occasionally drink it plain or in cocktails, buy this bottle.



GALLO Extra Dry Vermouth

PRICE: \$6.99 for 750 ml

SOURCE: California

COMMENTS: Our Best Buy was "sweeter" and had "less fragrant botanicals" than our winner but was still "crisp and fruity" enough for our panel. It earned top marks in risotto, where its "bright," "clean" flavor brought out the savoriness of the chicken broth and Parmesan cheese and didn't taste overly sweet. Best of all, it's less expensive than the dry white wines many of us usually buy for cooking.



MARTINI & ROSSI Extra Dry Vermouth

PRICE: \$8.49 for 750 ml

SOURCE: Italy

COMMENTS: This ubiquitous dry vermouth, which ranked fifth in our tasting, contained a range of flavors when sampled plain. Our panels detected everything from "lemony," "almost tropical" flavors to "lavender" and "potpourri"-like notes. But when we used it to prepare risotto, those assertive flavors mellowed to something more "flat" and "mild."



What to Do with Escarole

A member of the chicory family, escarole can add crispness and personality to plain green salads. Its broad, white-spined, curly-topped leaves start out light at the bottom and darken to a rich green at the top. Unlike frisée, whose leaves should be trimmed of their bitter tips, a head of escarole yields very little waste.

Escarole is also a key player in many Italian soups, including our Tuscan White Bean and Escarole Soup (page 22). Though escarole is less assertive than its cousins Belgian endive and frisée, its bitterness brings complexity to the soup. Also, its resilient leaves turn supple when cooked but don't fall apart, and the base and spine of each leaf add a little texture. Look for heads bristling with sturdy, unblemished leaves. —L.L.



SOUP AND SALAD GREEN

Yogurt Swap in Recipes

These days, grocery stores carry yogurt made not just from cow's milk but from goat's and sheep's milks, too. Since goat's and sheep's milks often have gamy, grassy flavors, we wondered how they would work in recipes calling for ordinary cow's-milk yogurt. We tried whole-milk versions of all three yogurts in Bundt cake, frozen yogurt, and a warm, savory yogurt sauce. In cake, the flavors of the goat's-milk and sheep's-milk yogurts were undetectable, but the sheep's-milk cake seemed slightly richer and more moist, likely due to this yogurt's high fat content (12 grams per cup versus cow's milk's 9 grams and goat's milk's 6 grams). However, in the frozen yogurt and yogurt sauce, tasters found that those funky flavors came through quite clearly. **Bottom line?** If you enjoy the funk of goat's-milk and sheep's-milk yogurts, feel free to use them in recipes calling for ordinary yogurt. Their impact on texture will be minimal, and depending on the dish, their barnyard-y characteristics may come through. —A.P.

Freekeh: "New" Noteworthy Grain

Freekeh, a traditional Middle Eastern grain popular in Mediterranean and North African cuisines, has recently started appearing on restaurant menus and grocery store shelves in the United States.

Freekeh is made from roasted durum wheat that's been harvested while the grains are still young and green. The grains are polished (freekeh is a colloquialization of *farik*, which means "rubbed" in Arabic) and sold whole as well as cracked into smaller pieces. Simmered pasta-style in a large amount of water and then drained, whole freekeh took 45 minutes to cook, while cracked freekeh took about 20 minutes. Once cooked, both styles remained slightly firm and chewy and boasted smoky, nutty, earthy flavors. The freekeh also tasted surprisingly savory:

Though it was cooked in only salted water, many tasters thought it had been simmered in chicken broth.

Freekeh can be substituted for other grains such as wheat berries or farro (try it in our recipes for Wheat Berry Salad with Orange and Scallions and Warm Farro with Cranberries, Pecans, and Herbs, which are available free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com/wheatberrysalad and CooksIllustrated.com/warmfarrosalad). It's also great in soups or hearty stews. —A.J.



WHOLE

Cooks in 45 minutes



CRACKED

Cooks in 20 minutes



Homemade Five-Spice Powder

Five-spice powder is a traditional Chinese seasoning blend with five components that imparts bitterness, sweetness, and pungency to food. We use it in spice rubs, glazes, sauces, and stews. Most Chinese blends include cinnamon, star anise, cloves, fennel, and Sichuan peppercorns, while American-made versions substitute white peppercorns for the Sichuan kind. This blend's impact is even greater when you grind your own from whole spices.

To make your own: Process 1 tablespoon whole cloves, 2½ teaspoons fennel seeds, and 2 teaspoons white peppercorns (or 4 teaspoons Sichuan peppercorns) in spice grinder until finely ground, 20 to 30 seconds. Transfer to small bowl. Process 4 to 6 star anise pods (depending on size) and one 5- to 6-inch cinnamon stick in spice grinder until finely ground, 20 to 30 seconds. Transfer to bowl with other spices and stir to combine. **Yield:** About ¼ cup. —S.D.

Microwave-Fried Shallots, Garlic, and Leeks

We love the bursts of crunch and savory flavor that crispy fried shallots, garlic, and leeks bring when sprinkled over soups, salads, stir-fries, and burgers. But they're easy to overcook. Microwaving them is more foolproof and doesn't require constant stirring. —A.J.

For Shallots: Place 3 shallots, peeled and sliced thin, in medium bowl with ½ cup vegetable oil and microwave at 100 percent power for 5 minutes. Stir and microwave at 100 percent power for 2 more minutes. Repeat stirring and microwaving in 2-minute increments until shallots begin to brown (4 to 6 minutes total), then repeat stirring and microwaving in 30-second increments until shallots are deep golden (30 seconds to 2 minutes total). Using slotted spoon, transfer shallots to paper towel-lined plate; season with salt. Let drain and turn crisp, about 5 minutes, before serving.

For Garlic: In place of shallots, use ½ cup garlic cloves, sliced or minced. After frying, dust garlic with 1 teaspoon confectioners' sugar (to offset any bitterness) before seasoning with salt.

For Leeks: In place of shallots, use 1 leek, white and light green parts only, halved lengthwise, sliced into very thin 2-inch-long strips, washed thoroughly, dried, and tossed with 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour (which accelerates browning).

Buttermilk Powder in Nonbaking Applications

We've long substituted powdered buttermilk for fresh buttermilk in baking recipes, but when we recently tried to use it in nonbaked goods, we ran into problems: It made for watery coleslaw, loose mashed potatoes, and fried chicken with a coating that didn't adhere properly. And curiously, when we added more powder to the same amount of water, the mixture didn't noticeably thicken.

That's because when fresh milk is inoculated with bacteria to create buttermilk, the proteins in the milk form a soft gel that thickens its consistency (some manufacturers also add thickeners). But when buttermilk is dried to make powdered buttermilk, the protein gel is disrupted, so reconstituted buttermilk ends up being thinner than its fresh counterpart.

DIY RECIPE Chocolate-Toffee Bark

For a sweet treat that's great for gifts, we make a buttery, nutty layer of toffee, let it harden, and then coat both sides with chocolate. A greased aluminum foil sling is essential for getting the sticky toffee out of the pan. —Julia Collin Davison

CHOCOLATE-TOFFEE BARK

MAKES ABOUT 1 ½ POUNDS

You will need a thermometer that registers high temperatures for this recipe.

- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup water
- 1 cup (7 ounces) sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 ½ cups pecans or walnuts, toasted and chopped
- 8 ounces semisweet chocolate, chopped coarse



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

2. Heat butter and water in medium saucepan over medium-high heat until butter is melted. Pour sugar and salt into center of saucepan, taking care not to let sugar touch sides of saucepan. Bring mixture to boil and cook, without stirring, until sugar is completely dissolved and syrup is faint golden color and registers 300 degrees, about 10 minutes.

3. Reduce heat to medium-low and continue to cook, gently swirling saucepan, until toffee is amber-colored and registers 325 degrees, 1 to 3 minutes longer. Off heat, stir in ½ cup pecans until incorporated and thoroughly coated.

4. Pour toffee into prepared pan and smooth into even layer with spatula. Refrigerate, uncovered, until toffee has hardened, about 15 minutes.

5. Microwave 4 ounces chocolate in bowl at 50 percent power, stirring occasionally, until melted, about 2 minutes. Pour chocolate over hardened toffee and smooth with spatula, making sure to cover toffee layer evenly and completely. Sprinkle with ½ cup pecans and press lightly to adhere. Refrigerate, uncovered, until chocolate has hardened, about 15 minutes.

6. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Using foil sling, invert toffee onto prepared sheet. Discard foil.

7. Microwave remaining 4 ounces chocolate in bowl at 50 percent power, stirring occasionally, until melted, about 2 minutes. Pour chocolate over toffee and smooth with spatula, making sure to cover toffee layer evenly and completely. Sprinkle with remaining ½ cup pecans and press lightly to adhere. Refrigerate, uncovered, until chocolate has hardened, about 15 minutes.

8. Break bark into rough squares and serve. (Bark can be stored at room temperature for up to 2 weeks.)

There's no way to thicken reconstituted buttermilk, but you can still substitute it for the real thing in coleslaw and mashed potatoes: Decreasing the amount of water by 25 percent while using the full amount of powder recommended on the package will yield the same tangy flavor without introducing a lot of excess moisture. But because the more concentrated formulation isn't actually thicker, it won't help breading cling, so it is unsuitable for fried chicken.

In sum, except in recipes where buttermilk's viscosity is key, such as fried chicken, the powdered kind will work fine as long as you use 25 percent less water than recommended to reconstitute the powder. —A.G.

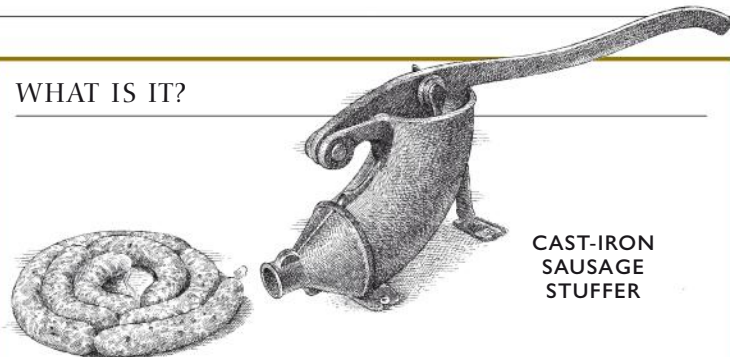


POWDERED BUTTERMILK
It's a sometime thing.

KITCHEN NOTES

➤ BY MIYE BROMBERG, STEVE DUNN, ANDREA GEARY, ANDREW JANJIGIAN, LAN LAM & LISA McMANUS ◀

WHAT IS IT?



CAST-IRON
SAUSAGE
STUFFER

This stout tool looks like an old fireplace bellows, but it's actually a sausage stuffer from the mid- to late 1800s. Made of cast iron, this 8-pound gadget was used to extrude ground sausage meat into casings to form link sausage. The handle would be raised to extract the plunger from the hopper so that meat could be placed inside. A casing would be placed over the extrusion nozzle and the handle pulled down to force the meat from the hopper into the casings.

To test the gadget, I whipped up a quick batch of sweet Italian sausage, loaded the hopper, readied a casing and . . . called for help. The long, unwieldy handle was tough to manage on my own, and I needed a fellow test cook to assist me. I needed both arms to generate enough force to pull the handle. Meanwhile, my helper held the unit steady and regulated the flow of meat into the casing. In the end, the press made fine sausages, but it was cumbersome to use. Later models evolved to include crank handles and gear mechanisms, which more easily and evenly forced the meat through the machine. —S.D.

Why It's Important to Let Cookie Sheets Cool

If you're baking a lot of cookies but have a limited number of cookie sheets, it can be tempting to load more batches onto the sheets before they've fully cooled. We ran a test to see the degree to which placing dough on a hot or merely warm cookie sheet would impact the cookies' spread. We made the dough for our Chewy Sugar Cookies (November/December 2010) and baked three batches. We arranged the first batch on a room-temperature cookie sheet (72 degrees), the second on a sheet that we let cool for 5 minutes (110 degrees), and the third on a hot sheet (172 degrees) that we did not allow to cool at all after removing the previous batch. What did we learn? Cookies baked on the warm sheet spread more than those started on the cool sheet; while not ideal, the cookies did not run into each other. But the cookies baked on the hot sheet spread so much that the cookies fused together.

The takeaway: For the best results, let your cookie sheet cool completely before reusing it. If time is tight, you can get away with letting it cool for as little as 5 minutes. Never reuse a sheet straight from the oven, as its high heat will cause the dough to spread and the cookies to fuse together. —S.D.



COOL SHEET
Best results

WARM SHEET
Not ideal

HOT SHEET
Too much spread

Cleave with Confidence

The tall, relatively heavy blade of a meat cleaver—such as the one on our favorite, the Shun Classic Meat Cleaver (see page 32)—is ideal for hacking up bone-in meat and poultry. But that's not all: The flat side of the blade can be used to smash aromatics, including garlic, ginger, and lemon grass. You can even use a cleaver to transfer chopped food from the cutting board to a cooking vessel. Many cooks are intimidated by cleavers. Here are a few tips for how to use this tool with confidence. —M.B.

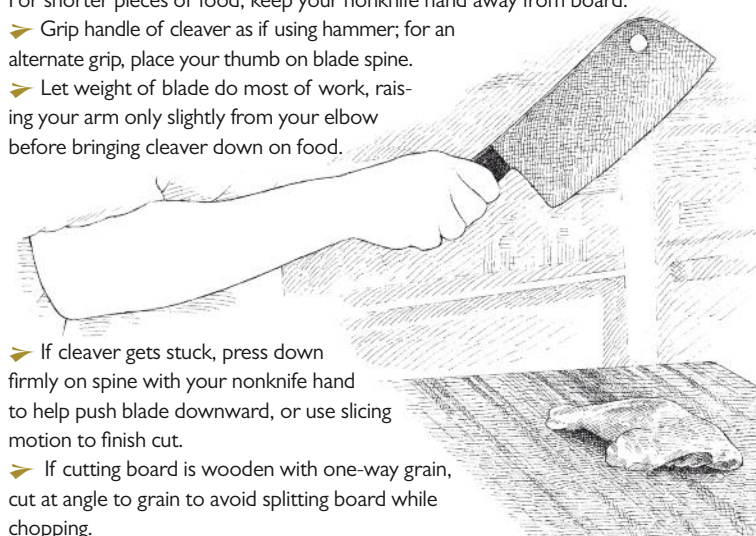
TO HACK UP MEAT OR POULTRY:

- Stabilize ends of long cuts (such as rib or backbone) with your nonknife hand. For shorter pieces of food, keep your nonknife hand away from board.
- Grip handle of cleaver as if using hammer; for an alternate grip, place your thumb on blade spine.
- Let weight of blade do most of work, raising your arm only slightly from your elbow before bringing cleaver down on food.

- If cleaver gets stuck, press down firmly on spine with your nonknife hand to help push blade downward, or use slicing motion to finish cut.

- If cutting board is wooden with one-way grain, cut at angle to grain to avoid splitting board while chopping.

- Go to CooksIllustrated.com/cleaver for more information on how to use a cleaver.



Darning Turkey Skin



BEFORE AND AFTER: AN EASY FIX

A simple wooden toothpick is all you need to mend this tear.

As the showpiece of the holiday meal, a roast turkey should look as good as it tastes. We have many tricks for ensuring moist and tender meat and a crisp, golden-brown skin. But every so often, a turkey emerges from the packaging with torn skin. Besides marring the bird's appearance, the patch of exposed meat tends to overcook without the protection the skin provides.

Fortunately, there's an easy fix. Before placing the bird in the oven, arrange the skin so that the torn edges are lined up, and then use toothpicks to pin the skin to the flesh underneath. Toothpicks should be spaced $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch apart. Roast per the recipe instructions, and when the bird comes out of the oven, remove the toothpicks. As heat sets the proteins, it helps glue the torn skin to the meat, and only the most discerning eyes will be able to pick out the patch. —L.L.

Guide to Chocolate Dipping

A glossy chocolate coating can enhance anything from simple fruit to fancy cookies, but not if it looks thick and clunky. Follow our foolproof technique for tempering chocolate (CooksIllustrated.com/temperchocolate), and then use these tips to create an elegantly thin coating. —A.G.



1. Maintain a chocolate temperature of about 90 degrees to ensure that the chocolate stays fluid (and tempered).
2. Dip the item in the melted chocolate to the desired depth and pull up. To remove excess chocolate, tap the item against the surface of the chocolate 4 or 5 times, pulling up sharply each time.
3. To prevent a thick “foot” of hardened chocolate from forming beneath the item, gently scrape its bottom against the edge of the bowl as you transfer it to a parchment paper-lined baking sheet to set.



Why Do Some Blades Have Hollows?

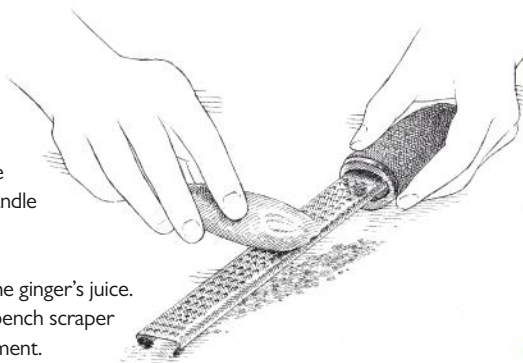
Santoku and slicing knives often feature oval hollows carved into the sides of their blades. Many sources claim that this innovation, patented in 1928 by what’s now the Granton Knives Co. in Sheffield, England, and often referred to as a “Granton edge,” prevents food from clinging to the blade. However, the Granton edge has an additional purpose: The scallops make the blade thinner and lighter to help it slide through food while maintaining some rigidity at the spine for control. The hollows are especially effective on Granton-brand knives, whose deep scallops are carved down through the cutting edge on alternate sides, unlike those of most imitators, which are symmetrical, shallower, and set higher on the blade.

We’ve tested dozens of Granton-edge knives over the years and found the hollows valuable on slicing knives, including our favorite, the Victorinox 12" Fibrox Pro Granton Edge Slicing/Carving Knife (\$54.65). The hollows reduce friction and make it easier to carve even slices, whether using it on a roast or a delicate side of salmon. But when testing santoku knives (page 23), we didn’t find them necessary since these blades are short (6.5 to 7 inches) and are already razor-thin. Our winning santoku lacks a Granton edge, and we didn’t miss it. —L.M.

Grate Advice for Ginger

Even with a sharp rasp-style grater, grating large amounts of fresh ginger can be a chore. Here are some tips to help improve your grating game. —A.G.

- Start with a large piece of peeled ginger. Because some waste is inevitable, it takes a 1¼-ounce piece to produce 1 tablespoon of grated ginger.
- The fibers in a piece of ginger run from the top of the root to the bottom. Positioning the cut end of a piece of ginger perpendicular to the grater’s surface so that the fibers meet the teeth of the grater straight on will result in clogged teeth. Instead, hold the ginger so that the fibers run perpendicularly across the teeth.
- If the teeth do clog, rinse the grater under warm running water and pass a moist sponge along the grating surface from the bottom toward the handle to avoid tearing the sponge.



Tip: There’s a lot of flavor in the ginger’s juice. Be sure to scrape it up with a bench scraper and include it in your measurement.

SCIENCE Why Brisket Is the Toughest Tough Cut

Brisket takes about twice as long to turn tender as do other braising cuts. We’ve always thought that’s because brisket has more chewy collagen (the main component in meat’s connective tissue) than other cuts, which needs more time to convert to soft gelatin for the meat to fully tenderize. But while developing our recipe for Braised Brisket with Pomegranate, Cumin, and Cilantro (page 8), we were puzzled to see that the braising liquid was thin and runny rather than silky and unctuous, the way you’d expect liquid full of gelatin to be. Could some other dynamic be at work? We decided to compare the gelatin produced by brisket with that of chuck roast, which often produces rich, thickened braising liquid.

EXPERIMENT

We sealed multiple 100-gram portions of brisket and chuck roast in bags and cooked them using a *sous vide* device at 195 degrees for 8 hours; at that point, we knew that both cuts would be tender and that they would have released as much gelatin as possible. We also included samples of veal breast—the same cut as brisket but from a calf—to see if age influences collagen (and thus gelatin) content. We drained the liquid from each bag, chilled it overnight, removed the fat, and then examined the gels for firmness.



RESULTS

To our surprise, the brisket and the chuck roast produced similar amounts of gel, and both gels were loose. Meanwhile, the gel from the veal breast was significantly more firm.

GEL TELLS ALL
Brisket and chuck have mainly insoluble collagen and produce watery gel (top two spoons), whereas veal breast gel is very firm (bottom spoon), indicating more soluble collagen.

EXPLANATION

Collagen is most abundant in muscles that get the most exercise. For this reason, brisket (from the breast, which supports 60 percent of the cow’s weight) is naturally higher in collagen than chuck (from the shoulder). But over time, exercise creates cross-links in collagen that transform it from a soluble form to



Collagen is a triple helix made of three protein chains that unwind during cooking to form supple gelatin. But age and exercise can create cross-links that allow collagen only to soften, not to fully unwind.

a stronger and more insoluble form.

Insoluble collagen can only weaken and soften with prolonged exposure to heat; it won’t break down into gelatin. Thus, while brisket has more collagen than chuck, the collagen in both these well-exercised cuts is mainly insoluble, so neither produces

enough gelatin to create full-bodied juices. Because veal breast (young brisket) comes from a calf that hasn’t experienced much exercise, its abundant collagen is mainly soluble and breaks down readily into gelatin.

TAKEAWAY

Brisket does indeed take more time to cook than other tough cuts because of its greater amount of collagen. However, much of that collagen is insoluble, so little of it will break down into gelatin. That’s why we needed to bolster the viscosity of the thin braising liquid in our recipe with powdered gelatin. —A.J.

EQUIPMENT CORNER

BY MIYE BROMBERG AND EMILY PHARES



HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

FINUM Brewing Basket L
MODEL: 63/451.66.00
PRICE: \$9.95



RECOMMENDED

MARCATO Biscuit Maker
MODEL: 8307
PRICE: \$42.00



HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

SHUN Classic Meat Cleaver
MODEL: DM0767
PRICE: \$149.00



HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

CALPHALON Tri-Ply Stainless Steel 14-inch Roaster with Nonstick Rack and Stainless Steel Lifters
MODEL: 1767986
PRICE: \$75.69



RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

NORDIC WARE Microwave Omelet Pan
MODEL: 63600
PRICE: \$5.12

Tea Infusers

Tea infusers are great for making a single cup of loose-leaf tea. They come in several styles: sticks, balls, and baskets made of perforated metal or wire mesh. With each, you simply insert the amount of tea you want to use into the infuser, stick the infuser into a cup, and pour hot water over it. We wanted to know which tea infuser was best, so we bought nine models, priced from \$5.96 to \$16.95, and used each to brew herbal, white, green, and black teas.

The size of the infuser proved critical. Smaller strainers couldn't hold a single serving of loose-leaf tea and were both fussy to fill and a challenge to clean. We strongly preferred larger, basket-style models, which allowed the tea to circulate and infuse the water more fully. All the basket-style infusers also had openings of 2 inches or more in diameter, making filling and cleaning them easy. Our winner, the Finum Brewing Basket L (\$9.95), had the greatest capacity in our lineup, and its tightly woven mesh basket kept even the finest leaves out of the finished tea. Plus, its top can be used as a saucer to hold the basket and catch drips after or between infusions. —M.B.

Cookie Presses

Cookie presses are handheld gadgets that portion soft cookie doughs into a variety of shapes, from hearts and flowers to snowmen and turkeys. These cookies are typically called "spritz" cookies, from the German word *spritzen*, meaning "to squirt." The press has a tube that holds the dough, with a perforated shaping disk at one end and a handle at the other. After loading the dough, you place the cookie press base on a baking or cookie sheet, squeeze the handle, and out pops a perfect, oven-ready dough design—if the press works well.

To find the best cookie press, we purchased four, priced from \$25.99 to \$42.00, and put them through heavy use in the test kitchen. After pressing and baking more than 1,400 cookies, we found one with the qualities that matter most for a cookie press: consistency of shaping, durability, and, most important, the appearance of the cookies. The Marcato Biscuit Maker (\$42.00) consistently produced attractive, well-formed cookies with few jams or misshapen designs. We experienced a couple of minor issues that required extra attention when loading the dough, inserting the disk, and operating the press, but the payoff—cookies in fun shapes—was worth it. —E.P.

Meat Cleavers

Designed to take abuse, meat cleavers are ideal for tough jobs that might wear down the blade of your chef's knife, such as cutting through whole chickens, whole lobsters, or butternut squash. With these functions in mind, we set out to determine the best meat cleaver for home use, buying 13 cleavers priced from \$10.67 to \$179.95. We put the cleavers to the test, chopping chicken parts and butternut

squashes and breaking down whole ducks into serving-size pieces. In the end, the Shun Classic Meat Cleaver (\$149.00) won us over with its even weight distribution; long, tall blade; and comfortable handle. This durable cleaver also came out of testing minimally scathed. For a more affordable option, we also recommend the Lamson Products 7.25" Walnut Handle Meat Cleaver (\$59.95) as our Best Buy. A favorite of many testers, this old-school cleaver performed well and was easy to use, but it was not as durable or as well-made as our winner. —M.B.

Small Roasting Pans with Racks

We love our favorite roasting pan, the Calphalon Contemporary Stainless Roasting Pan with Rack (\$99.99), for roasting turkeys and larger cuts of meat. But sometimes we want a more petite version for roasting chickens, vegetables, and smaller cuts of meat. Curious to know which small roasting pan and rack were best, we purchased five sets priced from \$17.99 to \$159.95, each about 14 inches long. We used each set to roast potatoes and a whole chicken and to make gravy on the stovetop with the chicken drippings. Almost all the sets cooked the food well, but a few design factors made certain sets perform and handle better than others. Our favorite model, the Calphalon Tri-Ply Stainless Steel 14-inch Roaster with Nonstick Rack and Stainless Steel Lifters (\$75.69), offers thick, tri-ply stainless-steel and aluminum construction and a flat cooking surface, which produced perfectly cooked, evenly browned food. Large handles made it easy to maneuver in and out of the oven, and its U-shaped rack nicely cradled the chicken. —M.B.

Microwave Egg Cookers

Microwave egg cookers promise cooked eggs in a flash with no pots, pans, or utensils to wash. To see how well they worked, we purchased seven products—five poachers and two omelet makers—and tested them in multiple microwave ovens at varying power levels. None of the microwave cookers could replicate the quality of eggs cooked on the stovetop; instead, this testing gave us eggs that were undercooked, rubbery, or even both at once. Why were the microwaved eggs inferior to stovetop eggs? Egg yolks contain less water and more fat than egg whites, so the two parts of the egg absorb energy at different rates, making it challenging to get nicely cooked eggs from a microwave oven. The best product, the Nordic Ware Microwave Omelet Pan (\$5.12), is only recommended with reservations: It was easy to use and clean, and it produced the most evenly cooked eggs in the lineup, but they were nothing like a tender, well-cooked stovetop omelet. —E.P.

For the complete testing results, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec17.

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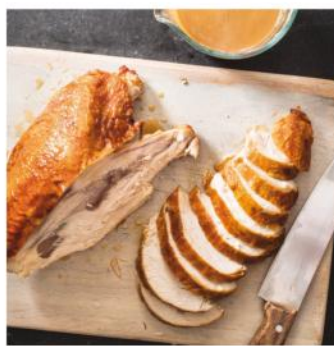
Want to see how to make any of the recipes in this issue? There's a free video for that

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Nazook



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Knafeh



*Tahini
Buns*

TURKISH
AND MIDDLE EASTERN
SWEETS