

Cook's Country



MARCH 2015



Adding the rich, smoky flavor of bacon to classic meatloaf seemed like a winner. And it was—after we spent several days in the test kitchen developing a technique that yields crisp bacon on top and real bacon flavor throughout. PAGE 4

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Cook's Country

Dear Country Cook,

Marie Briggs, our Vermont town baker, made the world's best nutmeg doughnuts. I know since I pretty much grew up on them. Years later, I made her recipe for coffee hour at the Methodist church, consuming two hot-out-of-the-oil specimens in the kitchen beforehand. A friend of mine, Nate, runs Saratoga Orchards and has a Rube Goldberg-style cider doughnut contraption. I buy a half-dozen in a small white paper bag and they are gone before I get back to the farm.

Our country store, Sherman's, sells doughnuts, as does the more touristy country store to the north. Even well-heeled New Yorkers show up in fancy cars early on Saturday mornings to grab their fill before the inventory runs out. (These are folks who are probably gluten-free the rest of the week.)

Last November, on the first day of deer season, I dropped my four-pointer off at the local butcher shop. The owner offered me a free doughnut and I, of course, picked the cake doughnut, the style that reminded me most of Marie.

Some things are constants in country life. Weather. Parades. Church suppers. Hunting season. And doughnuts. The sweetest constant of them all.

Cordially,



Christopher Kimball
Founder and Editor, Cook's Country



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(Healthy) Dinner in the Slow Lane

One often-overlooked benefit of the slow cooker: The moist heat environment makes it easy to cook with less fat. Our newest cookbook, **Healthy Slow Cooker Revolution**, will help you eat more healthfully in the New Year. Among the 200 recipes: Easy Baked Ziti with Turkey Sausage, Low-Fat Classic Brownies, and California Fish Tacos. Order online at AmericasTestKitchen.com/HealthySlow.



AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN
 RECIPES THAT WORK™

America's Test Kitchen is a very real 2,500-square-foot kitchen located just outside Boston. It is the home of Cook's Country and Cook's Illustrated magazines and the workday destination of more than three dozen test cooks, editors, and cookware specialists. Our mission is to test recipes until we understand how and why they work and arrive at the best version. We also test kitchen equipment and supermarket ingredients in search of products that offer the best value and performance. You can watch us work by tuning in to Cook's Country from America's Test Kitchen (CooksCountry.com) and America's Test Kitchen (AmericasTestKitchen.com) on public television.



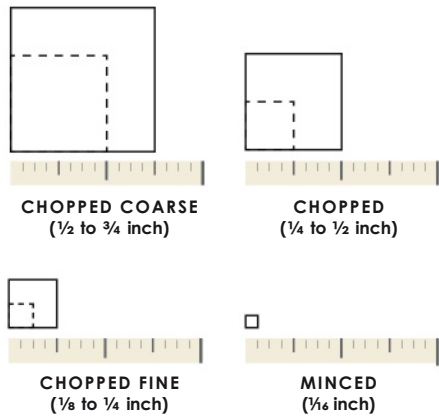
Ask Cook's Country

BY CHRISTIE MORRISON

I'm never exactly sure how small I should cut my vegetables. What's the difference between "chopped" and "chopped fine" in your recipes?

Cat Herrington, Charlottesville, Va.

Cutting ingredients to the correct size is important to the success of a recipe. Uniformity of size is the top concern, since ingredients cut to different sizes will have different cooking times: Some of your vegetables might burn, for instance, while the bigger chunks continue to cook. In the test kitchen, a ruler is a necessary tool for all our test cooks to ensure that ingredients are cut to specifications and cook for the same amount of time, every time. Keep these conversions in mind the next time you prep.



I've heard some red wines described as "tannic." Can white wines be tannic, too?

Barbara Nestor, Ashland, Pa.

Wines that are characterized as tannic are high in tannins, polyphenols—or a group of chemical compounds—that occur naturally in wood, plant leaves, and the skins, stems, and seeds of fruits like grapes, plums, pomegranates, and cranberries. Tannins have a bitter flavor and astringent quality that has a drying effect on your tongue. One of the challenges of wine making is striking a favorable balance between tannins and sweetness, and wines are manipulated to enhance or suppress either characteristic depending on the varietal. Intense, full-bodied red wines like Malbec or Cabernet Sauvignon are often high in tannins, since the pressed grape juice spends a good deal of time in contact with the grape skins, stems, and seeds before being aged in wood barrels (another source of tannins).

White wines are seldom described as tannic in the same way. They tend to be significantly lower in tannins than red wines since the juice spends so little time exposed to the grape skins. Any tannic

characteristics they do exhibit are more likely the effect of oak aging.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Call them crisp, call them fruity, but don't call white wines tannic. While white wines may contain tannins, their levels are too low to produce the bitterness and astringency that we would characterize as tannic.

Why does a double scoop of ice cream make me thirsty?

Andrew Fuga, Philadelphia, Pa.

We asked around the office to see if this was a common affliction, and about half the people said that yes, ice cream does leave a parched mouth. (Most also said they had thought that they were alone in their thirstiness.)

When in doubt, we often look to our science editor for explanation. He told us that sweet foods (like ice cream) behave much like salty foods when eaten in quantity. As ice cream is digested and sugar is rapidly absorbed into the blood, the concentration of sugar in the blood becomes higher than the concentration of sugar in the body's other cells. Since nature abhors an imbalance, osmosis kicks in, forcing water out of the cells, through membranes, and into the blood to equalize the relative concentrations of sugar. The brain senses that the cells are losing moisture, and the craving for a glass of water kicks in.

THE BOTTOM LINE: You're not imagining that post-ice cream thirst. Go ahead and treat yourself to a tall drink of water.

How are Marcona almonds different from regular almonds?

Christopher Stillman, Natick, Mass.

Most almonds consumed in the United States are produced in California; the United States is the largest producer of almonds in the world. Just behind the United States in production is Spain, home to the Marcona variety of almonds.

Marcona almonds are easy to distinguish from California almonds. They are shorter and rounder than our domestic almonds. Plus, their texture sets them apart: Marconas are softer and more tender to the bite than California almonds, which have a firm crunch. Tasters also noticed a pronounced sweetness in Marcona almonds, as well as a slight greasiness to the touch due to their higher fat content.

Like other almonds, Marconas are sold roasted or blanched and are used in salads, cheese plates, and desserts. They are also sold fried in oil and tossed with sea salt and herbs (a common preparation in Spain). However, the

If I have to let my roasted chicken rest for 15 to 20 minutes after it comes out of the oven, won't it be too cold to serve?

Treesa Weaver-Rich, Hillsdale, Mich.

It's helpful to think of resting as part of the cooking process. When you remove a roast from the oven, it continues to cook because of the heat trapped inside. This "carryover cooking" continues in proportion to the density and size of the meat and the temperature at which you were cooking it. So, for example, a whole chicken roasted at 400 degrees will carryover cook for longer than either a whole chicken roasted at 350 degrees or chicken parts roasted at 400 degrees. As the meat rests, the juices inside redistribute as well. During cooking, the muscle fibers contract and squeeze liquid out of their cells. Resting gives the fibers a chance to relax and draw moisture back inside. Slicing into a roast before it has sufficiently rested will result in that liquid escaping onto your cutting board rather than being reabsorbed into the meat.

The resting time recommended in your recipe takes these factors into consideration. And since heat moves from the hotter exterior to the cooler interior of the meat, we often suggest lightly tenting the roast with foil to keep the exterior warm without trapping too much moisture inside the tent. Since even light tenting can cause crisp skin to become soggy, we don't usually recommend tenting for chicken and turkey.

But won't the roast cool down too much to serve warm? To find out, we roasted a chicken according to one of our favorite recipes and checked the temperature when we removed it from the oven: 160 degrees in the breast and 175 degrees in the thigh. Then we took the temperature after 20 minutes of (untented) rest on a carving board. The chicken was still over 140 degrees—and almost too hot to carve. Since most meat tastes best when it's above 100 degrees, the chicken was still comfortably within the serving zone.

We recommend resting all large cuts of meat, though resting times vary. However, thinner cuts like steaks, pork chops, and chicken parts cool more quickly. In these cases, we usually recommend only about 5 minutes' resting time to ensure that the proteins are still ideal for serving.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Large cuts of meat hold on to heat far longer than you would expect, so don't rush the rest.

	Temperature	Rest Time	Tent?
ROAST CHICKEN	175 degrees (thigh)	20 minutes	No
ROAST TURKEY	175 degrees (thigh)	30 to 40 minutes	No
BEEF ROAST, MEDIUM RARE	125 degrees (center)	30 minutes	Loosely
PORK ROAST	140 degrees (center)	10 to 20 minutes	Loosely if unglazed

biggest difference between the almond varieties is price: Marcona almonds cost about twice as much as California almonds.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Marcona almonds have a sweeter flavor and softer texture than California almonds. You can use them in much the same way that you use domestic almonds, but at double the price, they are probably best enjoyed as a treat rather than as a pantry staple.



MARCONA ALMONDS



CALIFORNIA ALMONDS

To ask us a cooking question, visit CooksCountry.com/ask. Or write to Ask Cook's Country, P.O. Box 470739, Brookline, MA 02447. Just try to stump us!

Kitchen Shortcuts

COMPILED BY SHANNON FRIEDMANN HATCH



DOUBLE DUTY Dressing on the Go

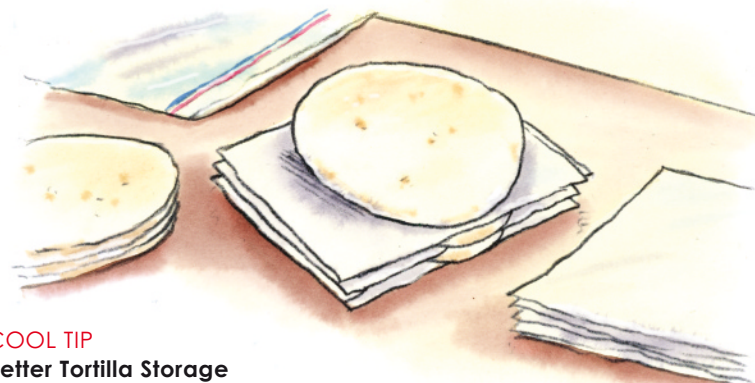
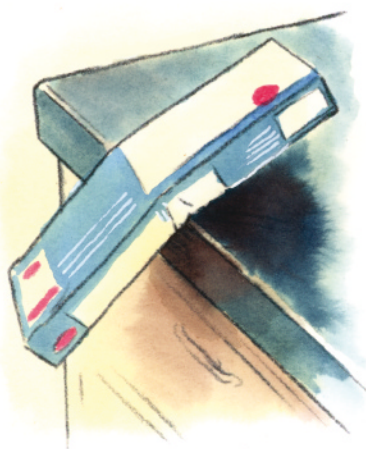
Stan Sack, Key West, Fla.

I've found another use for my surplus of squirt-tip bicycle water bottles: as vessels for transporting homemade salad dressing to potlucks and parties. The plastic containers have a wide mouth for adding ingredients, seal tightly, are easy to grip, and won't shatter en route. I usually unscrew the cap to serve, but you could even squeeze the dressing out through the top.

NEAT TRICK Break It in the Box

Patrick Starnes, Nashville, Tenn.

When I need to break long-strand dried pasta, like spaghetti, before cooking, I do it in the box: Just grip each end of the closed box, center it on the edge of the counter, and gently bend until the pasta inside breaks. This method contains any stray noodles that would otherwise scatter across the kitchen when the pasta snaps.



COOL TIP Better Tortilla Storage

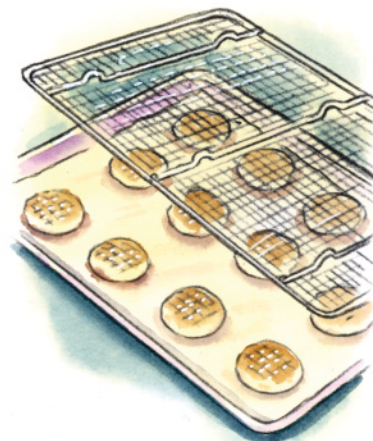
Gayle Keane, Cincinnati, Ohio

I use only a few tortillas at once, so I freeze the rest of the package. The problem is that the tortillas stick together and tear when I try to remove one or two for my next meal. Now, I put a square of parchment paper in between the tortillas before freezing. It takes a minute, but it saves a ton of hassle in the long run. And I reuse the squares of parchment paper every time.

CLEVER TIP Cooking with Kids

Mary McArthur, Redmond, Wash.

Accurately reading a recipe is the key to success in the kitchen. To help my daughters as they learn, I print out the recipe and place it inside a clear sheet protector. As they use each ingredient and complete each step, they cross it off with a dry-erase marker.



DOUBLE DUTY Easier Cookie Press

Carlyn Fischer, Cambria, Wis.

I've always made a crisscross pattern with a fork on the top of my peanut butter cookie dough. Recently, I've realized that my cooling rack makes a fine design, and I have to press only once for a whole batch.

TIDY TIP High Five Dry

Karen Tirabassi, West Henrietta, N.Y.

I used to lay my dishwashing gloves over the edge of the sink between cleanups, but they never fully dried. I've discovered that if I thread a pair of open tongs through the rungs of a dish rack, ends pointed up, I can put a glove on each end. Held upright, they dry much more thoroughly.



COOL TIP Streamlining Frozen Meals

Helene Schachter, Great Neck, N.Y.

Whenever I freeze food that will need additional preparation (not just defrosting), I wrap the dish, place a copy of the recipe on top, wrap it again, and freeze it. That way, I know how to finish the dish without having to dig up the recipe again.



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The Ultimate Bacon-Wrapped Meatloaf

Bacon-wrapped meatloaf? Sounds like a winner. But it takes a bit more than just slapping on some bacon to make it work. BY CRISTIN WALSH

IT'S HARD TO imagine that meatloaf could be improved upon, but I recently came across a cookbook recipe for bacon-wrapped meatloaf. The way the author described it, this dish had all the makings of something extraordinary: meatloaf draped in crisp, smoky bacon and brushed with a sweet barbecue glaze. I found a handful of other recipes for this meatloaf and got busy cooking in the test kitchen. The smell of six bacon-wrapped meatloaves cooking had my tasters champing at the bit to try them.

But my tasters' anticipation turned to disappointment once they started putting fork to loaf. The big problems were bland, greasy meatloaves; saccharine glazes; and lots and lots of flabby, chewy, unrendered bacon. These failed recipes made me determined to crack the code of bacon-wrapped meatloaf.

I knew what I wanted: a flavorful, moist, tender meatloaf with plenty of smoky, crisp bacon wrapped around its exterior. Luckily for me, the test kitchen has been around the block with meatloaf before, so I had plenty of knowledge to get me started. I began by making a meatloaf using equal parts ground beef and pork, which I dressed with onion and garlic, bound with a panade of saltines and milk, and bolstered with eggs. I shaped the loaf free-form (to bake on a rack where the fat can drain away); draped bacon over the top, tucking the ends under as best I could; brushed the exterior with bottled barbecue sauce; and baked it. The loaf was moist and the bacon did crisp in places, but the bacon also shrank dramatically, leaving gaping spaces on the loaf. The meatloaf itself was good, but you didn't get any bacon flavor unless you got a bite with the bacon on top—I wanted bacon flavor throughout. Plus, the barbecue sauce didn't add much.

If some bacon is good, I thought, more bacon would be better. To infuse the bacon flavor deep into the meatloaf, I tried ditching the ground pork and adding chopped bacon to the ground beef mixture. After a few tests, I found it easiest to buzz a medium onion with four slices of bacon in a food processor before sautéing them together and incorporating them into the meat.

As for the bacon on the exterior, I had a plan to use a loaf pan not for baking but to help me shape the loaf



What's even better than a bacon-wrapped meatloaf? A bacon-wrapped meatloaf that has chopped bacon added to the ground beef inside.

with bacon on top. To start, I shingled bacon slices on plastic wrap laid inside a loaf pan and then formed the meatloaf on top of the bacon. Using the sides of the plastic, I pressed the bacon into the formed loaf and used the plastic to invert the meatloaf onto a thin foil sling placed on a rack. This meatloaf certainly had a stronger bacon presence, and the exterior slices now covered the loaf evenly.

The bottled barbecue sauce brushed on top was the weak link, even when we used our favorite brand. I tried another batch with added liquid smoke, but that gave the glaze too much smoke flavor and not enough nuance. Rather than giving up on the bottled sauce, I doctored it with cider vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, and spicy mustard to cut the sweetness. This time the glaze imparted a subtle, complex smoky flavor that

tasters loved. So much, in fact, that they suggested adding it to the interior of the meatloaf for increased depth and all-around smoky flavor. This worked great, as did adding an extra layer of glaze between the bacon and the meat. A finishing pass under the broiler ensured that the bacon was impeccably browned and crisp and that the spicy-sweet glaze caramelized to perfection. It was the ideal finish to a meatloaf less ordinary.

BACON-WRAPPED MEATLOAF

Serves 6 to 8

Bulls-Eye Original is our favorite barbecue sauce. Do not use thick-cut bacon for this recipe, as the package will yield fewer strips for wrapping the meatloaf. Oscar Mayer Naturally Hardwood Smoked Bacon is our winning thin-sliced bacon.

- ¼ cup bottled barbecue sauce, plus extra for serving
- 1 tablespoon cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tablespoon spicy brown mustard
- 17 square or 19 round saltines, crushed (¾ cup)
- 4 slices coarsely chopped bacon, plus 8 whole slices
- 1 onion, chopped coarse
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- ⅓ cup whole milk
- 2 large eggs plus 1 large yolk
- ⅓ cup minced fresh parsley
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1½ pounds 90 percent lean ground beef

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and set wire rack in sheet. Whisk barbecue sauce, vinegar, Worcestershire, and mustard together in bowl; set aside glaze.

2. Process saltines in food processor until finely ground, about 30 seconds; transfer to large bowl. Pulse chopped bacon and onion in now-empty processor until coarsely ground, about 10 pulses. Transfer bacon mixture to 10-inch non-stick skillet and cook over medium heat until onion is soft and translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Set aside off heat.

3. Add milk, eggs and yolk, parsley, salt, pepper, and 2 tablespoons glaze to saltines and mash with fork until chunky paste forms. Stir in bacon mixture until combined. Add beef and knead with your hands until combined.

4. Lightly spray 8½ by 4½-inch loaf pan with vegetable oil spray. Line pan with large sheet of plastic wrap, with extra plastic hanging over edges of pan. Push plastic into corners and up sides of pan. Line pan crosswise with remaining 8 bacon slices, overlapping them slightly and letting excess hang over edges of pan (you should have at least ½ inch of overhanging bacon). Brush bacon with 3 tablespoons glaze. Transfer meatloaf mixture to bacon-lined pan and press mixture firmly into pan. Fold bacon slices over mixture.

5. Using metal skewer or tip of paring knife, poke 15 holes in one 14 by 3-inch piece of foil. Center foil rectangle on top of meatloaf. Carefully flip meatloaf onto wire rack so foil is on bottom and bacon is on top. Gripping plastic, gently lift and remove pan from meatloaf. Discard

TEST KITCHEN TECHNIQUE

That's a Wrap

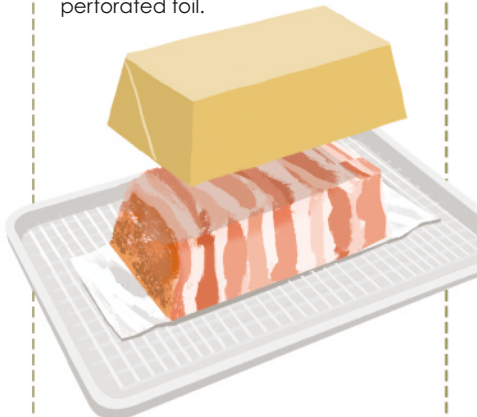
We found that using a loaf pan to wrap our meatloaf in bacon gave us the most consistent results with the least amount of work.



1. After spraying the pan with vegetable oil, line it with plastic wrap and eight slices of bacon. Brush the bacon with glaze.



2. Next, we press the meatloaf mixture into the pan, fold the bacon ends over the loaf, and top it with perforated foil.



3. Finally, invert the foil-topped loaf, bacon and all, onto a wire rack set in a baking sheet, remove the plastic, press the meatloaf into shape, and bake.

plastic. Gently press meatloaf into 9 by 5-inch rectangle.

6. Bake until bacon is browned and meatloaf registers 150 degrees, about 1 hour. Remove from oven and heat broiler. Brush top and sides of meatloaf with remaining 2 tablespoons glaze. Broil meatloaf until glaze begins to char and meatloaf registers 160 degrees, 3 to 5 minutes. Using foil as sling, transfer meatloaf to carving board and let rest for 15 minutes. Slice and serve, passing extra barbecue sauce.

Green Goddess Salad

This classic San Francisco dressing shows best over a salad of crunchy romaine, savory bacon, and velvety avocado. BY AARON FURMANEK

YOU CAN'T GO wrong with a salad of crunchy romaine with bacon and avocado. But such salads are too often overwhelmed by heavy dressings. I wanted to find a dressing that complemented these ingredients with bright, invigorating flavor.

Green goddess dressing is an ideal solution. Its fresh flavor is strong enough to lend a light, tangy contrast to the bacon and creamy avocado.

While modern versions of green goddess dressing often contain avocado, the original version, credited to chef Philip Roemer of the Palace Hotel in San Francisco during the 1920s, does not. Since we were already putting avocado in the salad, we decided to follow Roemer's lead and skip the avocado in the dressing.

A combination of fresh and dried herbs proved to be the best here: Fresh parsley and chives added brightness, while dried tarragon lent subtle licorice flavor. A single anchovy fillet disappeared into the dressing and added depth and nuance.

ROMAINE SALAD WITH GREEN GODDESS DRESSING

Serves 4

Reduced-fat mayonnaise works well in this dressing.

- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon water
- 2 teaspoons dried tarragon
- ¾ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ cup sour cream
- ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 1 garlic clove, chopped
- 1 anchovy fillet, rinsed
- ¼ cup minced fresh chives
- Salt and pepper
- 4 slices bacon
- 2 romaine lettuce hearts (12 ounces), quartered lengthwise
- 1 avocado, halved, pitted, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 small shallot, sliced into thin rings

1. Combine lemon juice, water, and tarragon in bowl and let sit for 15 minutes.

2. Process mayonnaise, sour cream, parsley, garlic, anchovy, and tarragon mixture in blender until smooth, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of blender jar as needed. Transfer dressing to bowl and stir in



Three kinds of herbs lend brightness to this classic dressing.

chives. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Refrigerate for 1 hour to let flavors blend.

3. Meanwhile, cook bacon in 12-inch skillet over medium heat until crispy, 7 to 9 minutes. Transfer to paper towel-lined plate and let cool. Crumble bacon into bite-size pieces.

4. Place romaine hearts on platter, cut sides up, and drizzle liberally with dressing. Top with avocado, shallot, and bacon. Season with pepper to taste, and serve.

Don't Fear the Fish

The single anchovy fillet we call for in this recipe may seem superfluous, but it adds savory depth to the dressing (without tasting like fish). Try adding a minced anchovy to your next batch of beef stew or tomato sauce—it will boost the flavor considerably. Anchovies are sold jarred or canned. Extra jarred anchovies can be refrigerated right in the jar according to package directions. But extra canned anchovies should be transferred to a nonreactive airtight container, covered with oil, and refrigerated for up to two weeks.

New Orleans Grillades

Many recipes for this Louisiana braise call for slicing pork shoulder into superthin steaks.

But there's an easier way. BY MORGAN BOLLING

THE SHORT LIST of iconic New Orleans foods includes gumbo, beignets, jambalaya, and po' boys. But there's one more Louisiana dish that deserves attention: grillades.

Despite what your French translation dictionary may claim, grillades (pronounced "GREE-ahds") are not grilled. Rather, they're thinly sliced cuts of meat (usually pork, veal, or beef, and sometimes even fillets of trout) that are browned and then slowly stewed in a roux-thickened, tomato-based gravy with a Louisiana spice mix and the New Orleans trinity of green bell peppers, celery, and onions. The dish is simmered until the meat is fork-tender and full of the peppery flavors of its thick stewing liquid. It's traditionally served over a bed of rice (sometimes grits) that thirstily absorbs the flavorful sauce.

I wanted to see if I could create my own version. I gathered a diverse sample of existing recipes and cooked five of

them. The results were disappointing. The meat was tough, and most of the gravy sauces were dull,

pasty, and bland. Bland? Not a goal of most Louisiana cooking. I clearly needed to bump up the spices.

Although some fancy restaurants serve grillades made with veal and some recipes call for beef, I made up my mind to use less expensive (and in my opinion, more flavorful) pork. Tests showed that rib chops, loin chops, and tenderloin all dried out during the long stewing time, but cuts of meat with more connective tissue, such as pork shoulder and country-style ribs, held up better.

Pork shoulder, though, generated a problem: irregularly shaped steaks. I could pound the steaks to get more consistent pieces, but what a pain. A colleague suggested pork blade chops, cut from the end of the pork shoulder, which have more fat and connective tissue than standard rib or loin chops. I cut the bones off eight of them and started in on searing, four pieces at a time, in my Dutch oven. I was pleased to see that the meat didn't dry out or toughen up, and it was more evenly cooked since all pieces were a consistent size and thickness. Plus, buying presliced chops saved me a ton of time and effort.



A potent, supersavory tomato-based gravy is the defining element of grillades.

With that settled, I was on to the sauce. As the defining element of the dish, it needed a strong, sharp personality.

First, I'd focus on structure. Most recipes call for starting the braising liquid with a sauce-thickening roux, which requires cooking flour with fat. It can add 20 to 30 minutes to the cooking time, but I pulled from past test kitchen knowledge and achieved

a similar result in less time by toasting the flour in a skillet in advance. This 3-minute jump start meant I could achieve a deep brown roux in the Dutch oven in just 2 minutes more. Seasoned with a mix of powerful spices, the gravy distributed complex and evocative flavors throughout the dish.

But spice isn't the same as heat, and I wanted some punch—enough to proudly announce itself but not send

tasters running for cold water or beers. I increased the cayenne in my spice mix, but its flavor was still a little flat. One of my initial recipes called for serving the grillades with Tabasco sauce, a time-honored and ubiquitous Louisiana ingredient; I tried stirring some into the sauce to finish it. Just right. The vinegar in the Tabasco added a sharp hit of acidity, making my sauce much more complex and layered.

Visit CooksCountry.com/whiterice to find our foolproof recipe for perfect white rice.

Backstory Cooks' Treat

Where do grillades come from? Culinary historian Randolph Cheramie of the Folse Culinary Institute in Thibodaux, Louisiana, points to the bayou, where "boucherie" parties, all-in community pig roasts, can go all night. The cooks wake up before dawn to start the pig and inevitably get hungry before it's ready (which can take 16 hours or more). They'll slice some pork off the rotisserie and stew it in a cast-iron pot with bacon, tomatoes, and aromatics to make a preparty meal. When the zydeco band fires up and the crowds gather, the cooks are fueled up and ready to go.



Like many Louisiana towns, St. Martinville hosts an annual boucherie.

PORK GRILLADES Serves 6 to 8

We prefer pork blade chops because they hold up to stewing better than loin chops. Blade chops aren't typically available boneless; ask your butcher to bone them for you. Use our Louisiana Seasoning (recipe follows) or your favorite store-bought variety.

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 8 (6- to 8-ounce) bone-in pork blade-cut chops, ½ inch thick, bones discarded, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons Louisiana seasoning
- Salt and pepper
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and chopped
- 1 celery rib, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, crushed by hand with juice
- 2 slices bacon
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 teaspoon Tabasco sauce, plus extra for serving
- 4 cups cooked rice
- 2 scallions, sliced thin

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Toast ¼ cup flour in small skillet over medium heat, stirring constantly, until just beginning to brown, about 3 minutes; set aside.

2. Season chops with 1½ teaspoons Louisiana seasoning, salt, and pepper. Whisk remaining ¾ cup flour and remaining 1½ tablespoons Louisiana seasoning together in shallow dish. Working with 1 chop at a time, dredge in seasoned flour, shaking off excess; transfer chops to plate.

3. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add 4 chops and cook until browned, 3 to 5 minutes per side; transfer to plate. Repeat with remaining 4 chops.

4. Remove all but ¼ cup oil from Dutch oven and return to medium heat. Add toasted flour to pot and cook, whisking constantly, until deep brown, about 2 minutes. Add onion, bell pepper, celery, and 1 teaspoon salt and cook, stirring often, until vegetables are just softened, about 3 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

5. Stir in broth, tomatoes and their juice, bacon, Worcestershire, and bay leaf, scraping up any browned bits. Nestle chops into liquid and add any accumulated pork juices from plate. Bring to simmer, cover, and transfer to oven. Cook until fork slips easily in and out of pork, about 1 hour.

6. Remove grillades from oven. Discard bacon and bay leaf; stir in Tabasco. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve over rice, sprinkled with scallions and passing extra Tabasco.

LOUISIANA SEASONING

Makes about ¾ cup

You'll need just 2 tablespoons of this Cajun seasoning for our Pork Grillades recipe; try the leftover seasoning on scrambled eggs, boiled potatoes, or roast chicken.

- 5 tablespoons paprika
- 2 tablespoons garlic powder
- 1 tablespoon dried thyme
- 1 tablespoon cayenne pepper
- 1 tablespoon celery salt
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 tablespoon pepper

Combine all ingredients in bowl.

TASTING LOUISIANA SEASONING

Whether called Cajun or Creole, most Louisiana spice blends contain a mix of paprika, garlic, thyme, salt, pepper, and cayenne—ingredients typically found in the region's signature dishes. We had 22 cooks and editors sample five seasonings labeled Creole or Cajun on white rice and in pork grillades.

Our tasters preferred saltier and spicier blends. We liked the "pungent" kick from products that list black pepper, cayenne, or chili powder high on their ingredient lists, and tasters also thought that products with more sodium had "more complex" flavors: Our favorite product contains 350 milligrams of sodium per ¼-teaspoon serving. Seasonings with less than 130 milligrams of sodium were "flat" and "bland," and one salt-free product was "completely boring."

When we tested the products against our homemade recipe for Louisiana seasoning in pork grillades, the homemade blend won out for its "balanced" complexity, so we think it's worth the extra time and effort. But if you're in a pinch, reach for Tony Chachere's Original Creole Seasoning, a local Louisiana favorite. An added bonus: At \$0.28 per ounce, it's the cheapest seasoning of the bunch. Visit CooksCountry.com/mar15 for the full tasting story and chart. —LAUREN SAVOIE

RECOMMENDED

TONY CHACHERE'S Original Creole Seasoning

Price: \$2.25 for 8 oz (\$0.28 per oz)

Ingredients: Salt, red pepper, black pepper, chili powder (chili pepper, spices, salt, garlic powder), garlic, silicon dioxide (to prevent caking)

Sodium: 350 mg per ¼ teaspoon



TASTERS' NOTES

"Vibrant" and "zesty," this "grainy" spice mix had strong notes of garlic and red pepper, with a "punch of heat" and a "slightly sweet" aftertaste. In grillades, it lent a "lively," "bright" flavor, though it was "slightly saltier" than our house mix.

McCORMICK Perfect Pinch Cajun Seasoning

Price: \$3.00 for 3.18 oz (\$0.94 per oz)

Ingredients: Salt, spices (including red pepper, black pepper, thyme, and celery seed), paprika, garlic, and onion

Sodium: 80 mg per ¼ teaspoon



This "rustic," "woody" seasoning had a "mild but present" mix of "warm spice" and "vegetable" flavors with a "pungent," "pleasant heat." "This is the real deal," said one taster, though a few found its texture "a bit dusty."

RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

ZATARAIN'S Creole Seasoning

Price: \$4.97 for 8 oz (\$0.62 per oz)

Ingredients: Salt, dextrose, spices (including red pepper, paprika), garlic, sugar, onion, disodium inosinate and guanylate (flavor enhancers), extractives of paprika, and natural flavor

Sodium: 340 mg per ¼ teaspoon



This "punchy" spice mix was "bold from the get-go," with "lots of garlic," "slight sweetness," and "lingering spiciness." However, some tasters found it too "salt-centric," possibly from the addition of other flavor enhancers like disodium inosinate and guanylate.

SPICE ISLANDS Louisiana Style Cajun Seasoning

Price: \$10.85 for 2.3 oz (\$4.72 per oz)

Ingredients: Dehydrated garlic, salt, spices, paprika (as color), dehydrated onion, red pepper

Sodium: 40 mg per ¼ teaspoon



While "rustic" and "peppery," with a "mild" spiciness, this product had "herbal," "oregano-heavy" notes and a "chunky" texture that drew some unfavorable comparisons with "Italian seasoning."

NOT RECOMMENDED

FRONTIER Organic Cajun Seasoning

Price: \$4.38 for 2.08 oz (\$2.11 per oz)

Ingredients: Organic paprika, organic onion, organic garlic, organic marjoram, organic thyme, organic fennel seed, organic cumin, organic cayenne

Sodium: 0 mg per ¼ teaspoon



This salt-free product's overwhelming "anise" notes and "dusty" texture seemed misplaced to tasters. "I wouldn't have guessed that this is Cajun seasoning," said one. In grillades, this product was the "blandest" of the bunch.



BLADE CHOP
Best for slow braising.

The Right Chop

The problem with buying pork chops is that markets call chops by different names. Since grillades are braised, it's important that you don't buy a lean chop, which would be better quickly grilled or sautéed. Flavorful blade chops may not look pretty, but their fat and connective tissue softens and melts out with braising.

Rediscovering Baked Steak

Put away your steak knives: Baked (or “smothered”) steaks are fork-tender and supremely beefy.

BY CHRISTIE MORRISON

BAKED STEAK, ALSO called smothered steak, is a mostly hands-off dinner that makes the most of inexpensive steaks. The majority of recipes for this dish are from midcentury cookbooks, when only cheap cuts were available to most households. These cuts have more connective tissue than tender cuts, so they are best when gently braised, which is what “baked” steaks really are.

Most recipes for baked steak follow a similar route: Four (or so) steaks from the chuck, blade, or round are seasoned, sometimes dredged in flour, and browned; sliced onions and mushrooms are placed, sautéed or raw, in the pan with the steaks along with broth and very simple seasoning.

Preparing and tasting these recipes helped me make some initial decisions. Chuck steaks were out because their rendered fat made everything greasy. Round steaks had a dry texture. I settled on 1-inch-thick blade steaks cut from the shoulder muscle. These flavorful steaks are often bypassed (in spite of their attractive price tag) because of the line of gristle that bisects each steak. I hoped that the longer cooking time here would melt out the gristle.

Some recipes call for simply nestling the raw steaks into a bed of onions and mushrooms and setting the pan in the oven; this seemed like a missed opportunity. By dredging the steaks in flour and quickly browning them, I built fond in the pan and added starch that would help thicken the sauce. Plus, the finished steaks now had some textural contrast and flavorful browning.

Since I was already taking time to brown the steaks in a skillet, I hated to spend more time on the stovetop before baking. For now, I would add the sliced onions and mushrooms to the skillet after I scraped up the flavorful fond left by the steaks. Then I placed the steaks on top of the mound of vegetables and added a cup of beef broth and a tablespoon of soy sauce (to enhance the beefy flavor). I covered the skillet and popped it into a 350-degree oven.

After 2 hours of baking, the steaks were swimming in a pool of liquid. The vegetables had cooked down significantly, releasing their juices into the broth and effectively stewing the meat. The blade steaks were pretty tender (and the connective tissue had softened con-

siderably) but needed a little more time to be just right. Also, the intense steam in the pan had softened the seared crust. So I returned the steaks to the oven, uncovered, for another half-hour. The surfaces of the steaks emerged nicely crusty and browned and the sauce had reduced a bit—but not quite enough.

I tested the dish with decreasing amounts of broth before realizing that the onions and mushrooms were releasing enough liquid to braise the meat on their own. I had just enough sauce now, but its texture was a bit thin. Needing a stronger thickener, I switched from dredging the steaks in flour to dredging them in cornstarch; this made the sauce thick enough to cling lightly to the meat and vegetables. Fine-tuning the flavors, we found that a tablespoon of tomato paste added sweetness, depth, and an appealing color to the sauce. A few cloves of garlic and a little chopped rosemary gave the sauce extra intensity.

My humble dish was met with smiles from tasters. “I didn’t think I’d like it so much,” one taster admitted. Exactly.

BAKED STEAK WITH ONIONS AND MUSHROOMS Serves 6

You can use white button mushrooms in place of the cremini.

- 6 (6- to 8-ounce) beef blade steaks, 1 inch thick, trimmed**
- Salt and pepper**
- ⅓ cup cornstarch**
- ¼ cup vegetable oil**
- 1 tablespoon water**
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce**
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste**
- 2 onions, halved and sliced thin**
- 8 ounces cremini mushrooms, trimmed and sliced thin**
- 2 garlic cloves, minced**
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary**
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley**

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Spread cornstarch in shallow dish. Working with 1 steak at a time, dredge steaks in cornstarch, shaking off excess, and transfer to plate.

2. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add 3 steaks at a time and cook until browned, about 3 minutes per side, then return to plate. Repeat



Blade steaks are the best choice here: They are deeply flavorful and tender when braised—and they’re cheap, too.

with remaining 2 tablespoons oil and remaining 3 steaks.

3. Remove skillet from heat and discard oil. Combine water, soy sauce, and tomato paste in now-empty skillet, scraping up any browned bits. Stir in onions, mushrooms, garlic, rosemary, and ¼ teaspoon salt. Place steaks in single layer on top of onion mixture and add any accumulated steak juices.

4. Cover skillet, transfer to oven, and bake for 2 hours. Uncover and continue to bake until steaks are browned and fork tender, about 30 minutes longer. Transfer steaks to platter, tent loosely with aluminum foil, and let rest for 5 minutes. Season onion mixture with salt and pepper to taste and spoon over steaks. Sprinkle with parsley. Serve.

Crowded Pleaser



With two sliced onions, 8 ounces of sliced mushrooms, and six steaks, the skillet is very crowded. The tight fit encourages flavor transfer between meat and vegetables.

Spinach and Potato Gratin

Adding spinach freshens up an old favorite—but then you have to solve the soggy problems it creates.

BY CHRISTIE MORRISON

A POTATO GRATIN, FOR some, is a done deal—potatoes, cream, and cheese all bubbly and brown. But it's also a starting point, a foundation to be built on. To combat winter's gray days, I wanted to introduce verdant spinach and savory ham to give the dish a fresh appeal.

Unfortunately, spinach and potatoes have very different cooking times. How would I preserve the bright color and flavor of the spinach, which cooks fairly quickly, until the longer-cooking potatoes became tender? The recipes I found for spinach-potato gratin mostly called for insulating the spinach by placing it between layers of potato slices. But this approach didn't fly with my tasters, as the layer of spinach (I tried both sautéed fresh spinach and thawed and drained frozen spinach) steamed between the potato layers and gave the gratin a soggy, watered-down flavor. There was one more-promising recipe, though, that called for placing the spinach on top of the potatoes and liquid; the spinach stayed fairly moist and didn't taste steamed, but it did overcook and turn an ugly army-green color by the time the potatoes cooked through. I had some work to do to figure out how to keep the spinach from overcooking.

While we often prefer the good flavor and convenience of frozen spinach in cooked applications, my tasters voiced a preference for fresh spinach in the gratin. Since I'd need to sauté the spinach before assembling the gratin, I wanted to keep the rest of the recipe simple and straightforward. That meant forgoing a cooked white sauce for a dump-and-stir sauce of liquid dairy (milk, half-and-half, heavy cream, or some combination) mixed with grated Parmesan, salt, pepper, and a touch of nutmeg. After several head-to-head tests, I wasn't surprised that my tasters preferred heavy cream.

I quickly learned that starchy russet potatoes were the only way to go, as Yukon Golds and waxy red potatoes didn't provide the starch necessary to help thicken the no-cook sauce. Most of our gratin recipes call for 3 pounds of potatoes (sliced 1/8 inch thick), but I knew that such a thick layer of sliced spuds would take a while to cook through—and by that time the spinach would be overcooked. What if I used fewer potatoes? That way, the potatoes



The starch from thinly sliced russet potatoes helps thicken the creamy sauce.

would cook through before the spinach was spent. I reduced the amount of potatoes in my recipe to 2 pounds, which was still sufficient for four to six people. My thinner gratin—I could now simply place the sliced potatoes in the bottom of the buttered dish without having to shingle them—baked through in about half the time, leaving the spinach in great shape.

I still had a problem, however. The heavy cream that tasters preferred left the gratin too rich and covered up the earthy flavor of the spinach (and the potatoes, for that matter). Cutting the cream with chicken broth helped lighten the gratin and, with less fat to get in the way, allowed the other flavors to shine. The gratin as a whole, though, was still a

little flat. Increasing the amount of seasoning helped the situation, but it was a one-note answer. One taster suggested including bacon or pancetta to add salty complexity, but both options required cooking—an extra step I was hoping to avoid. Instead, I tried adding chopped Black Forest ham for a similar salty, meaty element. The ham complemented the cooked spinach, enhancing but not overwhelming the flavor. Almost there.

By definition, a gratin needs to have a crust of some kind. Toasted bread crumbs and panko both made for a dusty texture that covered up the spinach, but a sprinkling of grated Parmesan browned beautifully and complemented the greens. A dish this rich and delicious shouldn't be this easy.

POTATO, HAM, AND SPINACH GRATIN Serves 8

Do not prepare the potatoes ahead of time or store them in water; the potato starch is essential for thickening the sauce. A mandoline makes quick work of slicing the potatoes.

- 1½ cups heavy cream
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1½ ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (¾ cup)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 8 ounces (8 cups) baby spinach
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 ounces thinly sliced Black Forest ham, chopped fine
- 2 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and sliced 1/8 inch thick

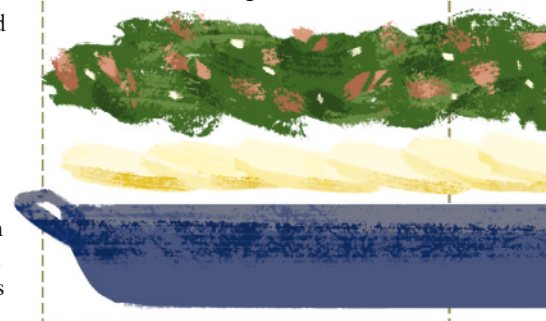
1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Grease 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Whisk cream, broth, ½ cup Parmesan, salt, pepper, and nutmeg together in bowl; set aside.

2. Melt butter in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add spinach and garlic and cook until spinach is wilted, about 3 minutes, stirring often. Off heat, stir in ham. Transfer spinach mixture to paper towel-lined plate to drain.

3. Arrange potatoes in even layer in prepared dish. Distribute spinach mixture evenly over potatoes. Pour cream mixture over spinach mixture and sprinkle with remaining ¼ cup Parmesan. Bake until potatoes are tender and cheese is spotty brown, 35 to 40 minutes. Let cool for 15 minutes. Serve.

Two-Tiered Solution

Spinach adds moisture to the mix, so to minimize sogginess, we lay it in a single layer atop the potatoes rather than nestling it in.



Flank Steak Peperonata

Peperonata—sweet peppers slowly stewed in olive oil—can take ages to prepare. We wanted a quick version to serve with steak for a weeknight supper. BY DIANE UNGER

PEPERONATA IS AN Italian condiment of sweet peppers stewed in olive oil with onion, tomato, wine or vinegar, and garlic until the peppers are soft and the flavors have melded—think roasted red peppers without the char. Its sweet, earthy flavor and smooth texture make it good hot, cold, or at room temperature. You'll find it on Italian American tables alongside meats, fish, and eggs; on salads and sandwiches; or as part of an antipasti platter. I wanted to make peperonata part of a sensational-yet-easy weeknight dinner, and my first thought was to pair it with quick-cooking flank steak.

I decided to tackle the peperonata first and then figure out a way to unite it with the steak. I started by gathering a bunch of recipes to try and was surprised at how different they were. While nearly all called for a mix of red and yellow bell peppers (for a nice presentation), some recipes called for roasting the peppers first, some required cutting the peppers in large chunks nearly 2 inches wide, and others called for thinly slicing the peppers. One recipe even called for peeling raw peppers with a vegetable peeler.

After tasting such a wide range of peperonatas, my tasters and I had some opinions. Since I wanted this to be a weeknight dish, roasting and peeling the peppers were both off the table—as were long-cooked versions, which did not fit my Tuesday-night timetable. I cobbled together a working recipe based on what I had learned from these initial tests: I wanted the peppers cut small so the skin wasn't noticeable and so they'd cook to tenderness relatively quickly,

and I wanted a good amount of acid to cut through the richness of the olive oil.

I started by cutting two red and two yellow bell peppers into ¼-inch-wide

strips, trying first lengthwise and then crosswise. My tasters thought that the shorter crosswise strips were easier to eat, so I cut the onion into slices of a similar size. After testing varying amounts of olive oil to cook the peperonata, I settled on ½ cup, which was enough to coat the peppers well without feeling greasy. In testing garlic amounts, I found that six cloves of garlic, crushed, added just the right amount of nutty



Tangy, sweet peperonata makes the perfect condiment for tender slices of spice-rubbed flank steak.

bite to the mix. I cooked everything covered until the peppers were just tender. Then I uncovered the skillet and added a can of diced tomatoes along with their juice, some capers and their brine (which tasters preferred to vinegar or wine), and red pepper flakes for a little heat. Finished with chopped basil for freshness, the flavorful peperonata was ready to be introduced to the flank steak.

My first test proved that simply

searing the flank steak, slicing it, and serving it with the peperonata made for an easy but uninspired dish. For more punch, I rubbed the steak with a mixture of salt and dried oregano and let it sit while I made the peperonata; this gave the salt a chance to work its way into the meat for deep seasoning, while the oregano strengthened the Italian flavor profile. For even faster, more thorough seasoning, I cut the 2-pound flank

steak lengthwise into three long strips before rubbing it with the salt-oregano mixture; this increased the surface area for the salt to be absorbed.

I wiped out the nonstick skillet and cooked the three strips of steak to a nice medium-rare, which took about 6 minutes per side over medium-high heat. I let the steak strips rest for about 10 minutes and then cut them into thin slices (against the grain of the meat for

▶ How about a supereasy chocolate cake for dessert? Visit CooksCountry.com/wackycake for our Wacky Cake recipe.

maximum tenderness). I drizzled the slices with olive oil and seasoned them with salt and pepper. Just right—the flank steak and peperonata finally tasted like they belonged together.

FLANK STEAK PEPERONATA

Serves 4 to 6

Look for a flank steak of even thickness. The *peperonata* can be made up to two days in advance.

- 1 (2-pound) flank steak, trimmed
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- Kosher salt and pepper
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup plus 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for serving
- 2 red bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, quartered, and cut crosswise into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-wide strips
- 2 yellow bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, quartered, and cut crosswise into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-wide strips
- 1 onion, quartered through root end and sliced crosswise into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-wide strips
- 6 garlic cloves, crushed and peeled
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons capers plus 4 teaspoons caper brine
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped fresh basil

1. Cut steak lengthwise with grain into 3 equal pieces. Combine oregano and 2 teaspoons salt in bowl. Season steaks all over with salt mixture, wrap in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes or up to 24 hours.

2. Heat $\frac{1}{3}$ cup oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add red and yellow bell peppers, onion, garlic, and $1\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoons salt. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are soft, about 10 minutes.

3. Stir in tomatoes and their juice, capers and brine, and pepper flakes. Continue to cook, uncovered, until slightly thickened, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer peperonata to bowl, cover, and keep warm.

4. Wipe out skillet with paper towels. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and season with pepper. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in now-empty skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook steaks until well browned and each registers 125 degrees (for medium-rare), 5 to 7 minutes per side. Transfer steaks to carving board, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest for 10 minutes.

5. Stir basil into peperonata. Slice steaks thin on bias against grain. Season steak slices with salt and pepper and drizzle with extra oil. Serve steak with peperonata.

Southern-Style Green Beans

Boiling fresh beans for an hour? It sounds old-fashioned, but the velvety beans and flavor-packed broth are worth the time. BY MORGAN BOLLING

SOME COOKS I KNOW preach the gospel of crisp-tender vegetables and will ardently caution against the sin of overcooking them. But I think that vegetables are just as often undercooked and can sometimes benefit from more thorough cooking. One dish that illustrates this point well is Southern-style green beans, in which the beans are boiled with potatoes and pork for upwards of an hour until they are silky-soft and infused with deliciously salty, meaty, full flavor. As a bonus, you get to drink the rich cooking liquid known as pot liquor (or pot likker).

I gathered a bunch of recipes for this dish and found that many of them suffered from the same problem: a lack of specifics. In particular, several simply called for water without giving an amount; others listed “potatoes” without saying what kind or how they should be prepped. As for the pork, recipes called for bacon, ham hock, salt pork, or country-ham trimmings. Some recipes included sugar or lemon, while others went virtually unseasoned. I selected a sample of recipes that represented these variables and got busy cooking.

The results were disappointing. Too sweet, underseasoned, and too salty were my tasters’ big complaints—as were potatoes that either fell apart or were too hard. As for the pot liquor, some versions had none; others had pot liquor that was lacking in flavor.

Starting with $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds of beans, I ran a few tests and determined that 4 cups of water was the right amount. I tested different types of potatoes and landed on a pound of red potatoes cut into 1-inch pieces, which I added after the beans had simmered for about 20 minutes and then let cook for another half-hour, until everything was perfectly tender. As for the pork products, I tried them all (save for the country-ham trimmings, which are hard to find in much of the country) and settled on meaty-tasting ham hocks, which I started with the beans and then removed at the end so I could pick the meat and return it to the pot. For other seasonings, my tasters rejected sugar and lemon but liked the simple additions of sautéed onion, garlic, and a little vinegar.

These ultratender, superflavorful, long-cooked green beans are definitely not *al dente*—and in this case, that’s a good thing.



These ultratender green beans are deeply infused with rich pork flavor.

SOUTHERN-STYLE GREEN BEANS AND POTATOES Serves 6 to 8

Do not drain off the cooking liquid before serving: This flavorful, savory pot liquor should be sipped with the meal. Leftover pot liquor can be used as a soup base.

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 onion, halved and sliced thin
- 4 cups water
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds green beans, trimmed and cut into $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch lengths
- 2 (12-ounce) smoked ham hocks
- 3 garlic cloves, crushed and peeled
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound red potatoes, unpeeled, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 teaspoon cider vinegar (optional)

1. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook until translucent, about 4 minutes.

2. Add water, green beans, ham hocks, garlic, and $2\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoons salt and bring to boil. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer for 20 minutes. Stir in potatoes, cover, and continue to simmer until potatoes are tender, about 30 minutes longer, stirring halfway through cooking.

3. Off heat, remove ham hocks and let cool for 5 minutes. Chop meat and return to pot; discard skin and bones. Gently stir in vinegar, if using, to avoid breaking up potatoes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

Carolina Chicken Bog

This simple, savory one-pot dish isn't hard to put together—as long as you get the timing just right.

BY NICK IVERSON

WHAT'S IN A NAME? Not much, if the name is Carolina chicken bog, an unpromising label that woefully undersells this wonderful dish. A staple in the Lowcountry and northern coastal kitchens of South Carolina, bog combines inexpensive ingredients—chicken, smoky sausage, and rice—into an easy one-pot meal that works for big weekend gatherings or simple weeknight suppers.

I tested several recipes for chicken bog; they ranged from spicy to bland and from complicated to simple. Some called for a whole chicken, others called for seasoned rice. Some were served stew-style, with a healthy portion of broth; others aimed for a drier, sticky rice studded with chicken and sausage.

After a visit to Loris, South Carolina, to watch bog masters at work (see “On the Road”), I decided I wanted the less-soupy style of bog, with a final dish that’s more like a pilaf than a stew, but with sticky, not separate, grains of rice. To get there, I knew that timing would be everything; I needed the rice to absorb just the right amount of liquid in just the right amount of time.

About that liquid: I wanted a deeply flavorful broth to make certain that the entire pot was infused with chicken flavor. Rather than cutting up a whole bird and risking overcooking the white meat, I opted for more forgiving chicken thighs—skin-on and bone-in for maximum flavor. The first step was to brown six thighs in a Dutch oven to render the fat (and flavor) from the skin. I next transferred them to a plate, reserving a tablespoon of chicken fat in the pot and discarding the spent skin.

Using this rendered fat to cook down the onions and brown the sausage (we chose kielbasa) ensured strong chicken flavor throughout the dish. A few cloves of minced garlic added depth; all were stirred together with the broth.

So far so good. But here came the tricky part: The chicken was not yet fully cooked through, and I hadn't even touched the rice. So I decided to return the chicken to the pot and add the rice at the same time, hoping to have everything finish together.

I cut the chicken from the bones (not easy, given that the insides were still raw) and stirred it into the broth with the rice. I covered the pot, turned down the heat, and let it simmer. Twenty



Don't get bogged down by the name: This is a straightforward, satisfying dish of rice, chicken, and sausage cooked in broth.

minutes later, when the rice was cooked, I gave it a taste. Alas, the chicken was still not cooked through, and the rice wasn't as flavorful as it should have been. Back to the kitchen.

This time, after stirring the broth into the pot, I added the now-skinless chicken thighs for 30 minutes to thoroughly cook through. I fished them out, set them aside on a carving board, and

stirred the rice into the cooking liquid, now bolstered by even more chicken flavor thanks to the chicken's half-hour simmer. Once the pot returned to a boil, I reduced the heat and covered it. After 20 minutes, the rice had absorbed the perfect amount of liquid and was slightly sticky with just a hint of starch on the outside of each grain.

While the rice cooked, I used my

hands to remove the chicken meat from the bones (much easier now that the thighs were cooked through and slightly cooled) and tear it into shreds. As I stirred these pieces of chicken into the now-cooked rice, the rice clumped onto my fork with a pleasant, sticky, dare I say boggy texture. My tasters and I could now take great big, chewy bites of this delicious one-dish dinner.

CAROLINA CHICKEN BOG

Serves 6 to 8

Wellshire Farms Smoked Polska Kielbasa is the test kitchen's preferred kielbasa.

- 6 (5- to 7-ounce) bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 8 ounces smoked kielbasa sausage, cut into ½-inch-thick rounds
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 2 cups long-grain white rice

1. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until just smoking. Cook chicken, skin side down, until well browned, 6 to 8 minutes; transfer chicken to plate. Discard skin.

2. Pour off all but 1 tablespoon fat from pot and return to medium heat. Add sausage and onion and cook until onion is translucent and sausage begins to brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add broth, chicken, 1 teaspoon salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper and bring to boil. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer until chicken is tender, about 30 minutes.

3. Remove chicken from pot and set aside. Stir rice into pot, cover, and continue to cook over low heat until rice is tender, about 20 minutes.

4. Shred chicken into bite-size pieces; discard bones. Gently fold shredded chicken into rice mixture. Remove from heat and let sit, covered, for 10 minutes. Serve.



On the Road Championship Bogs

We traveled to Loris, South Carolina, where the annual Loris Bog-Off Festival is a hotly contested affair. Entrants cook up bogs in large cast-iron Dutch ovens, carefully stirring with wooden “bogging spoons” worn down from years of pot stirring. Recipes are guarded jealously, but the basics—chicken, sausage, and rice—are shared by all.

Pimento Cheese

There are as many paths to pimento cheese as there are back roads in the South. We wanted to find the most direct route. BY CHRISTIE MORRISON

AS SOUTHERN COMFORT foods go, pimento cheese is right up there with fried green tomatoes and ham biscuits. Except it's not really Southern at all, according to food historian Robert Moss. Pimento cheese, he says, has roots in New York. In the late 19th century, cream cheese (produced in New York state) and pimentos (imported from Spain) were new to the American marketplace. Before long, consumers were combining them to spread on sandwiches. In 1908, the first published recipe for pimento cheese appeared in *Good Housekeeping*. By 1910, prepared pimento cheese was on store shelves.

So why is pimento cheese so closely associated with the South? “I’ve never been fully able to answer this,” Moss told us. “A lot of it has to do with the Southern tradition of bringing dips and spreads to community gatherings. People would compete with each other to have the best.”

Devotees have strongly held beliefs about what belongs in pimento cheese, but most will agree on cheddar cheese, mayonnaise, drained and diced pimentos, and cayenne or a splash of hot sauce. Other often-used components include cream cheese, pickles, olive juice, and grated onion.

Today, the most iconic version of pimento cheese may be the one served at the Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia. I mail-ordered a tub from the local WifeSaver restaurant that used to supply it to the golf club and whipped up a few more recipes claiming to be “the best pimento cheese ever” for a five-way taste test. (The WifeSaver version was passable but not great.)

The more popular versions had a chunky, homespun quality, so I quickly determined that the food processor, which many recipes employ, wasn't the way to go—the processed ingredients had the consistency of whipped cream cheese. Instead, I'd mix by hand to get the pebbly spread I was looking for.

After settling on the type of cheese to pair with the cream cheese (combinations of Colby and Monterey Jack paled in comparison with 100 percent sharp yellow cheddar), I found that ⅔ cup mayonnaise to 1 pound grated cheese was a balanced ratio for flavor and the best spreadable texture.

To round out the flavor, I added



Crackers provide an easy, direct delivery system for this iconic spread. Make sure to also try it with crudité or on a ham sandwich.

just a teaspoon each of lemon juice and Worcestershire sauce and ¼ teaspoon of cayenne for some gentle heat. I spread some on a cracker for a final test . . . and experienced a sudden rise in popularity in the test kitchen. If the true test of pimento cheese is how it brings people together, then I think I have a winner on my hands.

PIMENTO CHEESE Makes about 3 cups
You will need one 4-ounce jar of pimentos for this recipe. Yellow cheddar cheese is traditional, but you can substitute white cheddar cheese. Use the pimento cheese as a sandwich spread or serve it with crackers or crudité.

- ⅔ cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons cream cheese, softened
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 pound yellow sharp cheddar cheese
- ⅓ cup pimentos, patted dry and minced

1. Whisk mayonnaise, cream cheese, lemon juice, Worcestershire, and cayenne together in large bowl.

2. Shred 8 ounces cheddar on large holes of box grater. Shred remaining 8 ounces cheddar on small holes of box grater. Stir pimentos and all cheddar into mayonnaise mixture until thoroughly combined. Serve. (Pimento cheese will keep refrigerated for at least 1 week.)

SMOKED PIMENTO CHEESE

Substitute 8 ounces smoked cheddar cheese, shredded on small holes of box grater, for finely shredded sharp cheddar.

Pasta with Mushroom Sauce

We found the trick to coaxing deep, earthy flavors from supermarket mushrooms.

BY AARON FURMANEK

MOST SUPERMARKET mushrooms don't look like much in the produce case. The little buttons or shiitakes seem spongy and sad, destined for a supporting role at best. But I had a feeling I could coax satisfying earthy and meaty flavors from supermarket mushrooms for an easy weeknight pasta supper.

I tried several recipes, most of which called for cutting the fresh mushrooms into 1-inch pieces, browning them in butter or oil, and adding onion, shallot, or garlic. Then they direct you to hit the pan with a bit of white wine and scrape up the flavorful browned bits the mushrooms leave behind before tossing the lot with pasta and finishing with a sprinkle of cheese and parsley.

If only it were that simple. My experiments, so promising in theory, lacked anything more than shallow mushroom flavor. I had work to do.

I tried slowing things down to encourage the mushrooms to give up more flavor. I cooked them covered for 5 minutes to help them release their liquid. Then I cooked them uncovered for an additional 10 minutes to drive off the excess water. While this technique consolidated the flavors, I wasn't developing much fond, those flavorful browned bits left on the bottom of the pan. I found that if I coarsely chopped half the mushrooms (leaving the rest quartered for visual impact later), the smaller pieces left behind more fond. I then tossed the sauce with cooked pasta and served it to my tasters. The sauce was delicious, but it was just sitting on, rather than connecting to, the pasta.

Drawing on earlier test kitchen experiments with one-pot pasta dishes, I wondered if I could create a cohesive mushroom sauce in a Dutch oven and then add water and pasta directly to the pot to boil until the pasta was done.

Fingers crossed, I gave the technique a swing, using 4 cups of water and campanelle pasta (I'd settled on this short shape for its mushroom-cradling capabilities). Almost there; the pasta was nicely cooked, but even though I was finishing the sauce with plenty of Pecorino Romano and butter, the sauce was thin and lacked body.

I was about to set aside this technique when a colleague suggested a solution: elbow grease. I gave the process another try, but after adding the final ingredients



Fresh shiitake and button mushrooms, plus dried porcini, give this one-pot pasta deliciously deep mushroom flavor.

of Pecorino, lemon juice, and butter, plus a bit of water to loosen things up, I vigorously stirred the pasta for 1 minute, which drew as much starch from the pasta as possible. The minute of exertion

was well worth it. The starch added body and structure to the sauce, which now clung greedily to the pasta. I had an inexpensive but elegant dish with deep mushroom flavor in every bite.

KEY DISCOVERY Doubling Down for Big Impact

Chopping half the mushrooms creates more fond for a flavorful sauce; quartering the rest gives big, meaty mushroom texture.



COARSELY CHOPPED



QUARTERED

PASTA WITH MUSHROOM SAUCE

Serves 4

If you can't find shiitake mushrooms, cremini mushrooms can be substituted or white mushrooms can be used exclusively, but don't omit the dried porcini. Parmesan cheese can be substituted for the Pecorino Romano.

- 12 ounces shiitake mushrooms, stemmed
- 12 ounces white mushrooms, trimmed
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- Salt and pepper
- 2 shallots, minced
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh sage
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ ounce dried porcini mushrooms, rinsed and chopped fine
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 4 cups water plus ¼ cup hot water
- 12 ounces (3¾ cups) campanelle, penne, or fusilli
- 2 ounces Pecorino Romano cheese, grated (1 cup), plus extra for serving
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh chives

1. Coarsely chop half of shiitake mushrooms and white mushrooms; then quarter remaining shiitake mushrooms and white mushrooms. Melt 2 tablespoons butter in Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add all shiitake mushrooms and white mushrooms (both chopped and quartered) and ¾ teaspoon salt. Cover and cook until mushrooms release their liquid, about 5 minutes. Uncover and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until all liquid has evaporated and mushrooms begin to brown, about 10 minutes.

2. Add shallots, sage, garlic, and porcini mushrooms and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add wine and cook until evaporated, about 2 minutes. Stir in 4 cups water, pasta, and 1¼ teaspoons salt and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until pasta is tender, 12 to 15 minutes.

3. Off heat, stir in Pecorino, ¼ cup hot water, lemon juice, remaining 2 tablespoons butter, and ½ teaspoon pepper. Stir vigorously for 1 minute, until sauce is thickened. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to serving dish and sprinkle with chives. Serve, passing extra Pecorino separately.

Little Italy Zeppoles

To make these light, crisp confections, which are like a cross between doughnuts and fried dough, you need a little know-how—and two leaveners. BY MORGAN BOLLING

GOTO AN Italian American festival, such as the annual Feast of San Gennaro in New York's Little Italy, and you'll likely pass multiple booths selling fresh zeppoles. These deep-fried Italian confections are golden brown and crispy on the outside and soft and airy inside, with a light sprinkle of powdered sugar on top. They usually aren't eccentric or fancy in their flavorings, nor are they meant to be; their charm is their simplicity.

I was reminded of this on my fifth day of testing as I pulled the 18th batch out of the frying oil and sampled a disappointing, stodgy zeppole, overworked and overthought—so far from the simple fried dough ball I'd set out to create.

I'd started my testing according to our usual methods in the test kitchen: frying a variety of zeppoles from existing recipes using the two standard options of yeasted and *choux* batters. Unfortunately, none matched what I had devoured at street fairs.

I quickly ditched the *choux* batter. *Choux* is a simple batter of flour, eggs, butter, and water that's used for cream puffs and *éclairs*. Without a leavening agent like yeast or soda, *choux* relies on its moisture for leavening: When heated, the water inside the batter turns to steam, creating pockets of air and puffing the pastry. In my testing I'd found the *choux*-dough zeppoles lacking in flavor



Our light, tender zeppoles are best served warm.

I traced my steps back to that simple 15-minute recipe. I tinkered just a bit, adjusting proportions to make the perfect amount for a small group to share. I fried off that final batch, and when my tasters quickly devoured them, I realized, as with many things in life, sometimes the simplest path is the best.

ZEPPLES Makes 15 to 18 zeppoles

This dough is very wet and sticky. If you own a 4-cup liquid measuring cup, you can combine the batter in it to make it easier to tell when it has doubled in volume in step 1. Zeppoles are best served warm.

- 1⅓ cups (6⅔ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup warm water (110 degrees)
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 quarts peanut or vegetable oil
- Confectioners' sugar

1. Combine flour, granulated sugar, yeast, baking powder, and salt in large bowl. Whisk water and vanilla into flour mixture until fully combined. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and let rise at room temperature until doubled in size, 15 to 25 minutes.

2. Set wire rack in rimmed baking sheet and line rack with triple layer of paper towels. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 200 degrees. Add oil to large Dutch oven until it measures about 1½ inches deep and heat over medium-high heat to 350 degrees.

3. Using greased tablespoon measure, add 6 heaping tablespoonfuls of batter to oil. (Use dinner spoon to help scrape batter from tablespoon if necessary.) Fry until golden brown and toothpick inserted in center of zeppole comes out clean, 2 to 3 minutes, flipping once halfway through frying. Adjust burner, if necessary, to maintain oil temperature between 325 and 350 degrees.

4. Using slotted spoon, transfer zeppoles to prepared wire rack; roll briefly so paper towels absorb grease. Transfer sheet to oven to keep warm. Return oil to 350 degrees and repeat twice more with remaining batter. Dust zeppoles with confectioners' sugar and serve.

Snapshot: 1966



A street vendor in New York City's Little Italy neighborhood fries zeppoles for a hungry crowd.

and the dough itself fussy to work with.

Instead, I focused on yeasted dough, which proved both easier and more flavorful in those early tests. Stirring together flour, sugar, water, and yeast and letting it rest for 15 minutes before dropping spoonfuls into the hot oil gave me flavorful little nuggets, but not the light, fluffy zeppoles I was aiming for. Taking a cue from earlier test kitchen experimentation, I decided to double up on leavening and use both yeast and baking powder. Though usually used independently, putting both to work can make a lighter, fluffier end product—and did just that in this case. My zeppoles were noticeably lighter and still maintained a mild, yeasted flavor.

I loved these simple zeppoles—they

were so easy to make, beautiful and delicious and satisfying—but despite warnings about inquisitive cats, I couldn't help being curious: Could I improve on them even more?

I continued experimenting, adjusting the amounts of vanilla, sugar, and salt. I went further into untraditional territory, adding ingredients from milk to ricotta to see if they improved the texture or added appealing flavors. I even diverted from the traditional coating of confectioners' sugar, trying sprinkles of cocoa, cinnamon, and salt. But as I continued to test these tweaks against my straightforward two-leavener zeppoles tossed with powdery confectioners' sugar, none matched up.

When I ran out of detours to take,

Getting to Know Thickeners

Achieving the right consistency in a sauce, custard, pie, or jam takes a little knowledge . . . and some help from these common thickeners. BY CHRISTIE MORRISON



All-Purpose Flour

SLURRIED, ROUX-ED, OR PASTED

Flour can thicken a substance alone, as part of a slurry, or in conjunction with a fat. In a roux, a mixture of flour and fat is cooked to eliminate the raw flour flavor before introducing liquid. In a *beurre manié*, a paste of flour and softened butter is added to a soup or sauce to finish it. In either case, combine them with liquid gradually and whisk them in well before the mixture boils, when the flour's starches cause the mixture to thicken.



Cornstarch

STIR-FRY STRENGTHENER

Because cornstarch is a pure starch, it is a more effective thickener than flour (which is only 75 percent starch). But cornstarch-thickened sauces break down more quickly than flour-thickened ones, so be sure to follow the cooking times for recipes thickened with cornstarch and to reduce the heat once the dish has thickened. Cornstarch is the go-to thickener for stir-fries; first mix it with cold liquid to form a slurry before adding the thickener to hot liquids to prevent clumping.



Heavy Cream

RICH REDUCTION

Just a few tablespoons of heavy cream, which is 38 percent fat, can add distinct richness to sauces. Reducing heavy cream by boiling increases the concentration of fat globules to create the texture of a starch-thickened sauce. Cream was the only thickener we needed in our recipe for Creamed Kale with Chestnuts: CooksCountry.com/creamedkale.



Butter

SMOOTH FINISHER

The ultimate sauce finisher, butter contributes a glossy sheen, richness, flavor, and thickening to pan sauces (and to custards like lemon curd). But in order to achieve the right body, it's important to add butter off the heat. Because butter is an emulsion that can be broken by high temperatures, at around 160 degrees your nicely thickened sauce will lose its body.



Egg Yolks

CURD, NOT CURDLED

Rich custards like *crème anglaise* and lemon curd rely on egg yolks to achieve a creamy texture. Temperature is key to their thickening ability: If the yolks get too hot, their proteins coagulate and lose water, leaving you with a curdled, watery sauce. The takeaway? Don't boil custards thickened with egg yolks; you'll know that your custard has thickened when a spatula leaves a clear trail in the pan.



Pectin

SURE JELLED

Commercial pectin begins with apple or citrus extract and is chemically processed to produce a dry, powdered substance. Unlike gelatin, regular pectin requires the presence of sugar and acid in order to gel (that's why there's special pectin for low-sugar jams and preserves). We use pectin to achieve strength without rubberiness in our Raspberry Chiffon Pie: CooksCountry.com/raspberrychiffonpie.



Potato Starch

QUICKER TO THICKEN

Potato starch begins to thicken liquid before it reaches a simmer, while other starches must simmer for several minutes first. But the large starch granules can cause finished sauces to appear grainy, and it tends to thin out after prolonged cooking. For best results, add potato starch later in the cooking process, and take your sauce or soup off the heat as soon as it thickens.



Tapioca

SLOW-COOKER HERO

Tapioca starch comes from the tropical root vegetable cassava, also called manioc or yuca. This neutral-tasting thickener can be an asset in some fruit pies and in the slow cooker. For our Slow-Cooker Hearty Beef Stew (CooksCountry.com/slowcookerbeefstew), Minute tapioca—our favorite brand—was able to maintain its power over long hours in the slow cooker (unlike flour and cornstarch).



Gelatin

GOOD FORM

We use this pure protein in a variety of ways in the test kitchen: to thicken soups and braises, to stabilize whipped cream, and to shore up fruit pies like our Icebox Strawberry Pie (CooksCountry.com/iceboxstrawberrypie). Gelatin is sold in thin sheets and powdered. Both forms must be hydrated in cold water before being melted and incorporated. Basically, gelatin is used to turn liquids into solids (think your grandmother's green Jell-O fruit salad).



Arrowroot

CLEAR GEL

Arrowroot has almost twice the thickening power of flour. Unlike flour and cornstarch, it doesn't become cloudy as it thickens, so it leaves pie fillings and sauces clear. We've found arrowroot to have a slimy quality in recipes with dairy, so we don't recommend its use in puddings and custards. Arrowroot is almost as powerful as cornstarch; use 1½ teaspoons of arrowroot for every 1 teaspoon of cornstarch.



Okra

GUMBO ESSENTIAL

Okra has a long growing season in the southern United States. Elsewhere you're likely to find it frozen (we couldn't tell the difference between fresh and frozen when cooked). The long, green, tapered pods have a mild vegetable flavor that gets lost in spicy dishes; they're used for their sticky, mucilaginous insides. Once okra is sliced and its liquid is released, it becomes a thickener in Louisiana dishes like gumbo and *étouffée*.



Agar-Agar

SEAWEED STABILIZER

This complex carbohydrate is made from red algae, a form of seaweed. Available in flakes or powdered form, agar-agar has a thickening power similar to gelatin and is often used as a vegan alternative. The thickening strength can vary from brand to brand, but we generally found ¾ teaspoon of agar-agar flakes comparable to 1 teaspoon of gelatin when used to thicken 1 cup of liquid. Unlike gelatin, however, the agar-agar flakes need to soak in water for 10 minutes before the mixture is boiled for 10 minutes longer.

French Toast Casserole

French toast casserole sounds like an ideal family breakfast, but only if the dish looks and tastes like breakfast, not dessert. BY ASHLEY MOORE

MAKING FRENCH TOAST is no sweat if it's just for a few people, but it can quickly turn laborious and time-consuming when you need to cook breakfast for a crowd. French toast casserole, a one-dish breakfast for six to eight people, solves that problem. No more standing at the stove flipping slice after slice, dripping egg wash on the counter, serving one person at a time.

The basic process for French toast casserole is straightforward and familiar. It goes something like this: Stack two layers of sliced bread in a casserole

dish with plenty of brown sugar and cinnamon; pour an egg-and-milk mixture over the top and let it soak in; then slide the

I started with a dusting of brown sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg in the bottom of a buttered dish to create a sweet base and help anchor my slices. Next came a layer of bread, followed by a sprinkle of the sugar mixture. I repeated with two more layers and then poured the egg mixture over everything. I slipped the dish into the oven (uncovered, so that the top would get a little bit browned) and crossed my fingers.

Success. The three-layer casserole worked just fine and looked and felt abundant and exciting when it came out of the oven. Individual portions served from the dish looked just like “real” French toast.

I'm not one to gild lilies, but this dish needed one last flourish: a sprinkle of toasted sliced almonds, a touch that produced a satisfying crunch.

Many recipes for French toast casserole call for soaking the bread in the custard overnight, which is a great idea if you'd like to do the work the night before and reap the benefits in the morning. We tested this technique with our recipe and it worked just fine. In fact, tasters noticed only a very slight texture difference in a side-by-side test between an overnight soak and no pre-soak at all. Good news for both planners and procrastinators.

FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

Serves 6 to 8

We developed this recipe using Martin's Potato Bread, which has 16 slices per loaf, so you'll need to buy two loaves. With other brands, it may also be necessary to trim the slices to fit six in a single layer.

- 1 **tablespoon unsalted butter, softened, plus 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted**
- $\frac{3}{4}$ **cup packed (5 $\frac{1}{4}$ ounces) brown sugar**
- 1 **tablespoon ground cinnamon**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ **teaspoon ground nutmeg**
- $\frac{1}{8}$ **teaspoon salt**
- 18 **slices potato sandwich bread**
- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ **cups whole milk**
- 6 **large eggs**
- $\frac{1}{4}$ **cup sliced almonds, toasted**
- Confectioners' sugar**

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease 13 by 9-inch baking dish with softened butter. Mix brown sugar, cinnamon,



This crowd-pleasing casserole can be baked right away or assembled the night before and baked in the morning.

casserole into the oven for a half-hour or so. When it's done, you slice and serve it, dousing each stack of bread with maple syrup, and/or dusting it with confectioners' sugar. Couldn't be simpler.

But my initial tests of existing cookbook recipes quickly revealed the problem with this sunny scenario: All five versions that I tried looked and tasted a lot like bread pudding—soft and squishy and nothing like conventional crisp-crust French toast. And though some did deliver decent flavor, all were too sweet, even before we poured on the syrup. I wanted this to look and taste like breakfast, not dessert.

The first decision I had to make was what kind of bread to use. White bread just disintegrated in the custard. Challah, while great for traditional skillet French toast, was too delicate for this oven version (because of the extra weight from stacking). A colleague suggested trying potato bread. I was skeptical, but the sturdy slices were just big enough to fit six per layer in the dish. But would they hold up to the custard? Yes: Potato bread soaked up the egg mixture and baked into a tidy casserole that was easily divided into two-slice portions.

But two layers of French toast in the casserole dish looked a little shallow and sad, and who wants a sad breakfast? I wondered if a triple-decker French toast casserole would work just as well.

nutmeg, and salt together in bowl.

2. Sprinkle 3 tablespoons brown sugar mixture evenly over bottom of prepared dish. Place 6 bread slices (use bread heels here) in even layer in bottom of dish. Brush bread with 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons melted butter and sprinkle with 3 tablespoons sugar mixture.

3. Place 6 bread slices in single layer over first layer, brush with 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons melted butter, then sprinkle with 3 tablespoons sugar mixture. Place remaining 6 bread slices over previous layer and brush with 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons melted butter.

4. In separate bowl, whisk milk and eggs together until well combined. Pour milk mixture over bread and press lightly to submerge. Sprinkle with almonds

and remaining heaping 3 tablespoons sugar mixture.

5. Bake until casserole is slightly puffed and golden brown and bubbling around edges, about 30 minutes. Transfer casserole to wire rack, brush with remaining 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons melted butter, and let cool for 15 minutes. Sprinkle with confectioners' sugar and serve.

TO MAKE AHEAD

The assembled casserole, minus almonds and remaining heaping 3 tablespoons sugar mixture, can be covered and refrigerated for up to 12 hours. When ready to cook, sprinkle with almonds and sugar mixture and bake as directed in step 5.

Want some bacon on the side? Read our taste test of supermarket bacon at CooksCountry.com/supermarketbacon.

New York Bialys

They're not well known outside New York City, but these savory rolls should be.

BY CRISTIN WALSH

KISSING COUSIN TO the bagel, the bialy was first brought to the United States by Jewish immigrants from Poland (specifically the city of Bialystok, in the northeast of the country) who settled in the lower part of Manhattan in the early 20th century (see “Bialys’ Birthplace”). Downtown bakeries producing the golden, chewy, onion-and-poppy-seed-filled rolls eventually became so prevalent that the Lower East Side was once referred to as Bialy-town.

I searched our cookbook library for recipes, finding plenty that claimed to produce authentic New York bialys. But once I had mixed, kneaded, filled, and baked a few versions, I was left scratching my head. How could such disparate rolls all be “authentic”? I’d produced dense and chewy bialys, light and tender bialys, and a few in-betweens. And the onion fillings ran the gamut from dark to golden, from sweet to savory. With so many recipes leading me down such different paths, I decided a little legwork was in order to find out just what an authentic New York bialy should be.

Kossar’s, the oldest bialy bakery in the United States, opened for business on the Lower East Side in 1934, and the bialys made there are considered the best and most authentic in the city. I got my hands on a batch and tried them for myself. The edges were puffed and lightly brown, with a generous dimple in the middle to hold the sweet onion filling. I was taken by the salty flavor and soft but chewy texture of the roll.

Back in the kitchen, the onion filling proved to be the easy part. Simply sautéing the finely chopped onions in olive oil with kosher salt until they were golden and sweet and then stirring in the poppy seeds created a perfect onion filling. I could turn my attention to the more complicated conundrum: the roll.

I started with a simple dough of bread flour, water, yeast, and salt. I allowed it to double in size and then shaped it into flat rounds, dimpled the rounds, and filled them with cooked onions before baking. The rolls were denser and chewier than those I had found in New York and lacked the distinctive salty flavor. So I upped the salt amount to a generous 2 tablespoons of kosher salt, and to address the discrepancy in the texture, I tried all-purpose flour rather than bread flour, thinking that its lower



Bialys are best eaten warm out of the oven, but they'll keep well (in an airtight container) for a few days on the kitchen counter.

gluten content would help tenderize the dough. The end product was two steps closer to my goal, but the rolls were still too tough.

The recipe I was using required an initial proof before portioning and shaping the rolls, but once shaped and filled, the rolls were immediately baked. Previous baking experience suggested that letting the dough rest after portioning it might give the gluten a chance to relax

and the yeast an opportunity to create bigger air pockets within the dough, ultimately producing more-tender bialys.

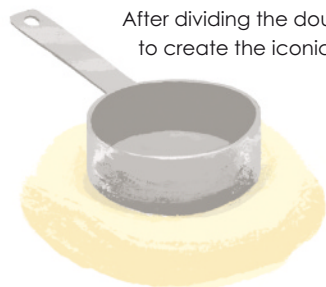
This time, after the initial rise, I shaped the dough into 12 equal-size balls and allowed them to rest at room temperature for an additional 30 minutes. After this second rise, I shaped the rested balls into 5-inch flat disks and gave them one more chance to rest before filling and baking. The texture

was improved, but the bialys were pale. I wanted a crusty exterior with golden-brown spots, so I turned to an obvious but often overlooked browning agent: sugar. The addition of just 1 tablespoon of sugar to the entire batch did wonders to improve the browning on the crust.

Finally, I had bialys that were golden brown, were tender yet chewy, and held just enough sweet onion filling to balance the salty flavor of the roll.

TEST KITCHEN TECHNIQUE Shaping Bialys

After dividing the dough and letting it rest, use this method to create the iconic shape.



MAKE A WELL

Use a greased and floured dry measuring cup to create a well in the center of the risen bialy dough.



ADD ONION MIXTURE

Fill the wells with about a tablespoon of our rich onion filling, and bake.

BIALYS Makes 12 bialys

If you substitute table salt for kosher, cut the salt amounts in half.

DOUGH

- 2 cups warm water (110 degrees)
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 4¾ cups (23¾ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt

FILLING

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 onions, chopped fine
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon poppy seeds

1. FOR THE DOUGH: In bowl of stand mixer, combine warm water, sugar, and yeast and let sit until foamy, about 3 minutes. Add flour and salt to yeast mixture. Fit stand mixer with dough hook and knead on low speed until dough comes together, about 3 minutes.

2. Turn out dough onto lightly floured counter and knead by hand until smooth, about 1 minute. Transfer dough to greased bowl and cover tightly with plastic wrap. Let dough rise at room temperature until almost doubled in size, about 1 hour.

3. Line 2 rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper and lightly flour parchment. Gently press center of dough to deflate. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter and divide into 12 equal pieces. Form each piece into rough ball by pulling dough edges underneath so top is smooth. Arrange 6 balls on each prepared sheet and cover loosely with plastic. Let dough rise at room temperature for 30 minutes.

4. FOR THE FILLING: Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onions and salt and cook until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Off heat, stir in poppy seeds.

5. Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 475 degrees. On lightly floured counter, use your hands to gently press each dough ball into 5-inch round.

Return to sheets and cover loosely with plastic. Let dough rise at room temperature until puffy, 15 to 20 minutes.

6. Grease and flour bottom of round 1-cup dry measuring cup (or 3-inch-diameter drinking glass). Press cup firmly into center of each dough round until cup touches sheet to make indentation for filling. (Reflour cup as needed to prevent sticking.)

7. Divide filling evenly among bialys (about 1 heaping tablespoon each) and smooth with back of spoon. Bake until spotty golden brown, 15 to 20 minutes, rotating and switching sheets halfway through baking. Transfer bialys to wire rack and let cool for 10 minutes. Serve.

Back Story Bialys' Birthplace

When food writer Mimi Sheraton set out in 1992 to discover the origins of the bialy, she went straight to the widely acknowledged source: Bialystok, Poland. But the trail was cold; no bakeries in Bialystok sold bialys. After interviewing far-flung former Bialystokers from New York to Argentina, Sheraton learned that while the bialy (*bialystoker kuchen*) was known in Bialystok in the early 1900s, the story of its origin had been lost. In her 2000 book *The Bialy Eaters*, Sheraton wrote: "It is doubtful that anyone will ever know unequivocally who first formed a bialystoker kuchen and when. My guess is that it originated by accident as a variation on the more ubiquitous *pletzl* . . . Given the random fickleness of fate, I conjecture that one day an unbaked *pletzl* fell onto a bakery floor and was stepped on with the heel of a shoe. Not wanting to waste anything, the frugal baker topped it with onions and poppy seeds, baked it, tasted it, and proclaimed it a eureka moment in bread history."

TESTING INEXPENSIVE ELECTRIC CITRUS JUICERS

One lemon for a vinaigrette is easy enough to juice by hand, but for larger extraction projects we use an electric citrus juicer. A good one should extract maximum juice with minimal effort and be easy to clean and store. Our favorite electric citrus juicer, the Breville Stainless Steel Juicer, is all those things, but at \$200, it's an investment. Could we find a good citrus juicer for less than \$100?

We compared seven models priced from \$20 to \$82; all have a spinning reamer that you hand-push a halved citrus fruit into to force out the juice. We juiced 10 limes, 10 oranges, and 10 grapefruits with each and measured how much juice they pressed from the fruit, and how quickly. We also considered how challenging they were to use, clean, and store, and how quietly they operated.

Except for the motorized bases, all the juicer parts are top-rack dishwasher-safe. Only one was annoying to clean: It has six detachable parts, and some were hard to snap together. We docked points accordingly.

Two juicers trap the juice in attached carafes; five just dispense their juice from a spout, it's up to you to capture the juice. We preferred attached carafes.

Testers found that a good juicer can extract 30 percent more juice than a bad one. The difference? Their reamers. If the ridges were too sharp, they cut into the fruit, sectioning it and spinning it around instead of pushing into the pulp; too dull and they left good juice behind. The best juicers came with two medium-ridged reamers that could accommodate fruit of different sizes.

The Dash Go Dual Citrus Juicer was the ultimate victor; while it's not as sturdy, powerful, or easy to use as the \$200 Breville, it's quiet and smooth, and it plowed through the fruit with ease. The second-place model, the Black & Decker Citrus Juicer, is our previous Best Buy; it was redesigned since we last tested. It worked well, but its motor is louder, and while it never stopped working, testers did note a burning smell toward the end of big jobs. Visit CooksCountry.com/mar15 for the full testing story and results chart. —HANNAH CROWLEY



TOO DULL
Poor reamers leave too much juice in the fruit.



JUST RIGHT
The best reamers leave little behind.

KEY Good ★★★ Fair ★★ Poor ★

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED	CRITERIA	TESTERS' NOTES
DASH Go Dual Citrus Juicer Price: \$19.99 Model: JB065	Juice Extraction ★★★ Cleanup ★★★ Ease of Use ★★★	This juicer expertly and securely extracted juice with two sizes of medium-ridged reamers. An attached carafe saved us from spills and detached easily for table use. It's cheap, light, and easy to clean, with a screen for adjusting pulp levels and a quiet motor that won't wake late sleepers.
BLACK & DECKER Citrus Juicer Price: \$19.99 Model: CJ625	Juice Extraction ★★★ Cleanup ★★★ Ease of Use ★★½	This juicer has both large and small reamers with sharp ridges that efficiently juiced citrus of all sizes. It has an adjustable pulp screen and was light, cheap, and easy to clean. It has a sturdy attached carafe and a nice pouring spout so it can be used at the table, but its louder motor is less preferable for quiet mornings.
JUICEMAN Citrus Juicer Price: \$29.99 Model: JCJ4000S	Juice Extraction ★★★ Cleanup ★★★ Ease of Use ★★	This juicer's large and small reamers have deep ridges that scoured the last drop of juice from citrus of all sizes. It spun the fastest, so it juiced quickly and efficiently, but it doesn't have an attached carafe and it stuttered occasionally, which didn't impede juicing but made us suspicious of its motor.
DASH Citrus Bar Price: \$49.99 Model: DCJ001SIL	Juice Extraction ★ Cleanup ★ Ease of Use ★	This is the only machine that juices two fruit halves at once, but it wasn't any faster. Its reamer's ridges were too sharp and cut into the fruit instead of pressing out the juice. Oranges were OK, but limes proved too small and grapefruits too large. Cleanup was a pain, too, with lots of individual pieces that were fussy to snap together.
NOT RECOMMENDED		

Poppy Seed Chicken Casserole

This Southern staple often starts with canned soup. We aimed for a fresher take.

BY ASHLEY MOORE

PAY A VISIT to the Blue Willow Inn restaurant in Social Circle, Georgia, for a buffet lunch and you may encounter the poppy seed chicken casserole, a rich, creamy, savory chicken dish with a crunchy cracker topping that was once widespread in the American South.

I found existing recipes in regional and historic cookbooks and cooked up five versions for a tasting in the test kitchen. These first attempts resulted in heavy, creamy, gelatinous messes with bland, artificial flavor. Comments ranged from the generous “not awful” to the more precise “gross.” “Only one way to go from here—up!” said one optimistic taster.

Down but not out, I quizzed a colleague from the South who remembered this casserole from her childhood and encouraged me to persevere. And so, determined, I took a red pen to my ingredient list. Out went the cans of soup; in came fresh mushrooms and chicken broth. Out went the three sticks of butter; in came white wine and fresh thyme. (Don’t worry, I kept some heavy cream in the mix. This isn’t a spa dish, after all.)

Drawing on established test kitchen knowledge, I knew that simply stirring together mushrooms, onions, chicken broth, and

base down pat. But what about the crunchy topping? Existing recipes called for crushed Town House crackers or Ritz Crackers. Why leave this element to chance? I prepared two casseroles, one with a Ritz-based topping, the other with Town House. The crushed Ritz, stirred with melted butter and a few additional poppy seeds, baked up just a bit more brown, crunchy, and flavorful. The toughest part now was waiting around for this savory Southern dish to cool down enough to eat.

POPPY SEED CHICKEN CASSEROLE

Serves 6

To crush the Ritz Crackers, seal them in a large zipper-lock bag and smack them with a rolling pin or heavy saucepan.

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 pound white mushrooms, trimmed and sliced thin
- 1 onion, halved and sliced thin
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- Salt and pepper
- ½ cup dry white wine
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 1¾ cups chicken broth
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 4 ounces cream cheese
- 1 (2½-pound) rotisserie chicken, skin and bones discarded, meat shredded into bite-size pieces (3 cups)
- 2 tablespoons poppy seeds
- 15 Ritz Crackers, crushed coarse

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Melt 2 tablespoons butter in Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add mushrooms, onion, thyme, 1 teaspoon salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid has evaporated and mushrooms begin to brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Add wine and cook until evaporated, about 3 minutes.

2. Stir in flour until vegetables are well coated and cook for 1 minute. Stir in broth and cream, scraping up any browned bits, and cook until slightly thickened, about 3 minutes. Stir in cream cheese and cook until melted, about 2 minutes. Stir in chicken and 1 tablespoon poppy seeds. Remove from heat and season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer chicken mixture to 8-inch square baking dish.

3. Microwave remaining 2 tablespoons

cream would net a loose, crumbly casserole. To get a creamy dish, I needed to thicken the sauce. A béchamel base (flour cooked with butter and then milk, the same sauce used to bind traditional macaroni and cheese) seemed too laborious, and a test using a cornstarch slurry introduced an off-putting flavor. Simply sprinkling flour over the mushrooms and onions as they cooked created a strong base for the broth and cream to build on. For an even more velvety texture, I stirred in ½ cup of cream cheese.

The casserole needs cooked chicken, but rather than baking or poaching chicken as part of my prep, I decided to save myself some time by using meat torn from a store-bought rotisserie chicken. A tablespoon of poppy seeds stirred into the mix gave the dish its traditional signature look (and a very faint pop of texture).

At this point, I had this casserole’s



Fresh mushrooms and dry white wine help us reinvent this buffet favorite.

butter in medium bowl until melted, about 20 seconds. Add crackers and remaining 1 tablespoon poppy seeds and toss to combine. Sprinkle cracker mixture evenly over chicken mixture. Bake casserole until topping is golden brown and filling is bubbling around edges, about 15 minutes. Let cool for 15 minutes before serving.

TO MAKE AHEAD

The casserole can be prepared through step 2, covered, and refrigerated for up to 24 hours. When ready to cook, microwave chicken mixture in baking dish, uncovered, until hot in center, about 5 minutes, stirring halfway through cooking. Sprinkle cracker mixture over top and bake casserole as directed in step 3.

KEY INGREDIENT Poppy Seeds

Poppy seeds are harvested from the dried pods of the *Papaver somniferum* plant, which also contains the raw material used to make opium. The seeds have no narcotic effects, but they can go rancid, so freeze them in an airtight container for up to six months.

SAFE SEEDS
These won't make you sleepy.



▶ What brand of chicken broth should you buy? Go to CooksCountry.com/chickenbrothtasting to read our taste test of supermarket broths.

Winter Vegetable Hash

Who says hash needs meat? The right mixture of vegetables, browned and cooked to tenderness, does the trick just fine. BY CHRISTIE MORRISON

HASH IS OFTEN a raid-the-refrigerator kind of dish, traditionally made with pieces of last night's meat plus potatoes and any other vegetables you have on hand. Mash it together, fry it up until crisp, and you're good to go. But you don't need meat to make a great hash. I set out to build a hearty vegetable hash that would work equally well at breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

I started by choosing vegetables that are available year-round so that I could enjoy this recipe even in the wintertime: Brussels sprouts, carrots, and potatoes, plus onion and garlic. But hashing together vegetables of very different densities presented a challenge: cooking times. The dense potatoes and carrots would take longer to soften than the leafy Brussels sprouts. Normally, we'd get around this by precooking the spuds and roots, but the last thing I wanted to do was haul out another pot. Cutting the potatoes and carrots into ½-inch pieces and starting them together in the microwave with a little oil solved the problem, coaxing them toward tender in only 6 minutes. While that was going on, I could prep the Brussels sprouts.

Brussels sprouts are typically shredded, sliced, halved, or cut into wedges when cooked into dishes like hash. I tried each preparation in the skillet but found that the first two tended to steam rather than brown—and good browning is what really elevates this vegetable to something special (steamed Brussels sprouts can have an unpleasant, sulfury taste). Halving or cutting the sprouts into wedges, on the other hand, provided nice flat surfaces that picked up flavorful browning. But the lack of moisture in the pan prevented the sprouts from cooking through, leaving me with halves or wedges that, while beautifully browned, were still undercooked and tough.

I looked at my bowl of microwaved potatoes and carrots. In addition to the tablespoon of oil I'd added to help steam the vegetables, there was now extra moisture from the cooked vegetables. If I added this liquid to the skillet along with the vegetables, would I have enough liquid to soften the browned sprouts?

Only one way to find out. I added the lot, covered the skillet, and cooked the vegetables for about 5 minutes,

giving them a stir halfway through. Sure enough, the sprouts softened right up and the precooked potatoes and carrots browned nicely.

I added some fresh thyme for savory depth and a tablespoon of butter for richness and shine, plus a few sliced scallions (both the white and green parts) for a fresh kick, and my hash was ready for the table—breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

BRUSSELS SPROUT AND POTATO HASH

Serves 4

Red potatoes are best here because their sturdy nature means they won't break apart in the hash. Look for small Brussels sprouts, no bigger than a golf ball, as they're likely to be sweeter and more tender than large sprouts. If you can find only large sprouts, halve them and cut each half into thirds.

- 1 pound red potatoes, unpeeled, cut into ½-inch chunks
- 2 carrots, peeled and cut into ½-inch chunks
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound Brussels sprouts, trimmed and quartered lengthwise
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 2 scallions, sliced thin

1. Toss potatoes, carrots, 1 tablespoon oil, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper together in large bowl. Cover and microwave until tender, 5 to 7 minutes, stirring halfway through cooking.

2. Meanwhile, heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add Brussels sprouts and cook until browned, 6 to 8 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add onion, water, thyme, garlic, microwaved vegetables, remaining 1 tablespoon oil, ¾ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper. Reduce heat to medium, cover, and cook until Brussels sprouts are tender, 5 to 7 minutes longer, stirring halfway through cooking.

3. Off heat, stir in butter and season with salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle with scallions and serve.



This hearty vegetable hash is equally great as a side dish to roasted meats or for breakfast with an egg on top.

TEST KITCHEN TECHNIQUE Cooking Brussels Sprouts Properly

Brussels sprouts are dense, meaning that it's easy to achieve deep browning before they're cooked through. Here's how we make sure they're brown and tender.



1. QUARTER

Trim the sprouts, then quarter them through the stem; this helps them hold together.



2. BROWN

Sear the sprouts in oil to create flavorful browning.



3. ADD WATER

Just a little water creates enough steam to cook the Brussels sprouts through.

Chocolate Chess Pie

We knew that introducing smooth, silky chocolate to this simple Southern pie would instantly elevate the dish, if only we could make it work. (We did.) BY AARON FURMANEK

WHAT'S THE POINT of chess pie? Simplicity, of course, coupled with plenty of sweetness. Chess pies—creamy custards baked in pie shells—are country-kitchen staples, delivering a soothing dose of comfort with accessible ingredients and a minimum of effort. They are everyday pies, easy to make, easy to love, charming, and, dare I say, humble—in the very best sense of the word.

The test kitchen has visited this territory before with recipes for lemon chess pie and buttermilk pie. But we wanted to take chess pie in a more luxurious direction with chocolate. I found several existing recipes for chocolate chess pie in my initial research, but none agreed on exactly what this pie should be: Some described the pie as “rich” and “fudgy,” while others claimed to produce pies that were “buttery” or “creamy.” I knew I wanted something sweet, soft, soothing, and with big chocolate flavor that was nowhere near bitter. It was time to get to work.

Per our usual process, I started by preparing and tasting pies made using the recipes I'd found. They mostly followed the same procedure: Stir together melted butter and chocolate (either cocoa powder or melted baking chocolate) with granulated sugar; beat in a few eggs; add vanilla and sometimes cream, milk, buttermilk, or evaporated milk; and bake in a partially baked pie shell. A few of the pies also called for a bit of cornmeal—a typical ingredient in chess pie—to help create the textural contrast of the thin top layer.

My panel of tasters and I were surprised at how varied these first pies were. Some were dense and fudgy, while others were light, thin, and almost runny. I decided I'd aim for a pie that was big on chocolate flavor, but light on texture—a soft custard with a delicate, sugary crust on top.

I took various elements from these recipes to create a rough working recipe. We preferred the richness of pies made with melted unsweetened chocolate to those made with cocoa. We favored a little cream over tangy buttermilk or cloying evaporated milk. And after two or three tries, I settled on four eggs, plus two additional yolks, for the silkiest, creamiest texture. Three tablespoons of flour helped everything



A sprinkle of sugar just before baking helps form the crackly top layer of the pie.

cohere enough to slice neatly.

The biggest bugaboo in my testing proved to be the baking temperature: Custards are notoriously fussy in the oven. Most of my initial recipes called for pies to be cooked at anywhere from 325 degrees to 375 degrees. After testing several pies, I found that baking at 350 degrees and higher caused the eggs to puff too much, cooking the outside of the filling faster than the inside and

resulting in a collapsed, sunken pie. I found that a 325-degree oven and a 35- to 40-minute baking time gave me the most consistent pie, with a softly textured but fully cooked custard, a satisfying chocolate flavor, and a golden-brown shell.

Now for the final touch: The delicate crackly crust atop the custard. My tasters weren't fond of cornmeal's flavor in this chocolate pie. Instead, I sprinkled an

even coat of granulated sugar over the pie just as I was putting it in the oven. The resulting crisp, delicate sugar crust provided that extra textural contrast I wanted.

It took many experiments—and plenty of failed pies—to get there, but finally I had a handsome chocolate chess pie that was simple to prepare, as promised, but thanks to the chocolate, full of complex luxury, too.

CHOCOLATE CHESS PIE

Serves 8 to 12

Our preferred unsweetened chocolate is Hershey's Unsweetened Baking Bar. Take care when melting the chocolate in the microwave, using only 50 percent power and stopping to stir every 30 seconds or so. This pie needs to sit for 4 hours after baking to set up. Serve with our Tangy Whipped Cream, if desired.

- 1 (9-inch) store-bought pie dough round
- 12 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 12 pieces
- 3 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped
- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) plus 1 teaspoon sugar
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 4 large eggs plus 2 large yolks
- ¼ cup heavy cream
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla extract

Find the recipe for our **Lemon Chess Pie** at CooksCountry.com/lemonchesspie. Checkmate.



TANGY WHIPPED CREAM

Makes 1½ cups

Be sure that the heavy cream and sour cream are cold before whipping.

- 1 cup heavy cream, chilled
- ¼ cup sour cream, chilled
- ¼ cup packed (1¾ ounces) light brown sugar
- ⅛ teaspoon vanilla extract

Using stand mixer fitted with whisk, whip all ingredients together on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to high and whip until soft peaks form, 1 to 3 minutes.

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Roll dough into 12-inch circle on lightly floured counter. Loosely roll dough around rolling pin and gently unroll it onto greased 9-inch pie plate, letting excess dough hang over edge. Ease dough into plate by gently lifting edge of dough with your hand while pressing into plate bottom with your other hand.

2. Trim overhang to ½ inch beyond lip of plate. Tuck overhang under itself; folded edge should be flush with edge of plate. Crimp dough evenly around edge of pie using your fingers. Wrap dough-lined plate loosely in plastic and freeze

until dough is firm, about 15 minutes.

3. Line chilled pie shell with 2 (12-inch) squares of parchment paper, letting parchment lie over edges of dough, and fill with pie weights. Bake until lightly golden around edges, 18 to 25 minutes. Carefully remove parchment and weights, rotate crust, and continue to bake until center begins to look opaque and slightly drier, 3 to 6 minutes. Remove from oven and let cool completely. Reduce oven temperature to 325 degrees.

4. Microwave butter and chocolate in bowl at 50 percent power, stirring occasionally, until melted, about 2 minutes.

In separate bowl, whisk 1½ cups sugar, flour, and salt together until combined. Whisk eggs and yolks, cream, and vanilla into sugar mixture until combined. Whisk chocolate mixture into sugar-egg mixture until fully incorporated and no streaks remain.

5. Pour filling into cooled pie shell. Sprinkle top of pie with remaining 1 teaspoon sugar. Bake until center of pie is just set and registers 180 degrees, 35 to 40 minutes. (Slight crust will form on top.) Transfer to wire rack and let cool completely, about 4 hours. Serve. (Pie can be refrigerated for up to 4 days. Bring to room temperature before serving.)

WHAT CAN GO WRONG Common Pitfalls for Custard Pies



SLUMPED CRUST

Our method calls for filling a chilled pie shell filled with pie weights (set on parchment paper in the shell) before prebaking. If you don't use pie weights when prebaking, your crust may shrink and pull away from the edges of the pie plate, and its compromised structure may leave your pie with a soggy bottom.



RUNNY SLICES

It's not easy to wait for dessert, but it's important to allow custard pies to cool and set up for at least 4 hours for clean, even slices. Slicing and serving the pie before it's completely cooled and set will result in pudding on a plate. Still delicious, but not exactly the look you want.

The American Table

What's in a Name? Or the Case of the Missing "E"

Chess pie is really a catchall term for a whole category of one-crust custard pies, from lemon to chocolate. Though now best known as a Southern dessert, chess pies were common fare across North America at least as far back as the early 19th century, and likely even before that—some culinary historians believe that English settlers brought the pie over to the New World as early as the 17th century.

But where did its curious name come from?

While Mary Randolph's 1825 cookbook *The Virginia House-wife* contained a recipe for "Transparent Pudding," which is essentially a chess pie with a different name, the earliest published recipe we could find for a pie called "chess" was in the October 1866 edition of *American Agriculturalist*. A reader named Mrs. Samuel P. May, from Grimes County, Texas, submitted the recipe for the simple custard pie, which she called "the best pie we ever ate," to the periodical; editors loved and printed the recipe.

One derivation theory suggests that "chess" pie is a merely a clipped version of "chest" pie, meaning it could be stored in a nonrefrigerated pie chest. Another theory points to a colloquialism along the lines of, "it's no big deal, it's jes' (chess) pie."

But the most likely etymology ties chess pie to an archaic English spelling of "cheese," which was often spelled with just one "e" in the middle: chese. According to culinary historian and Southern food expert Damon Lee Fowler, the word "cheese," or "chese," was often used to signify the types of curds and custards commonly used in single-crust pies. Linguistic license, which early Americans were fond of exercising, allowed cheese pie, or chese pie, to become chess pie.

SHOPPING The Upper Crust

We prefer homemade pie dough to store-bought (visit CooksCountry.com/singlepiecrust for our version), but sometimes you need the convenience of premade. In a recent taste test of store-bought pie dough, one brand, Wholly Wholesome, came out on top: Its frozen product, the 9" Certified Organic Traditional Bake at Home Rolled Pie Dough, was our winner, and its refrigerated product, the Organic Traditional 9" Pie Shell (which is sold already in a disposable pie plate), was the runner-up.



OUR FAVORITE STORE-BOUGHT CRUST
Wholly Wholesome Organic Rolled Dough

Cooking Class Pub-Style Burgers

Getting a flawless, juicy pub-style skillet burger starts at the butcher counter.

BY BRYAN ROOF



PUB-STYLE BURGERS

Serves 4

Sirloin steak tips are also sold as flap meat. You will need to freeze the meat for 35 minutes before processing it. Be gentle when shaping the patties, taking care not to overwork the meat so the burgers won't become dense. Serve with your favorite toppings.

- 2 pounds sirloin steak tips, trimmed of excess fat and cut into ½-inch chunks**
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled slightly**
- Salt and pepper**
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil**
- 4 hamburger buns, toasted and buttered**

1. Place steak on baking sheet in single layer. Freeze steak until very firm and starting to harden around edges but still pliable, about 35 minutes.

2. Place one-quarter of steak in food processor and pulse until finely ground into ¼-inch pieces, about 35 pulses, stopping to redistribute around bowl as necessary to ensure meat is evenly ground. Transfer meat to second baking sheet. Repeat with remaining 3 batches of steak. Spread meat over sheet and inspect carefully, discarding any long strands of gristle or large chunks of hard meat or fat.

3. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees.

Drizzle butter over ground meat and add 1 teaspoon pepper. Gently toss with fork to combine. Divide meat into 4 lightly packed balls. Gently flatten into patties ¾ inch thick and about 4½ inches in diameter. (Patties can be refrigerated, covered, for up to 1 day.)

4. Season 1 side of patties liberally with salt and pepper. Using spatula, flip patties and season other side. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over high heat until just smoking. Using spatula, transfer burgers to skillet and cook without moving them for 2 minutes. Using spatula, flip burgers and cook for 2 minutes longer. Transfer patties to rimmed baking sheet. Bake until burgers register 125 degrees for medium-rare or 130 degrees for medium, 3 to 6 minutes.

5. Transfer burgers to plate and let rest for 5 minutes. Transfer to buns and serve.

PUB-STYLE BURGER SAUCE

Makes about 1 cup

- ¾ cup mayonnaise**
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce**
- 1 tablespoon packed dark brown sugar**
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce**
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh chives**
- 1 garlic clove, minced**
- ¾ teaspoon pepper**

Whisk all ingredients together in bowl.

STEP-BY-STEP Ten Steps to Juicy Pub-Style Burgers



1. FREEZE

Freeze ½-inch chunks of steak on a baking sheet just until very firm and starting to harden around the edges.

WHY? Firm, slightly frozen meat is chopped more efficiently in the food processor; meat straight from the fridge smears and tears.



2. GRIND

Pulse the meat until finely ground into ¼-inch pieces.

WHY? A coarse grind stays loosely packed, ensuring a tender burger.



3. INSPECT

Spread the meat over a baking sheet and inspect carefully, discarding any long strands of gristle or large chunks of hard meat or fat.

WHY? Gristle and fat get in the way of the delicate texture of the freshly ground meat.



4. ADD BUTTER

Drizzle butter over ground meat and add 1 teaspoon of pepper.

WHY? Gently working melted butter into the ground meat not only ensures that the burgers cook up juicy but also encourages flavorful browning.



5. USE FORK

Resist the urge to mix the meat with your hands and use a fork instead.

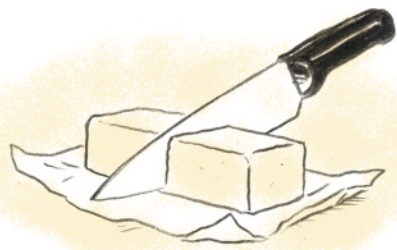
WHY? A fork will help distribute the butter more evenly and keep the meat grind loose.

Core Techniques

TEST KITCHEN TIPS
FOR ANY THICK
BURGER RECIPE

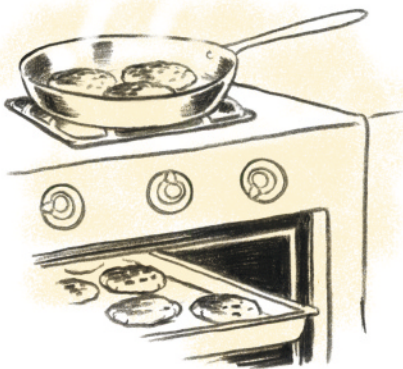
Add Fat

Leaner cuts make the best burgers, because fattier cuts come with baggage—more gristle and sinew that can make them hard to chew even after grinding. Incorporating extra fat (in this case, butter) into lean ground meat before cooking does more than just add flavor; it also dials up the juiciness on the inside of the burger and encourages browning in the pan for faintly crisp edges. This works well in any burger recipe, particularly ones that call for leaner meats like chicken, turkey, or fish. Starting with a lean cut and adding in your own fat also allows you to control how much fat ultimately ends up in your burger.



Use Gentle Pressure

Whenever working with ground meat, shape the patties with a gentle hand. The meat will adhere as it cooks to create a cohesive burger. If you pack the patties too tightly, the meat will bind too tightly, and you'll end up with tough, dry, chewy burgers. Our favorite technique is to start with a loosely packed ball of meat and then gently pat it down to a ¾-inch-thick disk.



Cook Twice

The key to thick skillet burgers with a crisp, seared exterior and a juicy medium-rare interior is a two-step process: first a hot sear on the stovetop to create a nice brown crust and then a visit to a relatively low, 300-degree oven to bring the interior of the burger to medium-rare or medium without leaving the exterior leathery or burnt. (For beef, 125 degrees is the goal for medium-rare; 130 degrees for medium.)

Ground Meat Primer

Why Grind at Home?

Meat ground at home has much better texture and flavor than supermarket ground beef. What's more, by purchasing intact cuts of meat and grinding the meat yourself, you know exactly what's in your burger. No pink slime here, and you can safely cook to medium-rare without worry. We've found that a food processor is an excellent tool for grinding meat at home, producing a coarse grind that's perfect for burgers. But the food processor doesn't grind the meat as finely as a commercial meat grinder, so stray pieces of gristle are more obvious. To avoid these pockets of chewy gristle, purchase a cut of meat that has little sinew, like sirloin steak tips (aka flap meat), and inspect the meat closely after it's ground. Low-sinew burgers are also lower in fat, but don't worry about the lower fat content producing dry or tough burgers—that's why we add butter to the mix.

Best Cuts to Grind for Burgers

We recommend grinding sirloin steak tips for these burgers, but short ribs and well-trimmed chuck roast also have the right texture and fat content (you still should add the butter). Avoid the round, which has a tendency to have liver-like flavors.

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE Eating in Haste

To make sure our thick burgers are cooked correctly, we sear them in a skillet (for a flavorful brown crust) and finish cooking them in the oven. But that's not the end of the story; it is imperative that you let the cooked burgers sit undisturbed for 5 minutes before tucking into them. Why? Heat forces the meat's juices to the center of the burger, and if you cut (or bite) into a burger straight out of the oven, those collected juices will spurt out. A short rest allows the juices to redistribute evenly back into the meat so that the burger is moist and juicy.



UNRESTED BURGER
If you don't let your burgers rest for 5 minutes after you take them out of the oven, you run the risk of losing all their juices.



6. FORM

Divide the meat into four lightly packed balls and then gently flatten into ¾-inch-thick patties, about 4½ inches in diameter.

WHY? Forming the patties gently helps prevent overworking the meat, which can make for tough burgers.



7. SALT NOW

Sprinkle the patties with salt and pepper.

WHY? Salting is essential for a well-seasoned burger, but salt also removes water from the meat—not a path to a tender burger, so don't salt too early.



8. SEAR

Cook the burgers briefly on each side over high heat until well browned.

WHY? This will caramelize the exterior of the meat and form a flavorful crust.



9. BAKE

Transfer the burgers to a baking sheet and bake in a low, 300-degree oven until they reach the desired temperature.

WHY? Searing on the stove and finishing in a low-heat oven ensures a well-browned crust and juicy center.



10. LET REST

Transfer the burgers to a plate and let rest for 5 minutes.

WHY? Resting allows the juices to redistribute evenly throughout the patty.



Slow Cooker Hungarian Goulash

This beef stew should be rich, beefy, and full of sweet pepper flavor. Sounds like a job for the slow cooker. BY DIANE UNGER

BEEF, SLOWLY SIMMERED to tenderness with onion, carrot, garlic, sweet paprika, tomato paste, sweet peppers, and broth and then enriched with a stir of sour cream and spooned over egg noodles: There is a lot to like about Hungarian goulash. I hoped that making this dish in the slow cooker would save effort while still producing a complex, richly flavored stew.

Many goulash recipes call for starting on the stovetop, browning cubes of stew beef in batches and removing it from the pan, sautéing aromatics and spices in the drippings, stirring in flour and broth, and then transferring the mixture to the oven to slowly and evenly cook until the meat is tender. But I wanted to see if I could make slow-cooker goulash without having to brown the meat.

I turned to the test kitchen's great recipe for this stew that skips the stovetop browning, instead leaving the stew uncovered in the oven to let the meat above the surface of the liquid brown in the dry heat. I was pretty sure it wouldn't work in a covered slow cooker (slow cookers don't get hot enough if you keep the cover off), but I tried it anyway; sure enough, it failed. The stew turned out watery, with muted flavors. I needed to figure out the best way to adapt this recipe to the moist environment of the slow cooker.

Big Paprika Punch

We use a full $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of sweet paprika—about twice the amount used in some other recipes—as the key seasoning in our Slow-Cooker Hungarian Goulash. To extract the most flavor from this mild spice, we combine it with roasted red peppers, tomato paste, and vinegar. But we don't stop there. We then sauté this mixture to “bloom” the flavors before adding it to the slow cooker with the beef. The result? Incredible depth of flavor.



OUR FAVORITE
Earthy, fruity
paprika from
The Spice House.



A puree of roasted red peppers, lots of paprika, tomato paste, and vinegar forms the backbone of the sauce.

I rebooted and started over with the same test kitchen version, knowing I'd make some changes along the way. I salted the cubed beef chuck-eye roast (our preferred cut for braising) to start the seasoning process. I cooked 6 cups of diced onion and 4 carrots (cut into 1-inch pieces) until the vegetables had softened. To that, I added a pureed mixture of drained, jarred roasted red peppers, a full $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of sweet Hungarian paprika, a bit of tomato paste to deepen the flavor, and vinegar for balance.

When developing this recipe, we found that the key to bringing out the full sweet, peppery flavor of the paprika was to cook the mixture until it had reduced, concentrated, and turned a deep rust color. Instead of deglazing the pot with 1 cup of beef broth as the recipe called for, I scaled back the liquid to just 5 tablespoons so the stew wouldn't be watery.

I did a side-by-side test and found that when I used only 5 tablespoons of liquid, tasters couldn't tell the difference between a goulash made with beef broth and one made with water, so I went

with the latter. I stirred the mixture into the cubed beef in the slow cooker, put the cover on, and felt my hopes rise as I turned it on.

After the slow cooker ran for about 7 hours on high heat, I lifted off the cover and took a step back. How could the goulash still be so watery? On further consideration, I knew that the liquid had to have come from the beef as the stew cooked. To tighten it up, this stew needed a stiff shot of . . . something.

In my next round of tests, I added flour to the sautéed vegetables in increasing increments until I settled on 3 tablespoons, which was just the right amount to thicken the sauce enough to cling to and coat the egg noodles that were waiting in the wings. For a traditional finishing touch (and after removing any surface fat from the goulash), I stirred in sour cream—after tempering it with some of the hot gravy so the shock of the heat wouldn't cause the sour cream to break.

Finally, I had a hearty bowl of meaty, thick, Hungarian goulash without even opening the oven door.

SLOW-COOKER HUNGARIAN GOULASH

Serves 6

Do not substitute hot or smoked Spanish paprika for the sweet paprika. Since paprika is vital to this recipe, it is best to use a fresh container. Our favorite paprika is The Spice House Hungarian Sweet Paprika. Serve this rich stew over egg noodles or spaetzle.

1 (4-pound) boneless beef chuck-eye roast, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch pieces

Salt and pepper

1 (12-ounce) jar roasted red peppers, rinsed

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup sweet paprika

2 tablespoons tomato paste

1 tablespoon distilled white vinegar

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

4 pounds onions, chopped (6 cups)

4 carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks

3 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 bay leaf

5 tablespoons water

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup sour cream

2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

1. Pat beef dry with paper towels and season with 1 teaspoon salt; transfer to slow cooker. Process red peppers, paprika, tomato paste, and vinegar in food processor until smooth, about 2 minutes, scraping down sides of bowl as needed; set aside.

2. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onions, carrots, and 1 teaspoon salt and cook, covered, until onions are softened, 8 to 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in flour, bay leaf, and red pepper mixture and cook until mixture begins to brown and stick to bottom of pot, about 2 minutes. Stir in water, scraping up any browned bits.

3. Stir onion mixture into slow cooker until beef is evenly coated. Cover and cook until meat is tender, 6 to 7 hours on high, or 7 to 8 hours on low.

4. Turn off slow cooker, let stew settle for 5 minutes, then skim fat from surface with large spoon. Discard bay leaf. Combine sour cream and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup hot stew liquid in bowl (to temper sour cream), then stir mixture into stew. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, sprinkled with parsley.



Cooking for Two French Onion Soup

A soup built on slow-caramelized onions in less than an hour? We cracked the code.

BY CHRISTIE MORRISON

CLASSIC FRENCH ONION soup is an exercise in patience—it involves building a rich beef stock and then slowly caramelizing onions until they're meltingly soft and sweet. A traditional toasted crouton blanketed in melted Gruyère cheese adds an irresistible finish.

Unfortunately, in many streamlined recipes the cheesy crouton provides tasty camouflage for a bowl full of ersatz broth and barely tender, flavorless onions. To make a worthwhile French onion soup for two, we'd need to come up with a streamlined way to get deeply caramelized onions and richly flavored stock while keeping the cooking time to a minimum.

I started by looking at the test kitchen's standard caramelized onion technique. We've found that a large, low-sided skillet usually works best for caramelizing onions since it allows moisture to evaporate, hastening the caramelizing process. That's fine, of course, when you don't mind firing up the stove twice and using two heavy pans—first to cook the onions and then to simmer the soup—but for a week-night dish for two, it was a nonstarter. Since the first step in caramelizing onions is cooking them until they've softened and released their moisture, I turned to the microwave. After just 10 minutes of unattended cooking (plus ½ teaspoon of salt to help the onions release their moisture), I had fully softened onions. After draining the onions of their liquid, I was ready to caramelize.

I melted some butter in a large saucepan (fine for caramelization here, because the onions had already expelled their excess moisture in the microwave) over medium-high heat. We traditionally use lower heat to caramelize onions so they cook before they burn, but since I was starting with already-cooked onions, I thought I could be a little more aggressive (and hopefully save some time) by using a higher flame. After about 10 minutes, the onions began to develop some color. But even though I was making sure to stir them frequently, I noticed that the onions were browning unevenly. To even things out, I deglazed the pot with 2 tablespoons of water. Besides reducing hot spots, this technique loosened the browned bits from the bottom of the pot and

kept them from burning. I repeated the process a second time until the onions were uniformly golden-brown and glazy in just 18 minutes—saving me nearly an hour of cooking time.

Now I could address the soup base. While recipes in our archive have used beef and chicken broth—alone or in combination—for French onion soup, I found that chicken broth was sufficient to add savory depth to this quicker soup without cloaking the onions' earthy sweetness. I did find that a few tablespoons of dry sherry—which we preferred to red or white wine's acidic finish—added warm complexity. To round out the flavors, I tossed a few sprigs of thyme and a bay leaf into the mixture to steep as the soup simmered.

The last step was the cheesy crouton. Traditionally, the soup is ladled into oven-safe bowls, topped with a toasted crouton and cheese, and broiled until the cheese is bubbling and browned. But since the last 15 minutes of the soup's cooking time were hands-off, I decided to make better use of my time: While the soup simmered, I broiled the croutons twice (once to toast the bread and again to melt the cheese) and then added them to the finished soup. *Et voilà!* I had a meal of rich, cheesy French onion soup in 45 minutes.

FRENCH ONION SOUP FOR TWO

Look for small or demi-baguettes in the bakery section of your supermarket. Three onions weigh about 1½ pounds.

- 3 onions, halved and sliced thin
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ teaspoon brown sugar
- 4 tablespoons water
- 3 tablespoons dry sherry
- 3 cups chicken broth
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- 4 (½-inch-thick) slices baguette
- 2 ounces Gruyère cheese, shredded (½ cup)

1. Combine onions and ½ teaspoon salt in bowl and microwave, covered, until fully softened, about 10 minutes; drain. Melt butter in large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onions, sugar,



We simplify the process (and eliminate the need for special crocks) by broiling the cheesy croutons on a baking sheet.

and ¼ teaspoon pepper and cook until onions are golden brown, stirring occasionally, about 12 minutes.

2. Add 2 tablespoons water and cook until nearly evaporated, scraping up any browned bits, about 3 minutes. Add remaining 2 tablespoons water and cook until onions are brown, scraping up any browned bits, about 3 minutes. Stir in sherry and cook until evaporated, about 2 minutes.

3. Stir in broth, thyme sprigs, and bay leaf. Increase heat to high and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer for 15 minutes. Discard thyme sprigs and bay leaf and season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Meanwhile, adjust oven rack 6 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Arrange baguette slices on parchment paper-lined baking sheet and broil until deep golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Remove bread from oven and divide cheese evenly among slices; broil until melted and bubbly, 2 to 4 minutes.

5. Ladle soup into bowls and place 2 baguette slices in each bowl. Serve.

TEST KITCHEN TECHNIQUE Faster Caramelized Onions

Classic French onion soup can take all afternoon to make—just caramelizing the onions can easily eat up an hour. For a two-person guest list, we needed to speed things up.

Our two-step process for faster caramelized onions starts the salted sliced onions in the microwave where they cook, covered, until soft, which takes about 10 minutes. Then we drain off the exuded liquid and sauté the onions not slowly, but quickly—don't forget to stir—until brown, about 12 minutes. Then we deglaze twice to extract every ounce of flavor before adding the broth.



COOK TWICE; SAVE TIME
Microwave and then sauté.



Recipe Makeover Baked Stuffed Shrimp

Surprise: We like this lower-fat version of baked stuffed shrimp even more than the original. BY CRISTIN WALSH

SHRIMP IS FULL of good stuff for your body: protein, omega-3 fatty acids, and minerals. And it's relatively low in fat and calories. But classic baked stuffed shrimp packs a whopping 670 calories and 39 grams of fat per serving of five shrimp. So how does a seaside classic become so bad for you? Bread, butter, and full-fat mayo. I was determined to cut the calorie count in half and the fat content by far more than that, without sacrificing satisfaction.

Full-fat recipes often call for using bread crumbs or crushed buttery crackers that are then drenched in up to a stick of melted butter. Celery, garlic, lemon, and wine or herbs are added—and fatty mayonnaise, too—before the mixture is packed into jumbo shrimp that have been flattened for stuffing. They taste great but come with a cost.

My first target: calorie-heavy bread. As I investigated options for alternatives, I discovered some eye-opening numbers. Prepackaged bread crumbs had 110 calories per ounce, while buttery crackers boasted 140 calories; both were too much for me. Easy homemade white bread crumbs, with 80 calories per ounce, were a move in the right direction.

Next I went after the butter. Butter acts as not only a flavoring in the stuffing but also as a binder for the bread. But thanks to earlier test kitchen experiments with shrimp burgers, I knew I had another ingredient at hand to accomplish both of those tasks just as

The Numbers

Nutritional information is for one serving of five shrimp.

Traditional Baked Stuffed Shrimp

CALORIES 670

FAT 39 g • SATURATED FAT 19 g

Cook's Country Reduced-Fat Baked Stuffed Shrimp

CALORIES 330

FAT 9 g • SATURATED FAT 3 g

well: shrimp. Four shrimp processed into a paste and mixed in gave me a substantive stuffing. But it was crumbly; losing the butter meant sacrificing moisture and smoothness. Hello, low-fat mayo. A half-cup was just enough to keep the stuffing moist while holding the fat count in check.

With the stuffing base under control, I decided to pump up the flavor. A bit of diced celery sautéed with garlic in a very spare amount of butter gave a little crunch and just a suggestion of indulgence. Lemon zest and juice and a bit of white wine added brightness and acidity. Parsley rounded out the lineup with an herby note.

Rather than sabotaging shrimp's healthy reputation with mounds of bread and butter, this baked stuffed shrimp recipe keeps the calories and fat in check—and to our surprise, we even preferred it to the original.



By replacing some of the butter and crumbs in the stuffing with ground shrimp, we amplify the flavor and cut fat and calories at the same time.

REDUCED-FAT BAKED STUFFED SHRIMP

Serves 4

Look for shrimp labeled "U15," which indicates that the number of shrimp per pound is under 15. Our favorite low-fat mayonnaise is Hellmann's Light.

- 4 slices hearty white sandwich bread
- 24 extra-jumbo shrimp (U15), peeled and deveined
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 2 celery ribs, chopped fine
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- ½ cup low-fat mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon dry white wine
- 2 teaspoons grated lemon zest plus 1 tablespoon juice
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Pulse bread in food processor to coarse crumbs, about 10 pulses. Transfer to rimmed baking sheet and bake until golden and dry, about 8 minutes, stirring halfway through baking. Transfer crumbs to large bowl to cool.

2. Line rimmed baking sheet with foil and spray with vegetable oil spray. Discard tails from 4 shrimp, then pulse shrimp in food processor until coarsely chopped, about 5 pulses; transfer to bowl with cooled bread crumbs.

3. Melt butter in 10-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add celery and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer to bowl with processed shrimp. Stir in mayonnaise, parsley, wine, lemon zest and juice, salt, and pepper until well combined.

4. Pat remaining 20 shrimp dry with paper towels. Using paring knife and holding shrimp with curve facing upward toward you, butterfly shrimp. Cut 1-inch slit through center of each shrimp so they lie flat.

5. Lay shrimp butterflied side down on prepared sheet. Divide filling among exposed sides of shrimp near head, about 1 heaping tablespoon per shrimp, pressing to adhere. Allow tails to curl up over stuffing. Bake until shrimp are opaque, 12 to 15 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking.

6. Remove shrimp from oven and heat broiler. Broil shrimp until crumbs are deep golden brown and crisp, 1 to 3 minutes. Serve.

TEST KITCHEN TECHNIQUE How to Stuff Shrimp

Shrimp don't have a natural cavity to fill; in this case, "stuffing" means creating a flat surface for the filling.



BUTTERFLY AND CUT

Use a paring knife to slice about halfway into the convex side of each shrimp. Remove vein if necessary. Cut a 1-inch slit through the center of each shrimp.



"STUFF"

Place the shrimp, sliced side down, on the prepared baking sheet and spoon on the stuffing, pressing to make sure it adheres.



Five Easy Recipes Chickpea Salads

With a few extra ingredients and a simple technique, you can transform a humble can of chickpeas into a bright and lively salad. BY ASHLEY MOORE

HEALTHFUL, INEXPENSIVE, EASY.

Canned chickpeas are a slam-dunk convenience food in most regards—except flavor: On their own, they don't offer much. But these nutty little nuggets, round and firm, make a solid foundation for easy—and flavorful—side salads or light lunches.

I started my experiments by tossing a few cans of chickpeas with a simple vinaigrette and assorted add-ins. And the results were just fine: By adding flavorful ingredients like briny olives, sweet carrots, and peppery arugula, I'd created an array of dishes that my colleagues enjoyed well enough. But I wasn't satisfied. A salad should be more than the sum of its parts, and while the parts in these salads were tasty, each salad, as a whole, didn't sing. The dressing and its flavors didn't infuse the chickpeas, instead leaving a pool of vinaigrette at the bottom of the bowl. Fine for mopping up with a heel of bread, but I wanted the dressing to impart more than just surface flavor to the chickpeas.

A coworker wondered whether heating up the chickpeas would help the dressing adhere. Suspicious, but eager to try something that didn't involve a skillet or a saucepan, I dropped the strained chickpeas into a bowl and gave the microwave a whirl. Just a minute and a half on high power and the warmed chickpeas seemed to soak up more dressing, adding a more cohesive flavor to the salad. But why?

I reached out to our science editor for an explanation. He told me that the seed coats that cover chickpeas (and protect them from bugs and fungi) are rich in pectin. Because pectin is sensitive to heat and moisture, blasting the chickpeas in the microwave breaks it down, which in turn weakens the protective seed coating and creates a more porous inner surface. The dressing can then easily penetrate the seed coat and cling to the chickpeas, delivering a satisfying punch of flavor with each bite.

With that discovery, I was off and running. Besides the savory olive and arugula salad, I developed a sweet-sour version with carrots and golden raisins, one with pungent arugula and licorice-y fennel, a version with orange slices and red onion, and a summery salad with roasted red peppers and feta.

CHICKPEA SALAD WITH CARROTS, ARUGULA, AND OLIVES

Serves 4

The test kitchen prefers Pastene Chick Peas. Shred the carrots on the large holes of a box grater or use a food processor fitted with the shredding disk.

- 2 (15-ounce) cans chickpeas, rinsed
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- Salt and pepper
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 3 carrots, peeled and shredded
- 1 ounce (1 cup) baby arugula, chopped coarse
- ½ cup pitted kalamata olives, chopped coarse

1. Microwave chickpeas in medium bowl until hot, about 1 minute 30 seconds. Stir in oil, lemon juice, ¾ teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon pepper, and cayenne and let sit for 30 minutes.
2. Add carrots, arugula, and olives and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

CHICKPEA SALAD WITH CARROTS, RAISINS, AND ALMONDS

Substitute lime juice for lemon juice and ½ cup golden raisins, ¼ cup chopped fresh mint, and ¼ cup toasted sliced almonds for arugula and olives.

CHICKPEA SALAD WITH FENNEL AND ARUGULA

Substitute 1 fennel bulb, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and cut into ¼-inch pieces, for carrots and olives.

CHICKPEA SALAD WITH ORANGE, RED ONION, AND CHIPOTLE

Substitute 3 oranges, segmented; ½ cup thinly sliced red onion; ½ cup fresh cilantro leaves; and 2 teaspoons minced canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce for carrots, arugula, and olives.

CHICKPEA SALAD WITH ROASTED RED PEPPERS AND FETA

Substitute ½ cup chopped jarred roasted red peppers, ½ cup crumbled feta cheese, and ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley for carrots, arugula, and olives.



Heating the chickpeas before dressing them helps them absorb more flavor.



Equipment Review Nonstick Cooking Sprays

New sprays promise performance without the chemicals—
can any take the heat? BY LAUREN SAVOIE

A SPRITZ FROM a can is far faster than greasing by hand, and cooking sprays help limit the amount of oil for lower-fat cooking. But many consumers have questions about the health effects and environmental safety of added chemicals in cooking sprays. Manufacturers have responded by launching innovative new sprays that allow them to avoid the standard chemicals. How do they perform compared with traditional aerosols?

To find out, we tried four top-selling traditional aerosol sprays and three innovative sprays. We chose each brand's canola oil product or "original" oil blend. Throughout the testing we compared each product's performance with that of plain canola oil sprayed from our winning refillable oil mister, the Orka Flavor and Oil Mister with Filter.

Most cooking sprays are aerosols; "aerosol" simply means small particles dispersed in air or gas. The particles in traditional aerosol cooking sprays are oil, an emulsifier called lecithin (found naturally in soybeans, eggs, and milk), and an antifoaming agent (usually dimethyl silicone). The gas is usually a liquid propellant such as propane. Two innovative products, PAM Organic Canola Oil and Spectrum Naturals Canola Spray Oil, make a "cleaner" aerosol by eliminating the antifoaming agent and switching the propellant to a naturally occurring gas like carbon dioxide. The third product,

Winona Pure 100% Canola Oil, uses a nonaerosol "bag-on-valve" system in which the gas and oil never mix in the can. When Winona's trigger is pushed, compressed air squeezes an oil-filled bag inside, forcing out the oil.

We set to work oiling Bundt pans and muffin tins; coating waffle irons; and spraying stainless-steel skillets for fried eggs, omelets, and chicken stir-fries. All the products were adept at preventing sticking—until we got to the fried eggs. While both traditional and innovative aerosols easily released eggs from skillets, eggs made with plain canola oil or Winona's nonaerosol spray stuck to pans. The reason? Unlike the other products, the Winona spray and plain canola oil don't contain lecithin, which helps the oil adhere evenly to the pan's entire surface, leaving no bare spots. Products with lecithin released foods more readily than plain oil.

But lecithin has a dark side. It can cause oil to darken at a lower temperature and impart off-flavors to food. Our instructions for chicken stir-fry call for heating oil in a skillet until smoking, but while plain canola oil is still clear at its smoke point, five of the six sprays with lecithin turned almost black before they started smoking, giving "burnt popcorn" or "spoiled margarine" flavors to food.

Dimethyl silicone, the antifoaming chemical, clearly helped some products spray more consistently in even mists; products without dimethyl silicone pooled and dripped. It also helped prevent browning.

In the end, we weren't convinced that innovative aerosols are better than traditional aerosols; however, we found one nonaerosol spray that doesn't contain chemicals and won't cause unwanted darkening: Winona Pure 100% Canola Oil. But because it doesn't contain lecithin, it is slightly less effective at preventing sticking.

For stickier tasks, we preferred PAM Original No-Stick Spray (it costs \$0.50 per ounce, compared with about \$0.17 per ounce for plain canola oil). This spray perfectly released foods, misted evenly, and browned 20 degrees after its smoke point. (Why? PAM Original's oil blend includes palm oil, a highly saturated oil that, along with dimethyl silicone, helps discourage browning.) For an all-around great spray, we're sticking with PAM.








Lecithin: Love It or Loathe It?

Lecithin helps oil sprays adhere to the pan and create a nonstick surface. But lecithin can also cause some oils to darken and give a burnt or spoiled flavor to food. Our winner, PAM Original Cooking Spray, has a fix in the mix: Its blend includes palm oil, a highly saturated oil that inhibits browning.



DARK AND FUNKY
Lecithin can cause some oils to darken at lower temperatures.

KEY Good ★★★ Fair ★★ Poor ★

RECOMMENDED	CRITERIA	TESTERS' NOTES
<p>PAM Original No-Stick Spray Price: \$2.99 for 6 oz (\$0.50 per oz) Ingredients: Canola oil, palm oil, coconut oil, lecithin from soybeans (nonstick agent), dimethyl silicone (for antifoaming), rosemary extract (preservative), propellant</p> 	<p>Taste ★★★½ Spraying ★★★ Nonstick ★★★ Browning ★★</p>	<p>This best-selling brand corners the market on cooking spray and for good reason: This product sprayed in a fine, broad mist without pooling or foaming and effortlessly released eggs, chicken, waffles, and cakes. In addition to canola oil, PAM Original also contains palm oil—a highly saturated oil—which makes this spray less prone to unwanted browning and funky flavors.</p>
<p>WINONA Pure 100% Canola Oil Price: \$4.65 for 5 oz (\$0.93 per oz) Ingredients: Canola oil</p> 	<p>Taste ★★★ Spraying ★½ Nonstick ★★ Browning ★★★</p>	<p>This innovative product combines the purity of an oil mister with the convenience of a supermarket spray. It performed identically to plain canola oil, maintaining its clear color and neutral flavor well past 400 degrees. The absence of lecithin makes this spray slightly less effective.</p>
<p>CRISCO Original No-Stick Cooking Spray Price: \$3.53 for 6 oz (\$0.59 per oz) Ingredients: Canola oil, soy lecithin, dimethyl silicone (for antifoaming), propellant</p> 	<p>Taste ★★ Spraying ★★ Nonstick ★★★ Browning ★½</p>	<p>This spray breezed through all our tests, and its broad mist adhered well to the crevices of waffle irons and Bundt pans. Our one gripe: its low browning point, which changed its normally "neutral" taste from "slightly buttery" to "burnt popcorn" when cooking at temperatures higher than 400 degrees.</p>
<p>SMART BALANCE Non-Stick Cooking Spray, Original Price: \$3.19 for 6 oz (\$0.53 per oz) Ingredients: Vegetable oil blend (canola, soy, and olive oils), soy lecithin, grain alcohol (preservative), dimethyl-polysiloxane, and propellant</p> 	<p>Taste ★★ Spraying ★½ Nonstick ★★★ Browning ★½</p>	<p>This product was perfectly adept at preventing sticking but sprayed quickly and directly, making it hard to control the amount of oil on the pan. It does contain an antifoaming agent, so this is likely the result of a bad nozzle. When sampled plain, this spray tasted "neutral," but it took on a "spoiled margarine" flavor when heated until smoking.</p>
<p>MAZOLA Original Cooking Spray Price: \$4.41 for 5 oz (\$0.88 per oz) Ingredients: Canola oil, soy lecithin, dimethylpolysiloxane, propellant</p> 	<p>Taste ★★ Spraying ★½ Nonstick ★★★ Browning ★½</p>	<p>While this product had a superfine mist that evenly coated pans and efficiently released sticky foods, it required constant shaking to form a steady stream and stopped spraying with plenty of oil left in the can. Still, it didn't bog down food with grease, and tasters liked its "clean" flavor.</p>
NOT RECOMMENDED		
<p>PAM Organic Canola Oil Price: \$4.39 for 5 oz (\$0.88 per oz) Ingredients: Organic canola oil, organic grain alcohol (added for clarity), organic lecithin from soybeans (prevents sticking), propellant</p> 	<p>Taste ★ Spraying ★ Nonstick ★★★ Browning ★</p>	<p>This spray was less appealing than its nonorganic counterpart, taking on an unappetizing dark brown color 100 degrees before its smoke point (because it lacks an antifoaming agent) and making waffles and cakes greasy from excessive oil pooling. Tasters didn't like the flavor either, calling it "chemical" and "sour."</p>
<p>SPECTRUM NATURALS Canola Spray Oil Price: \$8.09 for 16 oz (\$0.51 per oz) Ingredients: Mechanically (expeller) pressed canola oil, soy lecithin, propellant</p> 	<p>Taste ★ Spraying ★ Nonstick ★★★ Browning ★</p>	<p>With no antifoaming agent, this spray coated the pan in thick, unappealing froth and turned black when heated to 400 degrees. While perfectly adept at preventing sticking, this product had a "fishy" flavor and charred color when heated that were intolerable to most testers.</p>

Taste Test Brown Rice

Trust what's in the bag, not on it. BY HANNAH CROWLEY

BROWN RICE IS shedding its hippie image. It's whole-grain, gluten-free, cheap, and healthy—and according to Nielsen, national sales of brown rice increased 58 percent from 2006 to 2011. Brown rice is booming.

We like brown rice plain as a side dish or in pilafs and salads. To find the best product, we surveyed supermarkets and chose seven national best sellers. We focused on long-grain rice, as it's what we use most for its fluffy and discrete kernels. We first selected four top-selling dried products, and then because brown rice can take 45 minutes to an hour to cook, we added three prepared products to our lineup. All three are fully cooked and reheated at home in the microwave for 1 to 4½ minutes, depending on the product; two are shelf-stable and one is frozen. We passed over the boxes of traditional dried instant rice; their grains are usually steamed and dried at the factory to make them cook faster, and we've always found them spongy.

We tried the rice three ways, including both styles—dry and microwaveable—in each tasting. First we baked the four dried products according to our Foolproof Oven-Baked Brown Rice recipe, and for the second we simmered them on the stovetop, following package instructions. We microwaved the three quick products per their directions, comparing them with the baked and then with the simmered dry rice. Finally, we tried all seven products in a room-temperature rice salad; we boiled the four dried products according to the recipe and microwaved the three quick products, adding them to the recipe when it called for cooked, cooled rice.

We soon noticed our first pattern: Tasters always preferred good old-fashioned dry rice (when prepared right). It's firmer, with a pleasant nutty bite. And convenience products, for the most part, aren't worth it. "Did you accidentally cook the box?" asked one taster eating Uncle Ben's Ready Rice, a shelf-stable product. We looked into it and found that the rice is parboiled, just like the company's dry instant rice; its grains were clumpy and mealy. Another flop was Birds Eye Steamfresh, the frozen rice. According to our science editor, the harsh process of cooking, freezing, and reheating causes some of the starches to form crystals that trap water, drying out parts of the grains. It also releases starch molecules called amylose, which makes

the rice mushy when reheated.

One quick product, though, did turn out consistently decent; Minute Ready to Serve Brown Rice isn't perfect, but it's a good fast alternative. Its grains were firmer than those of regular brown rice, earning comparisons to wheat berries and barley. But it's also more expensive: \$1.20 per 1-cup serving versus \$0.25 for our winner. It comes salted and oiled, which tasters didn't mind, but you do sacrifice control.

As for the dry rice, when cooked according to our own recipes, all performed admirably. Testers ranked them nearly identically in both the basic baked brown rice recipe and when boiled and cooled for the room-temperature salad. All four products had similar scores for flavor and texture, so we turned to each product's package instructions. While we've perfected brown rice in our recipes, we know that sometimes people use the package for prep, too.

Talk about mixed results: When we cooked each product according to its instructions, one was great, one was decent, and two were utter mush. Wondering if we'd done something wrong, we cooked the latter two again, getting the same results: "gelatinous" "oatmeal," "like baby food." But these very same products were excellent in our own recipes. What gives?

All the stovetop package instructions use the absorption method, meaning you add a set amount of water and a set amount of rice and cook the two together until the water is absorbed. We looked at the water ratios called for on each package and found that the best rice called for a ratio of 1¾ cups water to 1 cup rice; the product that was pretty good calls for 2 cups water to 1 cup rice; and the two mushy products call for 2½ cups water to 1 cup rice. The mushy products don't sell bad rice; they're just telling you to add too much water. As an experiment, we cooked the two mushy products with the water ratio called for in our best rice, 1¾ cups per cup of rice, and they vastly improved.

Our winning rice, Lundberg Organic Brown Long Grain Rice, covered all the bases. It works great with a range of cooking methods and has its own smart instructions. Lundberg is the only company in our tasting that grows its own rice, and that level of control, coupled with smart directions, turns out consistently superior, firm, nutty grains.

RECOMMENDED

LUNDBERG Organic Brown Long Grain Rice
Price: \$3.79 for 32 oz (\$0.25 per cup cooked)
Style: Dry
Fat: 2 g per cup cooked
Sodium: 0 mg per cup cooked



TASTERS' NOTES

This dry rice has the best instructions and works with a range of other cooking methods. Tasters said its kernels were "plump" and "almost springy," as well as "distinct and pleasantly chewy." They were the most flavorful, too: "buttery," "nutty," and "earthy."

RICELAND Extra Long Grain Natural Brown Rice
Price: \$1.88 for 32 oz (\$0.11 per cup cooked)
Style: Dry
Fat: 1.3 g per cup cooked
Sodium: 0 mg per cup cooked



This rice's directions were slightly more successful because they called for less water, but the rice was still a bit "soft." Cooked with alternative instructions, it was very good, with "firm, intact grains" that were "chewy, yet distinct," "nutty," "rich," and "toasted."

CAROLINA Whole Grain Brown Rice (sold as Carolina in the Northeast, Mahatma everywhere else)
Price: \$4.19 for 32 oz (\$0.25 per cup cooked)
Style: Dry
Fat: 1.3 g per cup cooked
Sodium: 0 mg per cup cooked



This rice is good—if you ignore its package instructions. Prepared correctly, it can be "pleasantly chewy," with "distinct individual grains." Neutral in flavor and softer than other products we tried, some tasters compared it with white rice.

GOYA Brown Rice
Price: \$2 for 16 oz (\$0.25 per cup cooked)
Style: Dry
Fat: 0 g per cup cooked
Sodium: 0 mg per cup cooked



This rice turned to mush when prepared according to its package instructions. But adjust the cooking method and you get "nicely chewy," "tender yet toothsome" kernels. It was milder in flavor, "kind of white rice-y."

MINUTE Ready to Serve Brown Rice
Price: \$2.39 for 8.8 oz (\$1.20 per cup cooked)
Style: Shelf-stable microwavable
Fat: 3.5 g per cup cooked
Sodium: 150 mg per cup cooked



This fully cooked microwavable rice isn't perfect, but it consistently turned out decent rice in 60 seconds. The grains were "bouncy," "almost like wheat berries." They also come lightly oiled and salted, which tasters thought added nice flavor but which does limit control.

NOT RECOMMENDED

BIRDS EYE Steamfresh Whole Grain Brown Rice
Price: \$2.59 for 10 oz (\$1.30 per cup cooked)
Style: Frozen
Fat: 1 g per cup cooked
Sodium: 5 mg per cup cooked



The sole frozen product was OK dressed with vinaigrette in a salad, but otherwise tasters found it "dry" and "mushy." The process of cooking, freezing, and reheating the rice is harsh on the grains and leaves them dry on the inside and "pasty" outside. It was also bland, with notes of "dust" and "metal."

UNCLE BEN'S Ready Rice Whole Grain Brown
Price: \$2.39 for 8.8 oz (\$1.20 per cup cooked)
Style: Shelf-stable microwavable
Fat: 3 g per cup cooked
Sodium: 15 mg per cup cooked



"Arid like the Sahara!" declared one taster of this "dry," "crumbly" parboiled rice, with intermittently "chewy," "hard," straw-like kernels. At best it was bland and underseasoned; at worst, tasters said it was "oddly fragrant," and "floral," like "chemicals" or "wet newspaper."

DID YOU KNOW? All products reviewed by America's Test Kitchen, home of *Cook's Country* and *Cook's Illustrated* magazines, are independently chosen, researched, and reviewed by our editors. We buy products for testing at retail locations and do not accept unsolicited samples for testing. We do not accept or receive payment or consideration from product manufacturers or retailers. Manufacturers and retailers are not told in advance of publication which products we have recommended. We list suggested sources for recommended products as a convenience to our readers but do not endorse specific retailers.



Heirloom Recipe

We're looking for recipes that you treasure—the ones that have been handed down in your family for a generation or more; that always come out for the holidays; that have earned a place at your table and in your heart, through many years of meals. Send us the recipes that spell home to you. Visit CooksCountry.com/heirloomrecipes (or write to Heirloom Recipes, *Cook's Country*, P.O. Box 470739, Brookline, MA 02447) and tell us a little about the recipe. Include your name and mailing address. **If we print your recipe, you'll receive a free one-year subscription to *Cook's Country*.**

MOTHER'S MINCEMEAT COOKIES

"When I was young, we had these at holidays. But as I got older, they seemed to appear more often throughout the year."
—Alice Jacobs, Troy, N.Y.

Makes 20 cookies

You will need a 3-inch cookie cutter for this recipe.

- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- ¾ cup jarred mincemeat
- 3 tablespoons brandy
- ½ cup walnuts, toasted and chopped fine
- 4 (9-inch) store-bought pie dough rounds

1. Whisk ¼ cup water, flour, and sugar together in medium saucepan until smooth. Stir in mincemeat and brandy. Bring to simmer over medium heat and cook, stirring constantly, until mixture has thickened, 2 to 4 minutes. Transfer to bowl, stir in walnuts, and let cool completely.

2. Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 375 degrees. Line 2 rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Working with 2 pie dough rounds at a time, roll into 12-inch rounds on lightly floured counter. Using 3-inch cookie cutter, cut 10 circles from each dough round.



3. Working with 1 circle at a time, moisten edge with water and place 2 teaspoons mincemeat filling in center. Top with second circle and press edges to seal. Crimp cookie edge with your fingers. Cut small vent hole in center of cookie. Repeat with remaining circles and filling. Place 10 cookies on each prepared sheet, 1½ inches apart.

4. Bake until light golden brown around edges, 16 to 18 minutes, switching and rotating sheets halfway through baking. Let cookies cool on sheets for 5 minutes, then transfer to wire rack and let cool completely. Serve.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

We get a jump on warmer weather with **Cracker-Crusted Fried Chicken**, **Lemon-Herb Potato Salad**, and **Toffee Squares**. We'll give you the keys to easy weeknight dinners like **One-Pan Pork Chops and Vegetables**, **Pasta with Cherry Tomatoes**, and **Reduced-Fat Chicken Enchiladas**. You'll want two of our **Beef on Weck Sandwiches**. And we'll show you the tricks to **Slow-Cooker Chicken Stock** and a perfect **Italian Meat Sauce**. Don't miss our new recipes.



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FIND THE ROOSTER!

A tiny version of this rooster has been hidden in the pages of this issue. Write to us with its location and we'll enter you in a random drawing. The first correct entry drawn will win our winning inexpensive electric citrus juicer, and each of the next five will receive a free one-year subscription to *Cook's Country*. To enter, visit CooksCountry.com/rooster by March 31, 2015, or write to Rooster FM15, *Cook's Country*, P.O. Box 470739, Brookline, MA 02447. Include your name and address. Marlene Rice of Cheshire, Massachusetts, found the rooster on page 14 of our October/November 2014 issue and won our favorite slow cooker.



WEB EXTRAS

Free for 4 months online at CooksCountry.com

- Chicken Broth Tasting
- Creamed Kale with Chestnuts
- Icebox Strawberry Pie
- Inexpensive Electric Citrus Juicers Testing (full story)
- Lemon Chess Pie
- Louisiana Seasoning Tasting (full story)
- Raspberry Chiffon Pie
- Single Pie Crust
- Slow-Cooker Hearty Beef Stew
- Supermarket Bacon Tasting
- Wacky Cake
- White Rice

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30-MINUTE SUPPER



**PORK CHOPS WITH CHERRY TOMATOES
AND BALSAMIC REDUCTION**

30-MINUTE SUPPER



STRIP STEAKS WITH HERB-HORSERADISH BUTTER

30-MINUTE SUPPER



CUBAN QUESADILLAS

30-MINUTE SUPPER



QUICK TURKEY CHILI

STRIP STEAKS WITH HERB-HORSERADISH BUTTER Serves 4

✓ WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Compound butters, like this one, are a quick and easy way to dress up any cut of meat or fish.

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh chives
- 1 teaspoon prepared horseradish
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest plus 1 tablespoon juice
- Salt and pepper
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 2 (1-pound) boneless strip or rib-eye steaks, about 1 inch thick, trimmed and halved crosswise
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1. Combine butter, chives, horseradish, lemon zest and juice, ¼ teaspoon salt, ¼ teaspoon pepper, and cayenne in bowl; set aside.

2. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook steaks until well browned and meat registers 125 degrees (for medium-rare), 3 to 5 minutes per side. Transfer to plate, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Divide butter among steaks and serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: The test kitchen's preferred horseradish is Boar's Head Pure Horseradish.

COOK'S COUNTRY • FEBRUARY/MARCH 2015

PORK CHOPS WITH CHERRY TOMATOES AND BALSAMIC REDUCTION Serves 4

✓ WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: After softening the cherry tomatoes in the skillet, we add balsamic vinegar and reduce the mixture to a potent glaze before finally enriching it with butter.

- 4 (8- to 10-ounce) bone-in pork rib chops, ½ inch thick, trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 shallot, sliced thin
- 12 ounces cherry tomatoes, halved
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- ⅓ cup balsamic vinegar
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 ounces blue cheese, crumbled (½ cup)
- ¼ cup chopped fresh basil

1. Pat pork dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add pork and cook until well browned and cooked through, about 4 minutes per side; transfer to platter and tent loosely with foil.

2. Add shallot to now-empty skillet and cook until just softened, about 1 minute. Add tomatoes and cook until just softened, about 1 minute. Stir in garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add vinegar, scraping up any browned bits, and cook until thickened and becoming syrupy, about 2 minutes.

3. Pour any accumulated meat juices from platter into skillet. Off heat, whisk in butter and season with salt and pepper to taste. Pour sauce over pork, top with blue cheese and basil, and serve.

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QUICK TURKEY CHILI Serves 4

✓ WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Pureeing half the beans in broth helps thicken the chili and gives it a silky texture. We add the raw turkey straight to the chili so it stays in large chunks.

- 2 (15-ounce) cans pinto beans, rinsed
- 1½ cups chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 (4-ounce) can chopped green chiles
- 12 ounces ground turkey

1. Process 1 can of beans and ½ cup broth in food processor to coarse paste, about 10 seconds; set aside. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in chili powder, cumin, garlic, and sugar and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in chiles, pureed bean-broth mixture, remaining can of beans, and remaining 1 cup broth.

2. Add turkey and stir to break up meat into large chunks. Bring to boil, reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer until chili is slightly thickened, 15 to 20 minutes. Serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: Ground chicken is a fine substitute for turkey in this chili.

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CUBAN QUESADILLAS Serves 4

✓ WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: We decided to put a new twist on Cuban sandwiches and turn them into quesadillas. We combined sliced deli meats, Swiss cheese, and a quick pickle relish in flour tortillas. After giving them just a few minutes in the skillet, we had a tasty alternative to those well-known pressed sandwiches.

- ½ cup dill pickle chips, patted dry and chopped fine
- ¼ cup pickled banana pepper rings, patted dry and chopped fine
- 3 tablespoons yellow mustard
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 4 (10-inch) flour tortillas
- 8 ounces thinly sliced deli ham
- 8 ounces thinly sliced deli turkey
- 4 ounces sliced Swiss cheese
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1. Combine pickles, banana peppers, mustard, mayonnaise, and pepper in bowl; set aside 2 tablespoons relish. Spread remaining relish over half of each tortilla (about 1½ tablespoons each), leaving ½-inch border around edge. Top relish side of each tortilla with one-quarter of ham, turkey, and Swiss cheese and fold tortilla over filling, pressing firmly to seal.

2. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Cook 2 quesadillas until golden brown and crispy, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Transfer to cutting board. Repeat with remaining 1 tablespoon oil and remaining 2 quesadillas. Cut into wedges and serve, passing reserved relish.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: Patting the pickles and banana peppers dry helps keep these quesadillas crisp.

COOK'S COUNTRY • FEBRUARY/MARCH 2015

30-MINUTE SUPPER



GNOCCHI WITH CREAMY TOMATO SAUCE

30-MINUTE SUPPER



SPICY SHRIMP LETTUCE WRAPS WITH MANGO SALSA

30-MINUTE SUPPER



LEMONY CHICKEN WITH WILTED SPINACH AND POTATOES

30-MINUTE SUPPER



CARIBBEAN-STYLE CHICKEN WITH COCONUT MILK AND CILANTRO

SPICY SHRIMP LETTUCE WRAPS WITH MANGO SALSA

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: For flavorful and tender shrimp, we toss them in a mixture of salt, pepper, and chili powder and cook them quickly in a hot skillet.

- ½ ripe mango, peeled and cut into ¼-inch pieces
- ½ red onion, chopped fine
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 jalapeño chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons lime juice
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 2 teaspoons chili powder
- 1 head Bibb lettuce (8 ounces), leaves separated

1. Combine mango, onion, cilantro, jalapeño, 1 tablespoon oil, lime juice, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in bowl; set aside.

2. Pat shrimp dry with paper towels, season with salt and pepper, and sprinkle with chili powder. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add shrimp to skillet and cook until spotty brown and cooked through, about 4 minutes. Spoon shrimp into lettuce leaves and top with mango salsa. Serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: If you cannot find Bibb lettuce, substitute 1 head green leaf lettuce.

COOK'S COUNTRY • FEBRUARY/MARCH 2015

GNOCCHI WITH CREAMY TOMATO SAUCE Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: We build deep flavor by cooking the browned gnocchi in a quick tomato sauce enriched with cream.

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 pound vacuum-packed gnocchi
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- ½ cup water
- Salt and pepper
- ½ cup heavy cream
- 2 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (1 cup)
- ½ cup chopped fresh basil

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 475 degrees. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add gnocchi and cook until lightly browned, about 4 minutes; transfer to plate.

2. Add remaining 2 tablespoons oil and onion to now-empty skillet and cook until onion is softened, about 3 minutes. Stir in garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in tomatoes, water, ½ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper and cook until slightly thickened, about 5 minutes.

3. Add cream and browned gnocchi to pan. Reduce heat to low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until gnocchi are tender, 5 to 7 minutes; transfer to 2-quart casserole dish. Sprinkle with Parmesan and bake until cheese is well browned, about 8 minutes. Sprinkle with basil and serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: The partially cooked, vacuum-packed gnocchi found in the pasta aisle work best here, but refrigerated or frozen gnocchi can also be used.

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CARIBBEAN-STYLE CHICKEN WITH COCONUT MILK AND CILANTRO Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: A potent mixture of coconut milk, jerk seasoning, and cayenne both seasons the chicken and acts as the base for the sauce.

- 6 (5- to 7-ounce) bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons jerk seasoning
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 4 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- 1 (20-ounce) can pineapple chunks, drained
- 1 (13.5-ounce) can coconut milk
- ½ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup cashews, toasted and crushed

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with jerk seasoning and cayenne. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add chicken, skin side down, and cook until well browned, about 5 minutes. (Do not flip.)

2. Transfer skillet to oven and roast until chicken registers 175 degrees, about 15 minutes. Transfer chicken to platter, skin side up, and tent loosely with foil. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons fat from skillet.

3. Return skillet to medium-high heat (handle will be very hot), add garlic, and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in pineapple and coconut milk, scraping up any browned bits. Bring to simmer and cook until slightly thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir in ¼ cup cilantro and season with salt and pepper to taste. Pour sauce over chicken. Sprinkle with cashews and remaining ¼ cup cilantro. Serve.

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LEMONY CHICKEN WITH WILTED SPINACH AND POTATOES

Serves 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Browning the potatoes in the chicken drippings boosts their flavor.

- 1 pound fingerling potatoes, unpeeled, halved lengthwise
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- 3 ounces (3 cups) baby spinach
- 2 ounces goat cheese, crumbled (½ cup)

1. Combine potatoes, 1 tablespoon oil, and ¼ teaspoon salt in bowl. Microwave, covered, until tender, about 7 minutes. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook until chicken is browned and registers 160 degrees, about 6 minutes per side. Transfer to plate and tent loosely with foil.

2. Add potatoes to now-empty skillet, cut side down, and cook until golden brown, about 3 minutes. Stir in 2 tablespoons lemon juice, butter, garlic, thyme, and ¼ teaspoon pepper and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in spinach and cook until just wilted, about 30 seconds. Transfer potato mixture to platter, top with chicken, and drizzle with remaining 1 tablespoon lemon juice and remaining 1 tablespoon oil. Top with goat cheese and serve.

TEST KITCHEN NOTE: Jump-starting the potatoes in the microwave helps cut down on their skillet time.

COOK'S COUNTRY • FEBRUARY/MARCH 2015

THE GREAT AMERICAN CAKE

King Cake



The colors of Mardi Gras—not to mention a delicious cinnamon-pecan swirl—make this tasty cake festive enough for any party.

To make this cake, you will need:

- 1 cup plus scant 3 tablespoons whole milk
- 3 large eggs
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 4½ cups (22½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ½ cup (3½ ounces) granulated sugar
- 2¼ teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1¼ cups pecans, toasted and ground fine
- ¾ cup packed (5¼ ounces) light brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 miniature porcelain toy baby (optional)
- 2 cups (8 ounces) confectioners' sugar
- 1 tablespoon each yellow, green, and purple colored decorating sugars

FOR THE CAKE: Whisk 1 cup milk, eggs, and melted butter together in bowl of stand mixer. Stir in flour, granulated sugar, yeast, and salt until just combined. Attach bowl to stand mixer and fit with dough hook. Mix on medium-low speed for 10 minutes. Transfer dough to greased bowl, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and let rise at room temperature until doubled in size, 1½ to 2 hours.

Grease 12-cup nonstick Bundt pan. Combine pecans, brown sugar, and cinnamon in bowl. Roll out dough into 18 by 14-inch rectangle on lightly floured counter, with long side parallel to counter edge. Spray lightly with water and sprinkle evenly with nut mixture. Place baby, if using, along bottom edge of dough. Roll dough away from you into log and pinch along seam to seal. Form into ring and seal ends together. Place seam side up into

prepared pan, cover loosely with plastic, and let rise at room temperature until doubled in size, about 1 hour. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees.

Bake until deep golden brown and cake registers 190 degrees, 30 to 35 minutes, rotating halfway through baking. Let cool in pan for 10 minutes. Remove cake from pan, transfer to wire rack seam side down, and let cool completely, about 2 hours.

FOR THE ICING: Whisk confectioners' sugar and remaining scant 3 tablespoons milk together in bowl until smooth. Pour over cooled cake. Sprinkle ⅓ of top with half of yellow sugar, then repeat on opposite side. Repeat with green and purple sugars to form alternating bands of color. Serve.

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