# 12 Recipes that Will Change the Way You Cook

*Make bold, fresh food the Milk Street way*

CHRISTOPHER KIMBALL'S

# MILK STREET

◆ THE NEW HOME COOKING SPECIAL EDITION ◆

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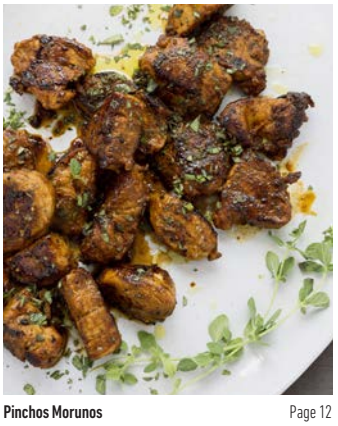
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**Front Cover Photo:** Joyelle West; Styling: Christine Tobin
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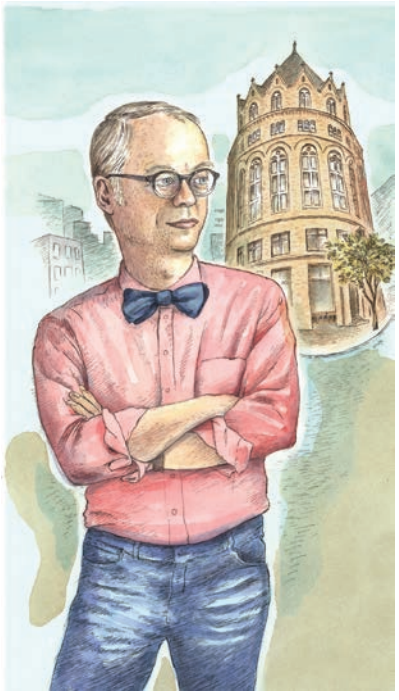
***Christopher Kimball's Milk Street*** in downtown Boston—at 177 Milk Street—is home to our editorial offices and cooking school. It is also where we record ***Christopher Kimball's Milk Street*** television and radio shows. Milk Street is devoted to changing how we cook by searching the world for bold, simple recipes and techniques that are adapted and tested for home cooks everywhere. For more information, go to **177MilkStreet.com**.

[EDITOR'S NOTE] Christopher Kimball

# One for Life, One for Love, One for Death



I RECENTLY DINED AT la Grenouille in New York—the last of the old-world French restaurants. It provided a timely reminder that classic American cooking is based largely on the cuisines of northern Europe. Traditional French cooking, in particular, is poorly suited to the American home kitchen. The weeknight kitchen even more so.

Classic European cooking depends on a marriage of top-notch ingredients and advanced culinary technique to coax flavors, often slowly, into perfect harmony. Poached sea bass with a mélange of tiny vegetables surrounded by a delicate nage is a case in point: One false step and triumph turns into an overcooked disaster. I've learned it is best to leave that approach to the professionals.

I've cooked the food of my New England childhood for over half a century, followed by all things French, maybe a taste of Italian. The table I grew up with is based on meat, heat, bread and root vegetables. It is a cuisine almost entirely devoid of spices, one that uses a limited palette of herbs, fermented sauces or strong ingredients such as ginger and chilies.

The rest of the world thinks differently about cooking. Water—not stock—produces soups and stews with cleaner flavors. Rich, velvety cakes are cooked on the stovetop. Brussels sprouts are charred in cast iron, not the oven. Eggs are lighter and fresher when scrambled in olive oil, rather than butter. Hummus is warm, whipped and often breakfast.

The ingredients are different, too. Fish sauce, soy sauce, miso, rice vinegar and other pantry staples give the home cook a head start toward culinary success. Instead of apple pie spice and a few dried herbs, what about za'atar, dukkah, ras el hanout, togarashi, garam masala and baharat? And when it comes to pepper, there are myriad choices, from Aleppo and Urfa to Sichuan peppercorns and the spicy white pepper so popular in Asian cooking.

These methods and ingredients offer us opportunities to simplify and improve our own cooking. And they have changed the way I cook. This cooking tends to be faster, or at the very least easier. To build flavor, it relies more on foods and their affinities and less on skill and precision. This is the sort of cooking anyone can do, and do with great success. It is neither fussy nor formal, and it occurs every day, everywhere. We would be well served—deliciously—to borrow from this.

Milk Street offers the proposition that America (and the rest of the world) is experiencing a watershed moment. Like music and fashion, cooking is becoming a mashup of ingredients and techniques. There is no "ethnic" cooking. It's a myth. It's just dinner or lunch served somewhere else in the world.

We think of recipes as belonging to a people and place; outsiders are interlopers. At Milk Street, we suggest the opposite, that the cooks of the world—all of them—have a seat at the same table.

And so we give you 12 recipes that will change the way you cook. A beef stew that will leave you wondering why you ever bothered to sear meat. A whole chicken, cooked flawlessly and effortlessly, every time. Decadently rich brownies that will have you rethinking the peanut butter swirl. A trio of Roman pastas that finally deliver creamy, cheesy sauces with never a worry of clumping.

Let's stop cooking in ways that made sense in the 19th century, but not the 21st. Milk Street travels the world to bring the very best ideas and techniques, with no hard-to-find ingredients, strange cookware or all-day methods to slow you down. Milk Street cooking is a simpler, bolder way to cook.

Welcome to Milk Street.

Illustration: John Dykes

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MILK STREET
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*The rest of the world skips it.*

**What do they know that we don't?**

# Stop Searing Meat for Stew

*Story by* Christopher Kimball

**Milk Street Basics:** *Searing meat for stew is messy and fussy. The same savory flavors can be built—better and more easily—with abundant herbs and spices.*

I STOPPED MAKING STEWS years ago. I blame our slavish adherence to the idea that flavor is built only by the tedious browning of meat at the start of a recipe.

It's the cult of the Maillard reaction, the high heat-triggered response between proteins and simple sugars that produces the flavors and aromas we associate with seared and roasted meats.

There certainly is a time and place to play up Maillard—a grilled steak is a fine example. But the wet nature of stews means any browning must be done first and, even then, in small batches (else the meat steams instead of sears). It's a messy, fussy and time-consuming process that I avoid. The good news is that when I went in search of like-minded cooks, I found a world full of them.

Almost every culture has a stew that eschews browning. They usually involve simmering tough cuts of meat (the shins and shoulders of the meat world) with potatoes or beans, then finishing with a massive handful of herbs and strong condiments like horseradish. Take Dutch hutspot or the Austrian Tafelspitz, for example.

So how did we end up addicted to Maillard? Northern European cuisine has two things in abundance: meat and fuel. The English method of roasting meat over a wood or coal fire is a finely developed art. And thousands of recipes begin with "saute meat in a hot skillet or Dutch oven." One might say that the definition of "cooking" in Northern Europe was, in large part, heat applied to meat.

But in cultures where fuel or meat was scarce (most of them), flavor had to be developed in other ways: Spices, strongly flavored condiments like fish sauce or soy sauce, fresh herbs, hot peppers, fresh ginger and animal fats all stood in for the flavors of browning.

This means the heat-to-meat equation becomes less central to the overall dish. It also means that the finished stew is built from layers of flavor. But could we come up with a sear-free stew flavorful enough to satisfy Maillard-loving Americans?

We took our inspiration from a classic Yemeni dish, fahsa, which combines a judicious mix of aromatic vegetables with lamb or beef, warm spices and plenty of herbs. Carrots and chickpeas are a common pairing in stews such as this, and we liked the earthy sweetness they added. We wanted to use dry chickpeas because we usually prefer their texture and flavor, but canned were nearly as good and much faster.

Next up was the meat. We love stewed lamb, the shoulder in particular because it packs plenty of collagen, which enhances the flavor and

Photo: Connie Miller of CB Creatives

body of the broth. But we found the stew works equally well with beef.

To ensure that we got tender results as quickly as possible, we found it important to cut the meat into small pieces and to trim off all fat. Trimming was key because the meat was otherwise chewy and greasy when stewed.

Instead of browning the meat, we looked for other methods to build flavor. A dry seasoning mix—in this case paprika, cumin, cardamom, cinnamon, salt and pepper—was a good first step. We tried several approaches—rubbed on the meat, bloomed in fat, simmered in the cooking water—before realizing that the mix was best when doing double duty.

We rubbed half the mixture onto the lamb and briefly cooked the other half in the pot with onion, butter and tomato paste. Rubbing the meat ensured the lamb was richly seasoned.

Cooking the seasonings with the fat (butter offered more complexity than olive oil) and tomato paste bloomed their flavors and lightly browned the tomato paste (which is high in sugar). This added the sort of deeply savory notes we usually get from browning the meat and provided an excellent base layer of flavor.

With our seasonings in place, we moved on to the main cooking event—adding the meat. First, we added water and brought it to a boil. This has the added benefit of deglazing the pan, pulling those flavorful bits of seasonings and tomato paste off the bottom.

Then the meat went in. It was anticlimactic without searing, but that was the plan. It was the next step that provided a rich layer of extra flavor.

We knew we wanted garlic, but we didn't want its harsh bite.

Slicing or mincing the cloves releases their aggressive sulfurous compounds. That's when we got the idea to try a variation on oven-roasted garlic. When you roast garlic, the head is kept intact, with just the top sliced off. Drizzled with oil and wrapped in foil, the cloves get meltingly tender and have a pleasant sweet-savory flavor.

It would be too much trouble to separately roast the garlic, but we figured we could use the stew to do the work for us. So we sliced off the top of the head, then added it to the stew whole to cook alongside the meat. The result was transformative.

By the time the meat was cooked, the garlic cloves were tender. Clutching the head with tongs, we squeezed the softened cloves out of their husks directly into the stew. Stirred in, they added a whole new layer of mild but savory flavor as well as a pleasant body to the broth.

To finish the stew, we wanted a hit of bright, fresh flavors—yet another layer on top of the dry seasonings, the meat, the garlic and the vegetables. Some baby spinach, a handful of cilantro and a few tablespoons of lemon juice were just right.

By choosing ingredients that each played a distinct role in stew—and by adding them to the pot in order of the heft they contribute to the finished flavor—we were able to create a layered stew with less time, trouble and mess. And with no thanks to Monsieur Maillard!

**Chopping or mincing garlic** brings out its pungency. Cooking the cloves or head whole, as when roasting, preserves its mellow flavor. We got similar results by simmering the head in the broth for the stew.

Illustration: Emma Dibben

## No-Sear Lamb or Beef and Chickpea Stew

*Start to finish: 2 hours and 15 minutes (40 minutes active) | Servings: 4*

Chopping garlic produces harsh flavors. We prefer to use whole cloves, which lend a subtler flavor. We used the simmering stew to cook a whole head, turning it tender, silky and mellow. We tried dried and canned chickpeas but didn't taste a big difference, so we opted for the ease of canned. We liked the flavor and texture of lamb shoulder, but boneless beef chuck worked, too (but needs an extra cup of water and must cook longer, 90 minutes total, before the carrots are added). A dollop of yogurt on top is great as is, but we also liked it with a bit of chopped cilantro, lemon juice and a pinch of cayenne added. Lamb shoulder can vary in fattiness; be sure to trim it well to avoid greasy broth. **Don't use old spices.** The backbone of the dish is the bold, vibrant spice mixture. Make sure yours are no more than a year old. Flat-leaf parsley can be substituted for the cilantro.

—Matthew Card *and* Rebeccah Marsters

1 tablespoon sweet paprika
2 teaspoons ground cumin
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
¼ teaspoon cinnamon
Kosher salt and ground black pepper
1¼ pounds boneless lamb shoulder, trimmed of fat and cut into ¾-inch pieces
1 head garlic
2 tablespoons salted butter
1 large yellow onion, diced (about 2 cups)
2 tablespoons tomato paste
6 cups water
½ pound carrots (2 to 3 medium), peeled, halved lengthwise and cut crosswise into ½-inch pieces
15½-ounce can chickpeas, drained
3 ounces baby spinach (about 3 cups)
1 cup chopped fresh cilantro, plus more to garnish
3 tablespoons lemon juice
Whole-milk yogurt, to serve (optional)

- **In a bowl, stir together** the paprika, cumin, cardamom, cinnamon, 2 teaspoons of salt and ½ teaspoon of pepper. Reserve half of the spice mixture, then toss the lamb with the remaining spice mixture until well coated. Set aside. Cut off and discard the top third of the garlic head, leaving the cloves intact.
- **In a Dutch oven** over medium-high heat, melt the butter. Add the onion and cook, stirring often, until softened and just beginning to brown around the edges, 5 to 8 minutes.
- **Add the tomato paste** and the reserved spice mixture, then cook, stirring constantly, for 1 minute. Add the water and bring to a boil over high heat, then add the lamb and garlic head, cut side down. Cover, leaving the lid slightly ajar, and reduce the heat to low.
- **Simmer for 1 hour,** adjusting the heat as necessary to maintain a gentle bubble. Add the carrots and continue to simmer, partially covered, for another 30 minutes.
- **Using tongs,** remove the garlic head and squeeze over the stew to release the cloves. Stir in the chickpeas and spinach and cook until the spinach is wilted, about 5 minutes.
- **Stir in the cilantro** and lemon juice, then season the stew with salt and pepper. Serve topped with yogurt and sprinkled with cilantro. ◆

*For the fluffiest,* **lightest scrambled eggs**, *it's all about the oil*

# Forget Butter. Olive Oil Makes Better Scrambled Eggs

*Story by* Christopher Kimball

When it comes to cooking eggs, it's hard to argue with the French. So when they say that the best fat for the job is butter, who would disagree?

Certainly not me. But then I noticed that chefs at hotel breakfast stations use oil to make omelets in carbon-steel pans. Likewise, the Chinese cook their well-seasoned, well-browned omelets in oil. Ditto the Japanese. Even the Italians favor oil for their frittatas, and there are plenty of Middle Eastern recipes for puffy deep-fried eggs. But scrambled eggs?

As a test, I poured a bit too much olive oil into my nonstick skillet, heated it until just smoking, then poured in my whisked eggs. Whoosh! In a quick puff of steam, the eggs were almost instantly cooked in rolling, variegated waves. The eggs came out fresher and lighter than any I'd ever cooked before, and not at all greasy or heavy. I experimented with different oils but found the flavor and texture of the eggs were best with olive oil. Even a butter/olive oil combination produced eggs that were fleshy and heavy compared to olive oil alone.

But why? My first thought was that oil gets hotter than butter faster, because butter is 20 percent water. Butter can only exceed 212°F once all of the water has evaporated. With no water content, vegetable oils can hit 350°F or higher in much less time. That might explain the instant production of steam. But was there more going on?

Yes, if you wish to indulge in a bit of speculative food science. The proteins in eggs are folded. Heat unfolds (denatures) them. The interior of these proteins contains sulfur atoms (sulfhydryl groups) that link together, creating a solid network that traps the moisture from the eggs. Olive oil is unique among vegetable oils in that it contains surfactants (surface-area agents) that make it easier for the egg proteins to unfold.

Why do we care? It means that eggs cooked in olive oil can link up more easily and "scramble" at lower temperatures, around 160°F. So, olive oil gets hotter faster and produces more steam, and the protein network that traps that steam is produced more quickly. And so you get quicker, bigger puffs and more impressive scrambled eggs.

**Cooking eggs in a hot skillet with extra-virgin olive oil** allows the proteins to link up more easily, trapping steam and scrambling faster to create creamier, fluffier, tenderer eggs.

The amount and temperature of the oil matter greatly. For two eggs in an 8- or 9-inch skillet, 1 tablespoon is right. That needs to increase slightly as the number of eggs and the size of the pan go up. As for the pan, it needs to be placed over medium heat and allowed to warm slowly until the oil evenly coats the bottom and just starts to smoke. This is important. If the oil is not hot enough, the eggs won't puff up properly.

Technique and timing matter, too. The eggs should be poured into the center of the pan, which pushes some of the oil to the perimeter. That oil at the outer rim cooks the edges of the eggs first and makes them lighter. You need to stir immediately, then fold. I like my scrambled eggs not entirely cooked through. This takes less than 30 seconds for two eggs. If you want the eggs a bit drier, they'll need a smidge longer. But fair warning: Take them off the heat before they are fully cooked and let them rest on a warm plate for 30 seconds. They finish cooking off the heat.

I thought I'd discovered something. But there's an epilogue. I eventually stumbled across a recipe for scrambled eggs in olive oil in "The Basque Book" by Alexandra Raij. Two eggs. One tablespoon olive oil. As Jasper White, the famous Boston chef, once told me, there is nothing new in the kitchen.

## Fluffy Olive Oil Scrambled Eggs

*Start to finish: 10 minutes | Servings: 4*

We found the oil needed a full 3 minutes at a gentle medium heat to get hot enough to produce the necessary steam when the eggs hit the pan. Higher temperatures cooked the eggs too fast, toughening them. After multiple tests, we settled on 2 tablespoons of oil in the pan, which was enough to coat the bottom of the skillet and flavor the eggs without making them greasy. Mixing the salt into the eggs before cooking was the best way to season them. And while you certainly can add pepper at this point, too, we preferred it ground fresh, just before serving. **Don't warm your plates too much.** It sounds minor, but hot plates will continue to cook the eggs, making them tough and dry. Cold plates will cool the eggs too fast. The plates should be warm to the touch, but not so hot that you can't comfortably hold them.

—Jeanne Maguire

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
8 large eggs
Kosher salt and ground black pepper

- **In a 12-inch nonstick** or seasoned carbon-steel skillet over medium heat, heat the oil until just beginning to smoke, about 3 minutes. While the oil heats, in a bowl, use a fork to whisk the eggs and ¾ teaspoon kosher salt until blended and foamy on top. Pour the eggs into the center of the pan.
- **Using a rubber spatula**, continuously stir the eggs, pushing them toward the middle as they begin to set at the edges and folding the cooked egg onto itself. Cook until the eggs are just set, 60 to 90 seconds. The curds should be shiny, wet and soft, but not translucent or runny. Immediately transfer to warmed plates and season with salt and pepper. ◆

Photo: Kristin Teig

*Everybody in America loves* **a quick pasta dish.**
*But what if you live in Sichuan?*

# Quick and Easy Sichuan Noodles

**Scallions, sesame oil and seeds,** plus pantry staples, flavor this simple, addictively good noodle dish.

*Story by* Christopher Kimball

Let's start with proper attribution. This dish was inspired by Fuchsia Dunlop's recipe, Fuchsia's Emergency Midnight Noodles, from her cookbook "Every Grain of Rice." Her recipe has become my go-to last-minute pasta recipe, even when it isn't midnight.

But at Milk Street, we had some touching up to do to adapt the recipe to the typical American home kitchen.

The first issue was the noodles. We tested dried Asian wheat noodles, dried Chinese egg noodles, dried soba and fresh yakisoba. Buckwheat noodles lost their toothsome texture too quickly, and noodles that were too thin, such as Japanese somen or Chinese misua, lost their shape. Fresh noodles were nice but less practical for a pantry-staple recipe. The winners were soft, chewy wheat noodles, such as udon or lo mein, followed closely by egg noodles. We preferred dried noodles about the width of spaghetti. (You can, of course, also use an Italian pasta, such as spaghetti.)

If you have chili oil, as Dunlop does, then this recipe is a tad simpler. For the rest of us, however, the solution was to infuse grapeseed oil with the flavors of red pepper flakes and sesame seeds. This takes just a few minutes. Then we tossed in scallion whites off heat, to temper their raw flavor.

These noodles are often served with a fried egg on top, so this approach came with another benefit: Because we already had a skillet—we didn't clean it out—with bits of infused oil, pepper flakes and sesame seeds, the eggs' flavor was improved.

**Dried Asian wheat noodles** worked best in this simple recipe. We preferred Japanese udon (left), which have a soft, springy texture and are made with white wheat flour. Firm, chewy Chinese lo mein noodles (right), made from wheat flour and egg or water, also hold up well to this recipe's sauce. Even spaghetti (center) will work in a pinch.

Our ingredients for the sauce lined up with Dunlop's recipe (soy sauce, vinegar and toasted sesame oil) save for Chinese black vinegar, which can be hard to find. For similar flavor, we combined unseasoned rice vinegar and brown sugar.

When you first toss the noodles with the sauce, the mixture will appear a bit too "saucy." However, the noodles quickly absorb much of the excess.

You could add more ingredients—broccoli, asparagus, edamame—but that seems silly. This is a recipe for pasta with sauce that you can throw together any time, no matter what time of day.

## Chinese Chili and Scallion Noodles

*Start to finish: 20 minutes | Servings: 4*

While we preferred udon noodles, chewy Chinese wheat noodles and even spaghetti were fine substitutes. A simple chili oil, made by infusing grapeseed oil with red pepper flakes, can be adjusted to taste. To soften the bite of the scallion whites, we added them to the hot oil just after removing the pan from the heat. The milder green parts of the scallions—added last—lent freshness.

**Don't walk away** while heating the oil. The sesame seeds can burn in an instant, and the red pepper flakes will blacken and become bitter. The seeds should be just turning golden, and the pepper flakes should be pleasantly fragrant.

—Laura Russell

- 12 ounces dried udon noodles, lo mein or spaghetti
- 5 tablespoons soy sauce
- 3 tablespoons unseasoned rice vinegar
- 3 tablespoons packed dark brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- ¼ cup grapeseed or other neutral oil
- 5 teaspoons sesame seeds
- 1¼ teaspoons red pepper flakes
- 12 scallions, white and green parts thinly sliced on the bias, reserved separately
- 4 fried eggs, to serve (optional)

▪ **Bring a large pot** of salted water to a boil. Add the noodles and cook until al dente, then drain and rinse. Meanwhile, in a large bowl, whisk together the soy sauce, vinegar, sugar and sesame oil.

▪ **In a 12-inch nonstick skillet** over medium, heat the grapeseed oil, sesame seeds and pepper flakes until the pepper flakes are fragrant and the seeds begin to brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Off heat, stir in the scallion whites, then transfer the oil mixture to the bowl with the soy sauce mixture.

▪ **Add the cooked pasta** to the sauce and toss. Add the scallion greens, reserving some for garnish, and toss. Divide among 4 serving bowls and top each with more scallion greens and a fried egg, if using. ◆

Photos: Connie Miller of CB Creatives; Styling: Christine Tobin

*In Guangzhou, they know that* **the simplest way to cook a chicken** *is also the best*

# For the Easiest Roasted Chicken, Put it in a Pot

*Story by* Michelle Locke

**Forget the skin.** It's the meat that matters.

We denigrate chicken meat as the epitome of bland and instead lavish attention on its exterior, hoping an herbed rotisserie treatment or spicy wings or convection-crisped skin will somehow transcend our expectations. And then we're disappointed yet again.

Turns out it doesn't have to be that hard.

The Chinese long ago sussed out that chicken is a lot better when flavor is more than skin deep. Hence their tradition of whole-bird poaching, which delivers simple, clear flavors and a silky, tender-but-firm meat primed for a variety of vibrant sauces. Known as "white-cooked chicken" or "white cut," the classic Cantonese dish gets its name from the fact that the meat is simmered without soy sauce and therefore remains white. Some recipes call for plain cooking water, others add flavorings such as ginger and scallions.

Once cooked, the bird is cut up and served with simple but flavorful sauces, such as soy, oyster or chili sauces seasoned with fresh ginger or ground chilies. And in contrast to roasting, it's much more difficult to overcook the chicken. Poaching delivers heat evenly, so dry breasts and pink thighs aren't an issue. The whole process takes about the same amount of time as roasting, most of it hands-off. In fact, the last 30 minutes of cooking occur off the heat entirely.

As for the skin? None in this game. Poaching results in blond skin that most Americans will want to discard (though Chinese cooks usually leave it on and consider it tasty).

**Milk Street Basics:** *Poach whole chickens in a flavorful broth for perfectly cooked, juicy meat.*

White-cooked chicken traditionally is served cold or at room temperature, usually cut horizontally across the bones to produce even chunks for dipping. Of course, it's easily adapted to American tastes. We liked it served hot, carved into legs, wings and breasts, with sauces.

Though popular in Asia, poaching—which is done between 160°F and 185°F, not at boiling—is mostly out of favor in the U.S. When it's done at all, it's usually with pieces of meat, not whole birds. But across Asia (variations of this dish appear throughout the region) whole birds symbolize prosperity and family unity and often are part of Lunar New Year feasting.

A similar state of affairs existed in America for the 200 years prior to the 1950s. Chicken was a special-occasion meat mostly purchased and prepared whole. Only in the latter half of the 20th century did a chicken become less than the sum of its parts due to a growing distaste for the unglamorous bits.

As ever, the quality of the meat makes a difference. Battery-raised supermarket birds usually are chilled in a cold water bath after cleaning, which can result in soggy meat. Air-chilled birds are firmer, and a free-range air-chilled bird will have the firmest and most flavorful meat but also the highest price tag. Roaming charges, if you will.

### Chinese White-Cooked Chicken with Ginger-Soy Dressing

*Start to finish: 2 hours (30 minutes active) | Servings: 4*

**We tried the Chinese** technique of plunging the chicken into an ice bath after poaching, which is said to tighten the skin, but found little advantage. (The skin is fine to eat as is, or you can remove it before serving.) We also tried "flashing" the scallions and ginger with hot oil before making the dressing, but we liked the brightness of the raw aromatics better. We did prefer cutting the saltiness and potency of the dressing with some of the poaching liquid. **Don't use cooking sherry for this recipe;** it usually has added sodium and little, if any, actual sherry flavor. Look for a high-quality (but affordable) dry sherry, and keep the remainder refrigerated to use in pan sauces, soups or even cocktails.

Photos: Kristin Teig



**Americans obsess over the skin,** but the meat is what matters. Chinese-style poaching guarantees perfect, effortless results every time.

Mirin, a rice wine, is a decent stand-in and usually is available in the Asian foods aisle of the grocery store. If possible, opt for hon-mirin over the sweeter aji-mirin.

—Bianca Borges

**For the chicken and poaching broth:**

3½- to 4-pound chicken, giblets discarded
1 bunch cilantro
6 scallions, trimmed and halved crosswise
4½ quarts water
2 cups dry sherry or mirin
4-inch piece fresh ginger, cut into 4 pieces and smashed
3 tablespoons kosher salt

**For the dressing:**

4 scallions, thinly sliced on bias
3 tablespoons soy sauce
2 tablespoons vegetable or other neutral oil
4 teaspoons finely grated fresh ginger
1 tablespoon unseasoned rice vinegar
1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
½ teaspoon white sugar
½ pound napa cabbage (½ small head), thinly sliced (4 cups)
Cooked white rice, to serve

▪ **Remove the chicken** from the refrigerator and let sit at room temperature while making the broth. Reserving a few sprigs for garnish if desired, cut the cilantro bunch in half crosswise, separating the stems and leaves. Use kitchen twine to tie the stems and scallions into a bundle.

▪ **Chop enough of the cilantro** leaves to measure ½ cup and set aside. (Save the remaining cilantro leaves for another use.)

▪ **In a large pot** (at least 8 quarts), combine the cilantro-scallion bundle with the remaining broth ingredients and bring to a boil over high heat.

▪ **Using tongs,** lower the chicken into the broth breast side up, letting the liquid flow into the cavity. If the chicken isn't fully submerged in the broth after flooding the cavity, weigh it down with a plate.

▪ **Allow the broth to return to a boil,** then reduce heat to medium and cook for 25 minutes, adjusting the heat as necessary to maintain a bare simmer; flip the chicken to be breast side down after 15 minutes. Turn off the heat, remove the pot from the burner and let the chicken sit in the broth for 30 minutes. Transfer the chicken to a carving board and let rest for 15 minutes.

▪ **While the chicken rests,** prepare the dressing. In a small bowl, stir together ¼ cup of the poaching broth, the scallions, soy sauce, vegetable oil, ginger, vinegar, sesame oil and sugar.

▪ **Using a sharp knife,** remove the legs from the chicken by cutting through the thigh joints, then separate the thighs from the drumsticks. Carve the breast meat from the bone and slice each breast crosswise into 4 pieces.

▪ **Discard the chicken skin,** if desired. Spread the cabbage on a serving platter, then arrange the chicken pieces on top. Pour the dressing over the chicken and sprinkle with the reserved ½ cup of chopped cilantro. Garnish with cilantro sprigs, if desired. Serve warm, cold or at room temperature. ◆

## Put your poaching broth to work

While the poached chicken cools before carving, use the hot seasoned broth to cook rice to round out the meal. Use the broth 1:1 for any water called for by the variety of rice you use. For long-grain white rice, for example, combine 1½ cups rinsed rice with 2 cups of the broth. Bring to a simmer, then reduce to low, cover and cook until the rice is fluffy and tender, 15 to 18 minutes. And be sure to save any remaining broth for use in rice, soups, sauces and braises. We freeze it in 2-cup portions in zip-close freezer bags. ◆

*To replicate the deliciously simple pastas of Rome, we needed to* **crack the cheese code**

# Three Deceptively Simple Sauces that Will Change How You Eat Pasta

**At Sora Margherita,** cacio e pepe is richly cheesy, pugently peppery and tossed together in seconds.

**Pasta and attitude** are fresh at Sora Margherita.

*Story by* J.M. Hirsch

Tucked into the backside of Piazza Trinità del Monti, its ancient stone doorway partly obscured by vines, Sora Margherita is unassuming, slightly hushed. Lucia Ziroli, who runs the 90-year-old restaurant with her husband and son, is anything but.

"E impossibile," the 5-foot-tall wall of no says sternly over and again as I plead and flatter for an hour. I could not get a table. And I certainly could not get into the restaurant's tiny, crowded kitchen.

Sora Margherita is the sort of place where tender, eggy pasta is made fresh each morning, hung to dry over the backs of chairs. Where the menu is handwritten and rarely used. Where the wine is house, served in carafes on wobbly tables.

It also serves one of Rome's best plates of cacio e pepe—literally cheese and pepper—the city's most iconic pasta. Pasta, pecorino Romano and copious black pepper, a study in the power of letting a few ingredients shine.

A table barely large enough for a wine glass and plate opens unexpectedly—tight to a wall papered with admiring notes from patrons—and Ziroli relents. No order is needed. A carafe of wine appears unbidden. Then cacio e pepe.

To call the dish transformative is insufficient.

Photos: Carlo Gianferro

The pasta is pillowy, of course. But the miracle is the marriage—the effortless blending of cheese and pepper to form a smooth, punchy sauce that coats richly, yet without heft.

As my praise grows fevered, Ziroli softens. Soon I stand at the kitchen. Pecorino and pepper are mixed with starchy pasta cooking water. Then the noodles, and much tossing. More cheese and pepper. More tossing. It is done in seconds.

And it should be eaten almost as quickly, Ziroli admonishes, before the cheese cools and sets. Fingering strands of rough-cut, irregular noodles and popping them into her mouth, she tells me how she once took a plate of cacio e pepe away from a woman who was taking too long to eat it. "You need to eat it with gusto," she explains. "Americans talk too much."

In the U.S., Italian fare is robust, pungent with garlic, tomato and herbs. This is not my experience here. In Rome, a bold simplicity built from few ingredients is more common. You never know whether it was carefully executed or carelessly tossed together. The truth likely is yes.

I wouldn't learn just how deceptive—perhaps even impossible—that simplicity was until I got home and watched my own pasta, pecorino and pepper break into a clumped, ugly mess. But first, I needed to meet the rest of the family.

**Rome is a riot** of aromas, wafting from shops and sprawling markets where nuns bicker with fishmongers, and cured meats, red and richly marbled, are mounded in piles next to breads cut and sold to order by the gram.

Today, those aromas drift down a set of wide and worn marble stairs as I climb to Mario Ive's otherwise modern apartment on the outskirts of the city. "It's Sunday," the retired army colonel and author of a Roman cookbook says by way of welcome. "The old ladies are cooking."

Ive has agreed to be my guide for what most Romans consider a pasta matriarchy. It all begins with cacio e pepe. Though its origins are debated—one popular theory is that cheese and black pepper were the only ingredients shepherds could carry into the mountains—it is widely accepted as the mother pasta dish.

To make the point, Ive prepares cacio e pepe, as refreshingly casual and delicious as Ziroli's. Then he makes it again, but this time he crisps chopped guanciale—cured pork jowl—and mixes it and its fat into the dish at the end. Now it is gricia.

Then he prepares it a third time, still crisping the guanciale, but now mixing the pecorino and pepper with four egg yolks, a mixture he tosses with the cooking water, then the pasta and guanciale. He presents carbonara.

"It's like a tree. The main body is cacio e pepe," Ive explains. "The branches are gricia and carbonara."

The results are stunning. Cacio e pepe transformed, one basic dish going from salty-cheesy to savory-smoky to creamy-lush. Yet no iteration feels burdened. It's partly because the meat is an accent; Ive used a scant few ounces for four servings.

But mostly it's the pepper, which he measured by the teaspoon for every tablespoon of grated cheese. It lingers on the tongue with a pleasant heat. And that's when I begin to understand the appeal of this family—balance.

In all three dishes, the pepper doesn't merely season or pretend to be salt's plus-one. It has a distinct role, complementing and contrasting the heavier flavors. It hits me: These dishes have no acid, the traditional counterpoint to richness. The black pepper—so aggressively added—plays that role, cutting through the cheese and pork.

"That's the secret of Roman cuisine," Ive says. "We use very few ingredients and try not to let one of them take over."

## *Now with eggs!*

**Romans, it turns out,** love a good pasta legend, and the origins of carbonara are a prime example. *Continued on page 10*

*The family tree of Rome's classic pasta dishes begins with* **cacio e pepe—literally cheese and pepper.** *Add guanciale and it becomes gricia. Add eggs and you have carbonara.*


**The chemistry of Italian cheese** helped us understand why cacio e pepe is so hard to make at home.

**In Rome, guanciale** is a seasoning used sparingly.

Photos: J.M. Hirsch (cheese display); Carlo Gianferro (guanciale)

*In the United States, we use black pepper mindlessly, a plus-one to salt. But in Roman pastas, the pepper is added so copiously, it becomes a defining part of the dish.* **"As if it were raining pepper,"** *one home cook explained.*

Some say the dish was born after WWII, thanks in part to American soldiers and their packets of MRE eggs. Others say the name is drawn from "carbone," or coal—a reference to the dish's complexion thanks to all that pepper.

Whatever its roots, I'm urged to try the carbonara at Pipero Roma, a whitest-of-white tablecloth restaurant a short walk from the Tiber River and across from a baroque 1500s-era church, the Parrocchia Santa Maria in Vallicella.

My hopes are not high as I enter, flanked by a busload of Japanese tourists. But when the carbonara comes, it is unlike any I've eaten—most of which have too often been heavy, densely cheesy and overwhelmed by smoky bacon.

But here, the sauce is light, airy even. And bright marigold yellow. The flavor is rich, yet somehow fleeting. I desperately want to be uncouth and ask for bread to sop up the remains. Instead, I noisily scrape the plate with my fork for every last smear of that eggy-cheesy sauce.

In the kitchen, the difference becomes clear. Chef David Puleio has added an unorthodox ingredient to his carbonara—air.

He demonstrates the recipe, drawing on the same basic ingredients I've now seen so many times. Except, when he combines the cheese, pepper, egg yolks and pasta cooking water, he does so in a bowl set over the boiling pasta.

And then he whisks. And whisks. And whisks, pumping air into the gently cooked, boldly bright sauce. By the time he is done—tossing in the pasta and crisped guanciale—the sauce is whipped and voluminous.

## *Cracking the cheese code*

I RETURNED TO MILK STREET confident in the simplicity of these dishes. I was wrong. Multiple batches of cacio e pepe produced grainy, gross clumps of partly melted cheese. Even when we controlled for factors we knew could cause clumping—including temperature—our results were only marginally better.

Which got us thinking that perhaps the problem was with one of the ingredients. Common to all three pastas is the cheese—pecorino Romano, a high-salt, aged sheep's milk cheese. Hard cheeses such as this naturally clump when melted.

Why didn't it in Rome? We learned that the high salt content in Italian pecorino, combined with the starch in the pasta cooking water, stabilizes the cheese as it melts, preventing the proteins in the cheese from clumping. But American pecorino has less salt and more calcium, two factors that increase the chance of clumping.

Which suggested an easy fix—use imported cheese. Wrong again. Though better, we still never got that effortlessly smooth sauce. More digging into the science of cheese revealed a likely cause: The longer cheese ages, the more likely it is to clump. And imported cheese is almost necessarily older than freshly purchased in Rome.

In true Roman fashion, the solution ended up being simple. We knew that starch helps stabilize melting cheese. For hard Italian cheeses, the starch that leaches from the pasta into the cooking water is plenty to handle the job. Here? Not so much. And nothing we did to draw additional starch from the pasta was sufficient.

So instead, we added starch—in the form of cornstarch—and cold water to the cheese and pepper mixture itself. The result? An instant and perfectly emulsified cheese sauce. In fact, it was so stable we could even prep it a bit in advance, then keep it warm on the stove while the pasta cooked.

### Cacio e Pepe

*Start to finish: 20 minutes | Servings: 4*

THIS CLASSIC ROMAN PASTA DISH depends on the quality of the pecorino Romano and freshly ground black pepper. The addition of cornstarch allowed us to overcome the tendency of lower-quality cheese to clump, but for flavor, we still suggest looking for imported pecorino.

**Don't immediately pour** the cheese mixture onto the hot pasta; letting the pasta cool ensures the mixture won't break. —DIANE UNGER

- 1½ cups cold water
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 6 ounces pecorino Romano cheese, finely grated (1¼ cups), plus extra to serve
- 12 ounces linguini or spaghetti
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 2 teaspoons ground black pepper, plus more to serve

▪ **In a large pot,** bring 4 quarts of water to a boil. Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, whisk the cold water and cornstarch until smooth. Add the

**Starch was key to getting pecorino Romano to melt smoothly** and coat the pasta as it did in Rome.

Photo: Connie Miller of CB Creatives; Styling: Christine Tobin

**For our gricia and carbonara,** we substituted pancetta (pork belly) for guanciale, cured pork jowl.

pecorino and stir until evenly moistened. Set the pan over medium-low and cook, whisking constantly, until the cheese melts and the mixture comes to a gentle simmer and thickens slightly, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat and set aside.

▪ **Stir the pasta and salt** into the boiling water and cook until al dente. Reserve about ½ cup of the cooking water, then drain the pasta very well. Return the pasta to the pot and let cool for about 1 minute.

▪ **Pour the pecorino mixture** over the pasta and toss with tongs until combined, then toss in the pepper. Let stand, tossing 2 or 3 times, until most of the liquid has been absorbed, about 3 minutes. The pasta should be creamy but not loose. If needed, toss in reserved pasta water 1 tablespoon at a time to adjust the consistency. Transfer to a warmed serving bowl and serve with more pecorino and pepper on the side.

## Pasta Gricia

GUANCIALE IS TRADITIONAL for gricia and carbonara, but we used more widely available pancetta. To make gricia, follow the recipe for cacio e pepe, but start by cooking 3 ounces chopped pancetta in a 10-inch skillet over medium until crisp, about 5 minutes. Use a slotted spoon to transfer the pancetta to a paper towel-lined plate; reserve 2 tablespoons of the fat. Whisk the reserved fat into the pecorino mixture before setting it aside. To finish, crumble the pancetta into the pasta after adding the pepper, then toss.

## Roman Spaghetti Carbonara

*Start to finish: 25 minutes*
*Servings: 4*

THIS BRIGHTER TAKE on carbonara came from Pipero Roma in Rome. Egg yolks are whisked until cooked and slightly foamy, creating a sauce that is lighter and smoother in texture than most carbonara recipes. Mixing the yolks with water and cornstarch ensures the cheese won't clump when tossed with the pasta.

**Don't substitute bacon for the pancetta.** The smokiness of the bacon will overwhelm the cleaner flavors of the egg-based sauce.

—DIANE UNGER

3 ounces thinly sliced pancetta, chopped
1¾ cups cold water
6 large egg yolks
2 teaspoons cornstarch
6 ounces pecorino Romano cheese, finely grated (1¼ cups), plus more to serve
12 ounces spaghetti
2 tablespoons kosher salt
2 teaspoons ground black pepper, plus more to serve

▪ **In a 10-inch skillet over medium,** cook the pancetta, stirring, until crisp, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to a paper towel-lined plate. Measure out and reserve 3 tablespoons of the rendered fat; if needed, supplement with olive oil. Set the pancetta and fat aside.

▪ **In a large pot,** bring 4 quarts of water to a boil. Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, whisk the cold water, egg yolks and cornstarch until smooth. Add the cheese and stir until evenly moistened. Set the pan over medium-low and cook, whisking constantly, until the mixture comes to a gentle simmer and is airy and thickened, 5 to 7 minutes; use a silicone spatula occasionally to get into the corners of the pan. Off heat, whisk in the reserved pancetta fat. Remove from heat and set aside.

▪ **Stir the pasta and salt** into the boiling water and cook until al dente. Reserve about ½ cup of the cooking water, then drain the pasta very well. Return the pasta to the pot and let cool for about 1 minute.

▪ **Pour the pecorino-egg mixture** over the pasta and toss with tongs until well combined, then toss in the pepper. Let stand, tossing the pasta 2 or 3 times, until most of the liquid has been absorbed, about 3 minutes. Crumble in the pancetta, then toss again. The pasta should be creamy but not loose. If needed, toss in up to 2 tablespoons reserved pasta water to adjust the consistency. Transfer to a warmed serving bowl and serve with more pecorino and pepper on the side. ◆

## Pasta Twirling

**In Rome,** pasta isn't piled—it's twirled into neat mounds. To serve, place a ladle into the pot of pasta, then use a long fork to gather and twist the pasta into a neat mound in the ladle. Slide the mound out onto a serving plate and lift out the fork. ◆

Photos: Connie Miller of CB Creatives; Styling: Christine Tobin

*The Spanish have a* **bold, fuss-free flavor** *for the simple pork tenderloin*

# Spiced Pork Bites in 15 Minutes

**A spice rub and a quick sear** add bright, smoky flavor to pork tenderloin.

*Story and recipe by* MATTHEW CARD

COULD SPANISH TAPAS—all about eating slow and social—be the answer to packing big flavor into bland pork tenderloin on a busy weeknight? We discovered it could, so long as we ditched the thorns.

In the U.S., we've reduced tapas to most anything served on a small plate. But in Spain, it is as much about the experience as the food—simple bites with big, drink-friendly flavors consumed with other people, typically across an evening of leisurely bar hopping.

Our answer to bland pork came from Spain's Basque region, where skewered meats are a common pintxo—as tapas are known there.

Loosely translated as "Moorish bites impaled on thorns or small pointed sticks," pinchos morunos is a dish of seared pork tenderloin rubbed with a blend of spices, garlic, herbs and olive oil. The recipe dates back generations, boasting influences from Spain and North Africa.

We knew this dish had great weeknight potential. The tenderloin is cut into small cubes, so it cooks quickly. It gets deep flavor in little time from a seasoning rub. Classic versions skewer the meat, which is seasoned with ras al hanout, a Moroccan spice blend.

Go back to the dish's beginnings and the meat in pinchos morunos was lamb (the Moors were Muslims). Once Spanish cooks got a hold of the dish, pork became more common.

For our version, we streamlined. Fussing with skewers was right out. Ras al hanout, which includes upward of 30 seasonings but can be hard to find, was also out, in favor of cumin, coriander and black pepper. Smoked paprika added the requisite Basque touch. More traditionally minded recipes add chopped garlic and dried oregano, but we added finely grated garlic and fresh oregano to a blend of lemon juice and honey that we drizzled over the meat.

Serve over rice, in lettuce cups or over steamed or roasted vegetables.

## Spanish Spice-Crusted Pork Tenderloin Bites (Pinchos Morunos)

*Start to finish: 50 minutes (25 minutes active) | Servings: 4*

WE USUALLY prefer the flavor we get from grinding whole spices ourselves, but in this recipe we found already-ground worked nearly as well. Cutting the pork tenderloin into 1- to 1½-inch cubes produced more surface area, allowing the spice rub to quickly penetrate and season the meat.

**Don't cut the meat too small.** If the cubes are smaller than 1 inch, they will cook through before getting a flavorful crust.

1½ teaspoons ground coriander
1½ teaspoons ground cumin
1½ teaspoons smoked paprika
Kosher salt and ground black pepper
1-pound pork tenderloin, trimmed and cut into 1- to 1½-inch chunks
1 tablespoon lemon juice, plus lemon wedges to serve
1 tablespoon honey
1 large garlic clove, finely grated
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano

▪ **In a medium bowl,** combine the coriander, cumin, paprika and ¾ teaspoon each salt and pepper. Add the pork and toss to coat, massaging the spices into the meat until no dry rub remains. Let the pork sit at room temperature for at least 30 minutes and up to 1 hour. Meanwhile, in another bowl, combine the lemon juice, honey and garlic. Set aside.

▪ **In a large skillet** over medium-high, heat 1 tablespoon of the oil until just smoking. Add the meat in a single layer and cook without moving until deeply browned on one side, about 3 minutes. Using tongs, flip the pork and cook, turning, until cooked through and browned all over, another 2 to 3 minutes. Off heat, pour the lemon juice-garlic mixture over the meat and toss to coat, then transfer to a serving platter. Sprinkle the oregano over the pork and drizzle with the remaining 1 tablespoon of oil. Serve with lemon wedges. ◆

Photo: Connie Miller of CB Creatives; Styling: Catrine Kelty

*A quick roast and a simple sauce:* **Transforming cauliflower**

# How to Oven-Roast Cauliflower

**Nutty sesame** pairs well with roasted cauliflower.

*Story by* Christopher Kimball

Cauliflower has come of age in America, but it has been a part of the world's culinary landscape for centuries, especially in the Levant—in Lebanon and Syria particularly. One of the most popular preparations is fried cauliflower. The meze dish goes by various names (arnabeet makli and zahra mekla, among others), and is served with a tahini-based sauce that also includes water, lemon and garlic.

The nutty, roasted flavor of the sesame paste seemed perfectly suited to the neutral taste of the cauliflower. At Milk Street, we chose roasting instead of frying; it's easier and less messy.

So far so good, except the tahini sauce dripped off and burned on the pan. To make cleanup easier, we lined our baking sheet with foil. Then we swapped water in the sauce for oil, which helped browning and clung to the cauliflower better. Still, the sauce needed a bit more complexity. We added sweet paprika and cayenne and used both the zest and juice of a lemon.

Using florets sped up the roasting time and made for more even cooking. Heating the baking sheet in a very hot oven beforehand was crucial to getting the florets browned and just tender.

Out of the oven, the cauliflower needed a splash of lemon juice and some fresh cilantro to finish. We also thought the Egyptian nut-and-seed blend dukkah would be a nice addition. Though we liked it as a final touch, roasted, salted cashews were a simpler solution.

### Cauliflower with Tahini

*Start to finish: 35 minutes | Servings: 4*

A hot oven and heated baking sheet were key to browning the cauliflower before it overcooked. Medium florets, about 1½ to 2 inches, didn't become mushy like smaller pieces. Reduce the cayenne if you prefer a milder heat. Flat-leaf parsley worked well as a substitute for cilantro. Crunchy dukkah (see sidebar) added even more texture; use ⅓ cup dukkah to replace the cashews.

**Don't forget to line** the baking sheet with foil before heating. The tahini mixture makes a mess of an unlined pan. —Elizabeth Germain

½ cup tahini
1 teaspoon grated lemon zest, plus 2 tablespoons lemon juice, divided
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
2 garlic cloves, finely grated
1½ teaspoons kosher salt
1 teaspoon sweet paprika
¼ to ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 large head cauliflower (about 2½ pounds), cored and cut into 1½- to 2-inch florets
⅓ cup roasted, salted cashews, chopped
⅓ cup chopped fresh cilantro

▪ **Heat the oven to 500°F** with a rack in lowest position. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil and set it on the rack to heat. In a large bowl, whisk together the tahini, lemon zest, 1 tablespoon lemon juice, the oil, garlic, salt, paprika and cayenne. Add the cauliflower and toss, massaging the dressing into the florets.

▪ **Working quickly,** remove the baking sheet from the oven and spread the cauliflower on it in an even layer, scraping any remaining tahini mixture onto the pan. Reserve the bowl. Roast until well browned in spots and just tender, 15 to 18 minutes, stirring and turning the florets and rotating the pan halfway through.

▪ **Transfer the roasted florets** to the reserved bowl. Add the remaining lemon juice and toss. Add half of the cashews and the cilantro, then toss. Sprinkle with the remaining cashews and serve drizzled with more oil, if desired. ◆

## Pantry: *Dukkah*

In India, there is garam masala and in China, five-spice powder. In Egypt, cooks have their own go-to seasoning—dukkah. It's a blend of coarsely crushed toasted nuts and whole spices (think cumin, coriander and sesame seeds). Rich in protein and fats, the spice mix was peasant fare historically, used to season beans or bread. Today, Egyptians consume dukkah from morning to evening. Served alongside hard-cooked eggs, it's breakfast. With oil, cheese and fresh bread, a snack. Sprinkled on roasted meat or vegetables, dinner. For our version, we used cashews instead of more traditional hazelnuts; it saved us from peeling the nuts after toasting. To the standard spice bill we added caraway seeds, which lent a slight bite. Dried oregano was the best substitute for the wild marjoram often found in Egyptian dukkah. Dukkah adds textural contrast to salads and vegetables (like our cauliflower with tahini), olive oil for dipping bread and roasted or grilled meat, chicken or fish.

### Egyptian Nut-and-Seed Seasoning (Dukkah)

*Start to finish: 15 minutes | Makes about 1 cup*

Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to a week. Freeze for longer use.

½ cup raw cashews
2 tablespoons sesame seeds
2 tablespoons coriander seeds
2 tablespoons cumin seeds
1 tablespoon caraway seeds
1 teaspoon dried oregano
½ teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon ground black pepper

▪ **In a large skillet** over medium heat, toast the cashews, stirring, until beginning to brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the sesame seeds and toast, stirring, until golden, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the coriander, cumin and caraway seeds and toast, stirring, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Transfer to the food processor and let cool for 5 minutes. Add the oregano, salt and pepper. Pulse until coarsely ground, 12 to 15 pulses. ◆

Photo: Joyelle West (left); Connie Miller of CB Creatives (right)

*Treat your* **vegetables like steak**

# Want More Flavor from Your Vegetables? Rough Them Up

*Story by* Jenn Ladd

Done well, roasted Brussels sprouts shine with a balance of sweet and savory. But nailing that perfect balance calls for a long stay in a hot oven.

Even if you're willing to put in the time, the results can disappoint. Pile too many sprouts in the pan and they steam, turning mushy and dull. Let them go too long and they get dry and bitter.

We wanted better, more reliable results, and in much less time. To do that, we needed to understand what was happening in the oven. We discovered there is some chemistry at play.

Chopping, shredding or even chewing a sprout releases the enzyme myrosinase. That enzyme converts sulfur-containing compounds in the sprout into bitter-tasting compounds. The same reaction occurs across the brassica family, including mustard seeds, radishes and cabbage.

But heat neutralizes that enzyme-induced chemical reaction. Once the internal temperature of a sprout goes above 140°F, the myrosinase is inactivated. So we knew we needed high heat.

Our search for a better way got a boost during a sampling of grilled and wood-fired vegetables at Gjelina, chef Travis Lett's Los Angeles restaurant. We loved the meatiness the dishes developed from Lett's rough, almost steak-like treatment of produce.

In particular, the charred Brussels sprouts with chili-lime vinaigrette. They were both wonderfully charred and tender, and bore little of the brassica's characteristic bitterness. We assumed—wrongly—that Lett had roasted them in a very hot oven.

In fact, he had used a cast-iron skillet to accomplish in minutes what normally took us a half-hour

or more. And he did it much better. This made sense. Cast iron holds heat extremely well, and the more it holds, the more it can transfer to the food. That process happens more quickly—and more intensely—than oven roasting, because air neither holds nor transfers heat efficiently.

We tried it and loved the way the searing-hot skillet gave the sprouts a delicious char we'd never achieved in the oven. Chemistry again was at play. In the oven, the sugars in the Brussels sprouts caramelize, which occurs between 320°F and 380°F. But the intense heat in the cast-iron skillet pushes the surface of the sprouts to 400°F or more, the temperature at which charring occurs. And with charring comes more intense flavors.

We next discovered that sprout size—as well as how they are prepped—matters greatly. Larger sprouts didn't taste as good as small or medium ones. That's because larger sprouts contain a higher concentration of the compounds that lead to bitterness. The heat of the pan wasn't able to penetrate larger sprouts quickly enough to mitigate that process during our shorter cooking time. And even with smaller sprouts, we liked them best when cut in half, creating more surface area and contact with the skillet and therefore more charring.

Some chefs char their vegetables in a dry skillet, but we found this produced dry, tough Brussels sprouts. Adding oil to the pan helped a bit but didn't add much in terms of flavor. The best technique was tossing the sprouts in oil, which helped them retain moisture and boosted their flavor. Just a tablespoon of extra-virgin olive oil gave us tastier, tenderer charred sprouts.

Next, we focused on seasonings. A cast-iron pan takes time to heat up, offering an opportunity to briefly heat a simple sauce. We already had olive oil on hand, so bagna càuda—the warm garlic- and anchovy-infused dip from Northern Italy—seemed like a natural fit. High heat would neutralize the fishy flavors of the anchovies, yet preserve their salty, savory side. Minced garlic would stand up to the anchovies. The combination, plus red pepper flakes and a final splash of lemon juice, resulted in a rich, tangy dressing.

But we also wanted a note of sweetness to soften the bitterness from the sprouts and from the charring. A drizzle of honey did the trick. It contributed a complexity that made us wonder if it might enhance the initial toss with olive oil, as well.

When we tested the recipe with that addition, the outcome surprised us. The finished sprouts had deeper color and flavor, and their texture was better, too. The color and flavor we knew were thanks to the glucose and fructose in the honey; they caramelize faster than sugar, which is mostly sucrose. But the sprouts also were moister. Why?

The answer was honey's hygroscopic nature, or tendency to attract water molecules. Caramelized honey loses its water content, but the final drizzle of honey in the dressing at the end locks in moisture and makes the sprouts tenderer.

The final dish had the meaty flavor, nutty texture and bright notes of the best Brussels sprouts we've tasted, and we had accomplished it in minutes.

## Charred Brussels Sprouts

*Start to finish: 25 minutes* | *Servings: 4*

A well-seasoned cast-iron pan was key to this recipe. Stainless steel didn't hold the heat well enough to properly char. To comfortably accommodate the recipe, the pan needed to be at least 12 inches. Tossing the sprouts with oil and honey before cooking prevented them from drying out. Large sprouts took too long to cook. Stick with small to medium. **Don't omit the anchovies.** You may not like them on their own, but as they cook they fade into a rich, salty background flavor.

—Matthew Card

1 pound small to medium Brussels sprouts, trimmed and halved
4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
4 teaspoons honey
Kosher salt
4 garlic cloves, minced
4 anchovy fillets, minced
Red pepper flakes
2 teaspoons lemon juice

- **In a large bowl, toss the sprouts** with 1 tablespoon of oil, 2 teaspoons of honey and ½ teaspoon of salt. Set aside.
- **In a 12- to 14-inch cast-iron skillet,** combine the remaining 3 tablespoons of oil, the garlic, anchovies and ¼ teaspoon of pepper flakes. Set over high heat and cook, stirring occasionally, until the garlic begins to color, 3 to 4 minutes. Scrape the mixture, including the liquid, into a bowl and set aside.
- **Return the skillet to high heat.** Add the sprouts (reserve the bowl) and use tongs to arrange them cut side down in a single layer. Cook, without moving, until deeply browned and blackened in spots, 3 to 7 minutes, depending on your skillet. Use the tongs to flip the sprouts cut side up and cook until charred and just tender, another 3 to 5 minutes.
- **As they finish,** return the sprouts to the bowl and toss with the garlic mixture, the remaining 2 teaspoons of honey and the lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper flakes. ◆

Photo: Connie Miller of CB Creatives

**Simple and quick,** this adaptation of a Goan curry gets brightness from ginger, lime juice and spices.

Photo: Connie Miller of CB Creatives; Styling: Christine Tobin

**Streamlined and punched up,** *a creamy South India-inspired soup*

# 10 Minutes to the Richest Indian Soup

*Story by* Albert Stumm

The heft we associate with Indian cuisine—heavy with spices, rich with chilies and hunks of meat—is just one iteration of the nation's cuisine: that of the North.

Head south to Goa—a small state on the Arabian sea and the source of our inspiration for this simple lentil soup—and the food becomes lighter, brighter, but equally flavorful.

The distinction lies in the lingering influence of the Portuguese, who arrived with the spice trade in the 15th century and didn't surrender Goa to India until 1961.

In both technique and ingredients, they left behind an indelible culinary mark—adding chilies, potatoes, tomatoes, pineapples and vinegar from their colonies across the New World. Vindaloo, for instance, comes from the Portuguese carne de vinha d'alhos, or meat with wine vinegar and garlic sauce.

For our Goan lentil curry, known as masoor dal, we kept its traditional tropical flavors, but simplified it in a one-pot soup.

*Head south to Goa—a small state on the Arabian sea—***and the food becomes lighter, brighter.**

Most Indian recipes call for blooming spices in oil as an initial step to draw out their flavor. We streamlined, instead cooking turmeric, coriander, fennel and mustard seeds with the onions. The result was a pleasant, subtle layer of spice.

A shot of lime juice cut through the starch of the split red lentils, which broke down in 30 minutes. Red pepper flakes added a touch of heat that was nicely balanced by the coconut milk.

A final addition of spinach was nontraditional, but it added green herbal notes that complemented the richness of the lentils and coconut milk. We also topped our soup with tomato and shredded coconut for acidity, brightness and color.

## Red Lentil Soup with Coconut Milk and Spinach

*Start to finish: 1 hour (10 minutes active) | Servings: 6*

Red lentils cook quickly, making this an ideal weeknight meal. Fresh ginger added bright flavor to the soup, and adding a portion of it at the end preserved its vibrancy. If you can't find ground fennel, grind whole seeds in a mortar and pestle or spice grinder.

**Don't substitute brown or green lentils** for the red lentils. Red lentils break down as they cook, thickening the cooking liquid and providing the ideal texture for the soup. —Matthew Card

2 tablespoons coconut oil or peanut oil
1 medium yellow onion, finely chopped
4 garlic cloves, smashed and peeled
Kosher salt
3 teaspoons finely grated fresh ginger, divided
2 teaspoons yellow or brown mustard seeds
2 teaspoons ground turmeric
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1 teaspoon ground fennel
¾ teaspoon red pepper flakes
3½ cups water
14-ounce can coconut milk
1 cup red lentils, rinsed
6 ounces baby spinach (about 6 cups), roughly chopped
2 tablespoons lime juice
Unsweetened shredded coconut and chopped tomato, to serve (optional)

▪ **In a large saucepan** over medium-high, combine the oil, onion, garlic and 1½ teaspoons salt. Cook, stirring, until the onion has softened and is just beginning to color, 7 to 9 minutes. Stir in 2 teaspoons of the ginger, the mustard seeds, turmeric, coriander, fennel and red pepper flakes. Cook, stirring often, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add the water, coconut milk and lentils, then bring to a boil. Reduce to low, cover and simmer, stirring once or twice, until the lentils have broken down, 30 to 40 minutes.

▪ **Stir in the spinach** and return to a simmer. Remove from the heat and add the remaining 1 teaspoon ginger and the lime juice. Taste and season with salt. Serve sprinkled with shredded coconut and tomato, if using. ◆

*Who Put* **Tahini in My Brownie?**

# Rethinking the Brownie

*Story by* Christopher Kimball

Up until the late 19th century, chocolate was a rare ingredient, and chocolate desserts were mostly absent from American cookbooks. In fact, the first brownie recipe, published in 1896 in Fannie Farmer's "The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book," really was a molasses cake. Farmer's 1906 version wasn't much better: more cake than brownie, with only a faint chocolate flavor.

Today, of course, chocolate is everywhere and brownies are infinite in style, flavor and texture. But most remain one-note wonders, little more than sugar, fat and chocolate plus the occasional marshmallow, nut or swirl of peanut butter. At Milk Street, we wanted a more grown-up pairing.

We loved the halvah brownie from Tatte Bakery & Cafe in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Halvah is a fudge-like candy from the Middle East made from tahini, a rich paste of ground sesame seeds. The mix of slightly bitter sesame and chocolate appealed to us immediately.

Others had paved the way. Naomi Duguid swirls sweetened tahini into brownies made with sesame oil, while Yotam Ottolenghi adds raw tahini to brownie batter, then sprinkles halvah on top.

At Milk Street, we fiddled with how much tahini to use in our brownies—its fat content was the problem. A full cup made the brownies greasy, and the tahini formed a thick layer that didn't bake well. So we reduced the tahini and the amount of butter, substituted cocoa powder for some of the chocolate and added an egg to cut through the rich brownie base. That was a good start.

Instead of adding tahini to a classic brownie batter, we reversed our thinking, stirring chocolate into a tahini base. Be sure to fully bake the brownies—they are extremely tender, even wet, if not baked through. One last tip: The tahini's flavor and color intensify over time, so make the brownies a day ahead for a more pronounced sesame taste.

We've made these brownies dozens of times. The slight bitterness and complexity of the tahini indeed are the perfect match for chocolate. Brownies finally have come of age.

**A swirl of tahini** produces ultra-tender brownies.

## Tahini Swirl Brownies

*Start to finish: 40 minutes | Makes 16 brownies*

The duo of dark chocolate and cocoa powder gave these brownies depth, and the vanilla enhanced the flavor of both of them. The combination of tahini and sugar replicates the sweet sesame flavor of halvah candy but was easier to work with—and to find. Swirling the reserved tahini batter into the chocolate created a visual and textural contrast and let the tahini flavor shine. The best way to marble the brownies was to run the tip of a paring knife through the dollops of batter.

**Don't skip stirring** the tahini before measuring; the solids often sink to the bottom.

—Erika Bruce

- 4 tablespoons salted butter (½ stick), plus more for pan
- 4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped
- 16 grams (3 tablespoons) cocoa powder
- 3 large eggs
- 223 grams (1 cup plus 2 tablespoons) white sugar
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 180 grams (¾ cup) tahini
- 47 grams (⅓ cup) all-purpose flour

- **Heat the oven to 350°F** with a rack in the middle position. Line an 8-inch-square baking pan with 2 pieces of foil with excess hanging over the edges on all sides. Lightly coat with butter.
- **In a medium saucepan** over medium heat, melt the butter. Remove from the heat and add the chocolate and cocoa, whisking until smooth.
- **In a large bowl,** whisk the eggs, sugar, vanilla and salt until slightly thickened, about 1 minute. Whisk in the tahini. Fold in the flour until just incorporated. Set aside ½ cup of the mixture. Add the chocolate mixture to the remaining tahini mixture and fold until fully combined.
- **Pour the batter** into the prepared pan, spreading evenly. Dollop the reserved tahini mixture over the top, then swirl the batters together with the tip of a paring knife. Bake until the edges are set but the center remains moist, 28 to 32 minutes. Cool in the pan on a wire rack for 30 minutes. Use the foil to lift the brownies from the pan. Cool on the rack for at least another 30 minutes before removing from foil. The longer the brownies cool, the more easily they cut. Cut into 2-inch squares. ◆

## The bitter truth about sesame seed paste, *and how to choose one*

**Think peanut butter** with a pleasantly bitter bite. That's tahini, a paste made from sesame seeds. It's now widely available in the U.S. in multiple varieties. The primary difference is whether the seeds are toasted or raw. Either should have a fresh sesame flavor that's nutty and buttery, says chef Alon Shaya, an expert in Middle Eastern cuisine.

Look for labels that list just one ingredient: sesame seeds. Shaya prefers tahinis that are stone-ground. "The stone grinding really gets the best texture and incorporates the oils and the nutrients into the actual butter." We prefer brands from the Middle East, such as Aleppo and Al Kanater.

A layer of oil from the crushed seeds rises to the top (as with natural peanut butter), so be sure to mix tahini well to avoid oily brownies or hummus. If you use a jar in a month or so, store it tightly sealed in a cabinet. It will last even longer refrigerated. ◆

Photo: Connie Miller of CB Creatives; Styling: Catherine Smart

**In the Old City of Jerusalem,** Arab and Israeli cultures and cuisines come together, and wonderfully so in bowls of warm, ethereally smooth hummus.

# Warm, Whipped and Simple. Real Hummus.

## *In Pursuit of Perfect Hummus*

*Story by*
J.M. Hirsch

**We make it wrong.** We serve it wrong. We eat it wrong.

In fact, the Israelis get hummus right in ways we hadn't even considered we could mess it up. This dawned on me just after I stepped off the plane in Tel Aviv.

"Where will you eat hummus in the morning?" My taxi driver wanted to know.

In Israel, hummus is breakfast. Not a party dip served with "baby" carrots. Not adulterated with pesto or artichokes or—God help me—chocolate.

My education begins the next morning at Abu Hassan, the country's premier hummus shop, around since the '60s. And it begins early. In a flurry of scooters, pedestrians and cars, customers line up shortly after 7 a.m., some carrying mixing bowls, plastic food containers, foil baking pans. Hummus take-out is very DIY. The shop will close once the hummus runs out.

Abu Hassan has two locations; I'm at the original, a beige storefront. In the distance, a sliver of the Mediterranean Sea peeks between buildings. On the left side, a tiny dining room that spills onto the sidewalk is already at capacity. On the right, a window and a line of people waiting to order.

At each of the eight or so tables, customers are handed wide, shallow bowls swirled with hummus topped with whole chickpeas, a sprinkle of parsley, pops of red paprika and amber cumin. Side plates hold stacks of pillow-soft pita breads and quarters of raw onion. The sea mixes with warm bread, concocting a seductive air. Crowd be damned, it is quiet beyond murmurs. These are workers stopping for a quick breakfast on their commute. The hummus was made in the early hours, so even the kitchen feels hushed.


**Abu Hassan**
*Ha-Dolfin Street, Tel Aviv*
Crowds gather here—Israel's premier hummus shop—by 7 a.m. and the shop closes as soon as the hummus runs out.

Photos: J.M. Hirsch (top, bottom left, bottom center), Noam Moskowitz (bottom right)

**Samah Siam teaches Palestinian cooking** at her home inside the Damascus Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem. She follows her mother's recipe, a study of simplicity: freshly cooked chickpeas, tahini, a splash of lemon juice and salt. She purees it until silken smooth, thinning it with chickpea cooking water.

Watching them eat is jarring. Sure, some rip off hunks of pita, swooping it fluidly into the yogurt-soft hummus, a scooping technique every child masters. But many pull the bowls toward them and eat it with a spoon, as we would soup.

My turn at the window and I make a hummus faux pas. I want what I see, so I ask for hummus and pita. I get a strange look and a request for 10 Israeli Shekels, or about $2.70. Instead of the beautifully dressed bowl I craved, I get a bag. Inside, a split pita with hummus oozing out the sides.

Turns out, pita is implied in any order of hummus. By calling it out, apparently I overstated the obvious to which I was oblivious, changing my request into some sort of unorthodox sandwich. Hence the odd look. Nonetheless, I eat—rather messily—standing at the sunny curb, surrounded by others expertly balancing bowls and bread.

I don't care. I am transfixed. This no tub of American grocery store hummus. It is light, ethereally smooth. The flavor is at once boldly nutty with tahini yet also subtle. None of the harsh garlic and lemon I expect. Is there even any garlic in it? Most shocking: It is deliciously warm. Who knew you could eat hummus warm?

I ask—repeatedly over several days—but the men at Abu Hassan won't share their secrets. But at least they had shown me what hummus should be. To deconstruct that, I head an hour south, to the walled Old City of Jerusalem.

## Samah Siam's Home

*Old City of Jerusalem*

HUMMUS HAS BEEN an unlikely flashpoint in the Middle East. Various countries and people claim it as their own, a push and pull that would be comical if the factions weren't already so at odds. In recent decades, Israelis became particularly enamored with it. Today, Jews and Muslims alike savor it. But it began as an Arab dish. So I seek an Arab as my first teacher.

Samah Siam's home—a warren of small, almost subterranean stone rooms in the city's Muslim Quarter—is a short walk along narrow cobbled roads from the Damascus Gate, a massive entrance to the city that dates to the 16th century. She will teach me the hummus her mother taught her. Her 20-year-old daughter, Aseel, translates from Arabic as Samah pulls a pot of steaming, freshly cooked chickpeas off the stove.

She works quickly and by instinct, measuring nothing in her small kitchen, which is a contrast that spans thousands of years. Jesus likely walked past her home. Today, a reality competition plays on a flat-screen TV on the other side of the room. Stray cats—which are legion in Israel—saunter past the open door. Eager to impress, her husband, Riad, takes us to the rooftop, from which a stunning panorama of history and faith unfolds.

When we return, Samah explains that the chickpeas are always pureed warm and hummus is always served warm. They are creamier that way. And they are pureed first with nothing but their own cooking water, a critical ingredient for reaching a silky consistency. When her blender has reduced the chickpeas to a soft puree, she adds tahini, lemon juice, salt. Nothing else. No garlic.

The hummus pours easily from blender to bowl. Samah—whose family in winter eats fresh

**At Shlomo & Doron,** near Tel Aviv's massive outdoor Carmel Market, the toppings are as important as the hummus itself. Ful (pureed favas) and shakshuka (tomatoes and eggs) are the two most popular.

Photos: Noam Moskowitz


**At Gargir Hasav,** near Tel Aviv's Levinsky Market, hummus is made fresh each morning, 5 liters at a time. To ensure a smooth, almost sour cream-like consistency, the chickpeas, still piping hot, are pureed for a full three minutes. In addition to pita bread, raw onions and pickles are common sides.

hummus almost daily for breakfast—adds a drizzle of olive oil, a spoonful of whole chickpeas. It is warm, savory and soft. We eat it with fresh pita.

### Shlomo & Doron

*Yishkan Street, Tel Aviv*

BACK IN TEL AVIV, I meet with Elad Shore. His family opened the Shlomo & Doron hummus shop in 1937. The 27-year-old sits, sorting fava beans, at one of the tables outside the shop, near the massive outdoor Carmel Market. He confirms the simplicity of hummus, then talks toppings. It is something his shop takes particular pride in.

The classic topping is hummus masabacha—whole chickpeas, olive oil, parsley, paprika and cumin. Sometimes a sliced hard-boiled egg. Then there is ful (pronounced FOOL), which tops hummus with an almost-black fava bean puree. Shlomo & Doron also serve hummus topped with shakshuka (poached eggs in tomatoes) and a baba ghanoush-like roasted eggplant. Some shops even break the vegetarian barrier, adding spoonfuls of spiced ground lamb (called kawarma).

What about the onions, I ask as a man on a motorbike delivers fresh pita. I couldn't get enough of the warm pita, but Elad explains that Israelis use as little as possible. "It's too heavy, especially at breakfast" he explains. Instead, they break the quartered onions into thin scoops, using them to spoon up hummus. An acquired taste, to be sure.

**In Israel,** warm hummus is a breakfast food, usually eaten outside or at open-air shops.

Photos: Noam Moskowitz

### Gargir Hasav

*Levinsky Street, Tel Aviv*

ON MY FINAL DAY in Tel Aviv, the cooks at yet another hummus shop, Gargir Hazav ("Grain of Gold"), invite me into their kitchen. A cauldron of chickpeas boils over on a gas burner, sending rivers of foam onto the tiled floor. We focus on proportions and timing, all of which surprise me.

Oren Mizlahi, who learned hummus-making from his father, ladles 4 or 5 liters of freshly cooked chickpeas and cooking water into a food processor. He walks away for one, then two, then three minutes. Far longer than I've ever let anything process. He opens the cover and steam billows out. He adds tahini—a full liter. Far more proportionally than I've ever made. Then he purees the mixture for another full minute. I start to understand why Israeli hummus is so light and smooth.

BACK AT MILK STREET, we had work ahead of us. First, the ingredients. We'd never noticed, but chickpeas come in a range of sizes. In Israel, they favor smaller varieties, about the size of green peas. Larger chickpeas make grainy hummus. We agreed. We tested conventional chickpeas against smaller varieties, such as the Whole Foods Market 365 Everyday Value brand, and overwhelmingly preferred the latter.

Tahini was also an issue. Tahini is more common In Israel than ketchup is here, and brands and varieties are numerous. Less so in America. A toasted, thin (i.e., pours easily) tahini is needed to get the creamy consistency and rich, savory flavor we wanted. It was also essential to stir the tahini very well; some brands separate and clump. We liked the Kevala brand, but Soom and Aleppo brands also worked. We did not like Joyva, which was dark, thick and tasted bitter, almost burned.

We were pleased that in Israel the chickpeas are cooked in a familiar way—soaked overnight, then drained, then boiled with baking soda (to help soften them). We found that adding salt to the soaking water not only helped tenderize the chickpea skins, but also helped them absorb more water (softening them further). We tried cooking them without soaking—both pressure cooking and boiling—but neither method worked nearly as well, producing hummus that was dark, with a muddy flavor.

We questioned whether the extreme processing Oren showed us was really necessary. Most recipes here only call for processing until smooth. But when we compared, processing for a full three minutes made a significant difference; the hummus was noticeably creamier and lighter. We also tested the blender versus the food processor and found the latter not only did a better job of pureeing, it was also easier to get the hummus out of.

We wondered if processing the chickpeas while

warm really was important. Once again, the Israelis knew their stuff. Hot chickpeas made a much smoother hummus. For a do-ahead option, we found we could soak the chickpeas overnight, then drain and refrigerate them for a few days before cooking. We also found that cooked chickpeas could be kept in their cooking water for an hour after boiling, then reheated briefly just before making the hummus. The heat rule also held true for serving. The taste of warm hummus was substantially better than cool.

Finally, dried chickpeas versus canned. Honestly, until this trip I despised working with dried beans. It's a pain when fully cooked beans are just a can opener away. But that is anathema in Israel. Now, I agree. We tried canned—which we heated before pureeing—and while the results were certainly better than the tubs sold at the grocery store, they could not compare in flavor or texture to hummus made from freshly cooked chickpeas.

So now I will soak and boil and puree for a very long time. Because pared down to its basic elements, hummus is breathtakingly good. But I'm still not sure I'll eat it scooped up with raw onions.

## Israeli Hummus (Hummus Masabacha)

*Start to finish: 1 hour (15 minutes active), plus soaking | Makes 4 cups*

SMALL CHICKPEAS WORK BEST for hummus; aim for no larger than a green pea. The Whole Foods Market 365 Everyday Value brand worked well. If you only find larger chickpeas, cook them until starting to break down, or 10 to 15 minutes longer. Soak the chickpeas for at least 12 hours. They can be soaked ahead of time, then drained and refrigerated for up to two days. Tahini is a sesame paste sold near peanut butter or in the international aisle. We liked the Kevala brand, but Soom and Aleppo were good, too. Look for a brand that is toasted and pours easily. Processing the chickpeas while warm ensures the smoothest, lightest hummus. Hummus is traditionally served warm and garnished with paprika, cumin, chopped fresh parsley and a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil. Sometimes a sliced hard-boiled egg is added. Serve with warm pita bread. Leftover hummus can be refrigerated for up to five days. To reheat, transfer to a microwave-safe bowl, cover and gently heat, adding a few tablespoons of tap water as needed to reach the proper consistency, 1 to 2 minutes. Alternatively, set over a double-boiler.

**Don't forget to stir the tahini very well.** Some brands separate and can become quite thick at the bottom. If your tahini is particularly thick, you may need to add a tablespoon or two of water to the hummus to reach the right consistency.

—J.M. HIRSCH *and* DIANE UNGER

**Warm hummus** is also delicious topped with a sliced hard-boiled egg and spiced ground beef.

Cold water
8 ounces (227 grams) dried chickpeas
2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon kosher salt, divided
½ teaspoon baking soda
¾ cup toasted tahini, room temperature
3½ tablespoons lemon juice
1 to 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
½ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon paprika

▪ **In a large bowl,** combine 8 cups of cold water, the chickpeas and 2 tablespoons of the salt. Let soak at room temperature at least 12 hours or overnight.

▪ **In a large stockpot** over high, bring 10 cups of water and the baking soda to a boil. Drain the soaked chickpeas, discarding soaking water, and add to the pot. Return to a simmer, then reduce heat to medium and cook until the skins are falling off and the chickpeas are very tender, 45 to 50 minutes.

▪ **Set a mesh strainer** over a large bowl and drain the chickpeas into it; reserve ¾ cup of the chickpea cooking water. Let the chickpeas sit for 1 minute to let all liquid drain. Set aside about 2 tablespoons of chickpeas, then transfer the rest to the food processor. Add the remaining 1 teaspoon of salt, then process for 3 minutes.

▪ **Stop the processor** and add the tahini. Continue to process until the mixture has lightened and is very smooth, about 1 minute. Use a rubber spatula to scrape the sides and bottom of the processor bowl. With the machine running, add the ¾ cup of cooking liquid and the lemon juice. Process until combined. Taste and season with salt.

▪ **Transfer the hummus** to a shallow bowl and use a large spoon to make a swirled well in the center. Drizzle the well with olive oil, then top with the reserved 2 tablespoons chickpeas, parsley, cumin and paprika.

### Spiced Beef Topping (Kawarma)

*Start to finish: 20 minutes | Makes about 2 cups*

RICH, SAVORY MEAT TOPPINGS lend bold notes to hummus and make it a more robust meal. Our inspiration was kawarma, which uses ground lamb. We found beef was just as delicious. Use a wand-style grater to finely grate the garlic. The raw meat mixture can be combined up to an hour ahead and refrigerated until ready to cook. It also can be cooked ahead and refrigerated (leaving out the lemon and parsley), then reheated in a skillet or microwave just before serving. Finish with the lemon juice and parsley.

—J.M. HIRSCH *and* DIANE UNGER

½ pound 90-percent lean ground beef
2 teaspoons sweet paprika
¾ teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon dried oregano
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
2 garlic cloves, finely grated
¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons water, divided
½ large yellow onion, finely chopped (about 1 cup)
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1½ teaspoons lemon juice
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley or mint
Tahini, to serve

▪ **In a medium bowl,** use your hands to mix together the beef, paprika, salt, cinnamon, cumin, oregano, cayenne, garlic and 2 tablespoons of water.

▪ **In a 10-inch skillet** over medium-high, combine the ground beef mixture, onion and olive oil. Cook, stirring occasionally and breaking up the meat, until the onion is softened and the beef is no longer pink, 6 to 8 minutes. Stir in the tomato paste and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

▪ **Add another ½ cup** plus 2 tablespoons of water and cook, scraping the pan, until the water has evaporated and the mixture begins to sizzle, about 5 minutes. Off heat, stir in the lemon juice and parsley. Taste and season with salt. Spoon over hummus, then drizzle with tahini. ◆

Photo: Joyelle West

**Velvety and light,** *a simple two-bowl solution to chocolate cake*

# Chocolate Cake: No Oven Needed

*Story by* Albert Stumm

Most cooking involves finding the sweet spot, and that's particularly true with baking, where the perfect cake requires the perfect oven temperature.

But oven heat can vary a surprising amount, leading to inconsistent results. If the cake's a touch too hot, it dries out and bubbles up in the middle. Too cool and it doesn't rise enough, leaving you with a dense flop.

Which had us wondering: What if, to make an ultra-moist, evenly cooked cake, we got rid of the oven altogether?

In areas of the world with fewer home ovens, cakes often spring to life on the stovetop, relying on the consistent temperature of steam. It's a foolproof way to "bake" an unimaginably moist, tender cake every time.

Stovetop steaming is typical for some Western baked goods—Boston brown bread and British Christmas pudding, for instance—but today, steamed desserts are mostly found in Asian countries. There's almond-scented nian gao, served at Chinese New Year; Korea's red-bean pat siruteok; and kue putu, made inside a bamboo tube in Indonesia.

The technique owes its success to how steam relates to the starch and gluten in the batter. In a dry oven, the interior of the cake never gets above about 200°F because much of the moisture is lost to evaporation as it reaches the boiling point. But in the steamy environment of a simmering pot, once the water boils, the temperature in the vessel stays an even 212°F.

Since steam has five times the energy of air at the same temperature, it agitates the batter, sort of punching the cake out from the inside, causing it to set more quickly. The water that would otherwise evaporate is retained in the cake crumb, resulting in a uniformly moist cake.

At Milk Street, we wanted to adapt this simple, effective technique to a classic chocolate cake. A Dutch oven provided the right size for a steaming pot, and placing a coil of scrunched-up foil on the bottom was an easy way to keep the cake pan above the water line.

**Skip the oven.** The steamy environment of a simmering pot cooks this cake.

We left the stand mixer in the cupboard, opting for a simple two-bowl mixing method. In little more than 20 minutes, we had a light, ultra-moist chocolate cake.

One element we lost as a result of steaming were the browned edges of the cake produced by the Maillard reaction, when high heat reacts with the sugars and proteins in the batter, causing caramelization. Steaming, however, cleared the way for a cleaner, more chocolate-forward flavor. A touch of espresso powder added complexity and hinted at the roasted aromas that would have developed during baking.

Our stovetop recipe strikes a balance of being rich but not dense. Its velvety simplicity pairs well with a scoop of vanilla ice cream or even just a dusting of powdered sugar.

## Stovetop Chocolate Cake

*Start to finish: 35 minutes (10 minutes active), plus cooling | Servings: 8*

Steaming a traditional chocolate cake batter produced a light, moist cake and let us avoid using the oven. Brown sugar and espresso powder gave the cake complexity, while sour cream added richness and a welcome tang. Either Dutch-processed or natural cocoa powder works well in this recipe. We liked the cake dusted with powdered sugar or topped with whipped cream. If your Dutch oven has a self-basting lid—dimples or spikes on the underside—lay a sheet of kitchen parchment or foil over the top of the pot before putting the lid in place to prevent water from dripping onto the cake's surface.

142 grams (1 cup) all-purpose flour
29 grams (⅓ cup) cocoa powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon kosher salt
198 grams (1 cup packed) light brown sugar
2 large eggs
½ cup water
1 teaspoon instant espresso powder
½ cup sour cream
6 tablespoons (¾ stick) salted butter, melted
1½ teaspoons vanilla extract

- **Cut an 18-inch length** of foil and gently scrunch together to form a snake about 1 inch thick. Shape into a circle and set on the bottom of a large Dutch oven. Add enough water to reach three-quarters up the coil. Mist the bottom and sides of a 9-inch round cake pan with cooking spray, line with kitchen parchment, then mist the parchment. Place the prepared pan on top of the coil.
- **Sift the flour,** cocoa powder and baking soda into a medium bowl, then whisk in the salt. In a large bowl, whisk the sugar and eggs until slightly lightened, about 30 seconds. Whisk in the water, espresso powder, sour cream, butter and vanilla. Add the flour mixture and whisk gently until just combined.
- **Pour the batter** into the prepared pan. Cover and heat on high until the water boils. Reduce heat to low and steam, covered, until a toothpick inserted at the center comes out clean, about 23 minutes.
- **Turn off the heat** and carefully remove the lid. Let the cake sit in the Dutch oven until the pan is cool enough to handle. Transfer the pan to a wire rack, then run a paring knife around the edges. Let the cake cool completely, then invert onto a plate and remove the parchment. Invert back onto another plate. ◆

**Don't open the Dutch oven** too often while steaming, but do check that the water is at a very gentle simmer. You should see steam emerging from the pot. If the heat is too high, the water will boil away before the cake is cooked.

—Yvonne Ruperti

Photo: Connie Miller of CB Creatives; Styling: Christine Tobin

◆ **Qa'er Hejazey** bakes shraq, Iraqi flatbread, as his family has for 300 years at Jerusalem's Makhbaz Hejazey bakery. ◆