

Cook'sCountry
**BEST POTLUCK
RECIPES**

More than 100 Classic and Heirloom
Favorites for All Occasions

FROM THE EDITORS AT AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN

COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY Keller + Keller and Carl Tremblay

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY Daniel J. van Ackere

America's
TEST KITCHEN



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Pictured on the front cover: Strawberry Poke Cake (page 212)

Pictured opposite the title page: Waldorf Salad (page 58)

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WELCOME TO AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN

This book has been tested, written, and edited by the folks at America's Test Kitchen, a very real 2,500-square-foot kitchen located just outside of Boston. It is the home of *Cook's Country* magazine and *Cook's Illustrated* magazine and is the Monday-through-Friday destination for more than three dozen test cooks, editors, food scientists, tasters, and cookware specialists. Our mission is to test recipes over and over again until we understand how and why they work and until we arrive at the "best" version.

We start the process of testing a recipe with a complete lack of conviction, which means that we accept no claim, no theory, no technique, and no recipe at face value. We simply assemble as many variations as possible, test a half dozen of the most promising, and taste the results blind. We then construct our own hybrid recipe and continue to test it, varying ingredients, techniques, and cooking times until we reach a consensus. The result, we hope, is the best version of a particular recipe, but we realize that only you can be the final judge of our success (or failure). As we

like to say in the test kitchen, "We make the mistakes, so you don't have to."

All of this would not be possible without a belief that good cooking, much like good music, is indeed based on a foundation of objective technique. Some people like spicy foods and others don't, but there is a right way to sauté, there is a best way to cook a pot roast, and there are measurable scientific principles involved in producing perfectly beaten, stable egg whites. This is our ultimate goal: to investigate the fundamental principles of cooking so that you become a better cook. It is as simple as that.

You can watch us work (in our actual test kitchen) by tuning in to *Cook's Country from America's Test Kitchen* (www.cookscountrytv.com) or *America's Test Kitchen* (www.americastestkitchen.com) on public television, or by subscribing to *Cook's Country* magazine (www.cookscountry.com) or *Cook's Illustrated* magazine (www.cooksillustrated.com). We welcome you into our kitchen, where you can stand by our side as we test our way to the "best" recipes in America.

PREFACE

For over twenty years, our small town in Vermont has held the annual Ox Roast in mid-August at Susie and Valerie's homestead, just south of Beartown. That, and my own family's Pig Roast held just two weeks later, are the main social events of the summer, gatherings dominated by large cuts of meat provided by the hosts and potluck side dishes and desserts brought by the guests. Sure, the long row of hay bales covered with paper tablecloths offers much that is expected over the years, from five pots of baked beans, some thick as paste and some more like soup, to coleslaw, potato salads, pasta salads, various brightly colored Jell-O side salads (both fruit and vegetable), rice salads, more adventurous dishes using wild greens such as fiddlehead ferns or wild leeks, and then the desserts: brownies, one-layer frosted cakes, pies (a few store-bought), cobblers, cookies, coffee cakes, ambrosia, and one or two fluffy, brightly colored offerings that are scooped up quickly by the older bachelor farmers. Before the meat is

either sliced or pulled and the line forms, there is much pecking at the potluck dishes, and a scurrying about trying to figure out who made what. Since most of us are familiar with the quality of the cooking in various kitchens around town, this bit of advance work pays off.

I am, as many know, a great believer in cooking as the foundation of society. Much like nineteenth-century barbecue, a potluck dinner is the ultimate social leveler, a glue of sorts, that brings people together from all walks and then sets them down at the same long table where they discover common ground. A potluck supper has one other great bonus—it is much like attending an auction preview; one finds treasures one didn't expect, gems among the more pedestrian offerings. I suppose that is why someone once married the term *pot* with *luck*. It was to express the adventurous nature of this sort of food, a grab bag, a wheel of fortune, a bunch of stocking stuffers with varying degrees of appeal. So our

goal was to take the "luck" out of potluck, to make sure that every recipe was either exceptional or, at the very least, pretty darn good. Try our version of Ultimate Seven-Layer Dip, Dilly Beans, Southern Corn Pudding, Southwestern Tamale Pie, Wisconsin Grilled Brats and Beer, and then a groaning board of sweets: Apple Slab Pie, Texas Sheet Cake, Moravian Sugar Cake, and St. Louis Goopy Butter Cake, to name just a few. There is nothing common about this food; it is uncommonly good. And there is one other nice feature of this volume. Since all of these recipes have been put through the vetting process in our test kitchen, you can rest assured that they really deliver as promised.

The best parts of any potluck supper, however, are the stories. Last year at the Ox Roast, I ran into Doug Wright, who used to run the gas station in town. He is a smart operator so he often hired the prettiest girl in town to pump gas, attracting quite a crowd. He reminded me of the

following story about a particularly incompetent barber. A man came into the shop for a shave and, after having endured several minutes of agony in the chair, asked the barber for a glass of water.

"What's the matter," the barber asked, "got a hair in your throat?"

"Nope," yelled the man. "Just want to see if my neck would still hold water!"

Enjoy the recipes, the cooking, and the stories.

Christopher Kimball

Founder and Editor

Cook's Country and *Cook's Illustrated*

Host, *Cook's Country from America's Test Kitchen*
and *America's Test Kitchen*



CHICKEN, BROCCOLI, AND ZITI CASSEROLE

AFTER YOU RSVP

Potluck 101

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FOOD SAFETY

Let's face it. We've all been to gatherings where the food sits out on the buffet table for hours, leaving us to wonder what is really safe to eat. Sure, tepid lasagna isn't exactly a disaster, but if it's been sitting out for too long, it's unsafe in addition to being unappealing. Why? When cold salads warm up or piping-hot casseroles cool down, the potential for food-borne bacteria increases. Simply put, you want everyone to remember you for your creamy buttermilk coleslaw—not for the way it made them feel the next day. We've compiled the following guidelines to help ensure that the food you serve is safe to eat.

KEEPING COOL

Cold food should be stored at 40 degrees or below until serving time. To keep salads, slaws, and other perishables well chilled, wrap them tightly with plastic wrap, then foil, and pack them in a cooler with ice or freezer packs (or, in a pinch, frozen water bottles). Food should already be chilled when placed in the cooler; hot food will only warm up its surroundings. A cooler tightly packed with ice or cold packs will stay colder longer; if yours is only partially filled after you've packed the food, add more ice. Remember grade-school science class—cold air sinks (hot air rises)—so be sure to set ice or ice packs on top of the food, not just on the sides or bottom of the cooler.

While you're in the car, be sure to place the cooler in a shaded spot, not the sunny passenger seat, and don't open the cooler until you reach

your destination to ensure that the food remains at the right temperature.

At the party, cold salads and slaws that are in serving bowls can be set directly in a bowl of ice to keep them chilled; add more ice as necessary, and drain off the water as it melts. After being served, cold foods should not sit out longer than 2 hours (or 1 hour if the temperature is above 90 degrees).



Set bowls of cold salads and slaws in a larger bowl of ice to keep them chilled.

STAYING HOT

Hot food should be kept hot, at or above 140 degrees—so if you're transporting it, don't let it cool down after it comes out of the oven. It should be wrapped well in foil or placed in an insulated carrier if you have one (see page 4) until serving time. Hot dishes should not sit out longer than 2 hours (or 1 hour if the temperature is above 90 degrees). When in doubt, toss the leftovers.



Your food should be at or above 140 degrees before serving. If not, see page 4 for reheating instructions.

PACKING ESSENTIALS AND TRAVELING TIPS

Unless your destination is across the street or right in your neighborhood, it pays to pack your food properly and with care. We have found that the following items and tips make this task much easier—no more food sloshing around the backseat or, if you take the subway, all over your lap. With these suggestions, we've got you—and your food—covered.

WRAP IT UP

A kitchen staple if there ever was one, aluminum foil is our favorite multitasker. We use it to wrap everything from hot casseroles (really tight to keep the heat in) to wood chips for the grill. Not only does foil keep foods cold or hot, it also keeps things where they belong—when tightly wrapped. But foil can stick to the food, so we recommend spraying it with vegetable oil spray before wrapping any dish (or you could use nonstick foil). As for brand preference, we buy ours in super-sized, restaurant-style rolls but have found little difference among various store brands.

Plastic wrap is essential for storing, freezing, and keeping food fresh. When it comes to packing cold dishes, a layer of plastic wrap (followed by a cover of foil) is a must. But plastic wrap can be frustrating to work with—the roll rips, the plastic clings to itself, and the sharp metal teeth slice skin along with the plastic. To find the best brand, we tested several for clinginess, pain-free packaging, and the ability of the wraps to keep foods fresh. Our favorite was Glad Cling Wrap Clear Plastic, which aced the impermeability test, has sharp teeth that easily tore the plastic (but not our skin), and an adhesive pad to hold the cut end of the wrap in place.



KEEP IT SECURE

To keep wrapped food from tipping over or sliding around the backseat, nothing works better than a plain old cardboard box or a roasting pan. You can fit several plates and bowls in either one, secure them against each other, and stuff the empty space with dish towels for extra insurance.

Frosted sheet cakes travel well in their own baking pans, wrapped tightly with foil, but taking cupcakes on the road can be tricky. To make transporting cupcakes easy, we set frosted cupcakes into a muffin tin, then set the tin in a deep roasting pan. Because of the pan's high sides, the cupcakes can easily be covered with foil—without doing any damage to the frosting. Keeping the cupcakes contained guarantees that they won't slide around during transport.



For easy cupcake transport, set frosted cupcakes in a muffin tin, place the tin in a deep roasting pan, and cover with foil.

INSULATED FOOD CARRIERS

Insulated carriers used to be only for pizza delivery workers and caterers, but we found two models that will keep your famous lasagna piping-hot all the way to the potluck. Our favorite insulated carrier is the Pyrex Portables 3-Quart Oblong with Black Carrier (\$26.99), which kept hot food hot and safe to eat (over 140 degrees) for nearly 3 hours (almost 4 hours when we used the included hot/cold pack). The top-latching Velcro handle felt secure and stable, even when maneuvering a blazing-hot casserole dish around the test kitchen. What's more, its sleek carrier fit like a glove around a standard 13 by 9-inch baking dish (both our winning carrier and runner-up come with this size baking dish, so there's no need to purchase one). Our runner-up is the Anchor Hocking Bake N Take 3-Quart Baking Dish Set (\$17.99).

Although it didn't keep food at temperature as long as the Pyrex (just under 2 hours), it was easy to use and sturdily constructed.



PYREX

NO FOOD CARRIER? NO WORRIES!

If you don't have an insulated food carrier, don't fret—you can improvise. You can wrap a casserole straight out of the oven in foil, then in a large beach towel, and then in plastic wrap. While the casserole wrapped this way did not stay at a safe temperature for the same length of time as in our insulated carriers (only about an hour), it was long enough to travel moderate distances and still keep food hot.



1. If you don't have an insulated carrier, wrap the hot casserole in foil, then in a large beach towel.



2. Then wrap the whole package securely in plastic wrap to keep it hot.

REHEATING AND SERVING TIPS

So you've made it to your destination with no big messes or mishaps—now what? If you've prepared and baked a casserole just before leaving your home and it isn't as hot as it should be when you arrive, you can easily reheat it. Simply cover the casserole (it should still be lukewarm, not cold) with aluminum foil sprayed with vegetable oil spray (or use nonstick foil) and reheat it in a 400-degree oven for about 15 minutes. If there is a crumb topping, uncover the casserole for the last 5 minutes or so to help the topping recrisp.

If your dish is a salad or slaw, combine the salad ingredients in a serving bowl, but hold off adding the vinaigrette or dressing until you arrive at the party (15 minutes before serving time, unless otherwise specified).

MAKE THINGS EASY FOR YOUR HOST

(AND OTHER WAYS TO BE A GOOD POTLUCK GUEST)

Most households have a limited number of serving utensils, so do your potluck host (and fellow party-goers) a favor and remember to pack the appropriate serving utensils for your dish. You don't want to end up serving your macaroni and cheese with a teaspoon because all the serving spoons have been taken. Also, don't forget to pack serving platters or dishes if you're bringing food in a zipper-lock bag or other container not worthy of presentation. And your host will appreciate it if you include hot pads or trivets with your dish—these also tend to run in short supply at parties.

Labeling your contribution is another way to be helpful to your party host. After you've wrapped your salad or casserole in foil, label it with the name of the dish and your name, then tape the label to the foil. When setting out your dish, the host and guests will know what you've provided. Also, don't forget to attach a label—with your name on it—to the bottom of the dish; when the party's over, no one will wonder whose antique crystal serving bowl is left on the table because it will cleverly have your name on it.

WHEN YOU'RE THE HOST

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL POTLUCK

Potlucks are a collaborative effort—that's what makes them so much fun. But when you're the host, it's up to you to make sure the party goes off without a hitch. Here are a few tips to ensure that your potluck goes smoothly.

- Assign guests a category of food to bring. This way, you can rest assured that you'll have a full complement of foods to fill your buffet table.
- Designate specific areas of your home for drinks, desserts, and anything else that may not need to go on the buffet table right away. When someone walks in holding a sheet cake, you can simply point toward the dessert table.
- Be sure to pick up enough ice and beverages, and make sure you have enough coolers or decorative tubs to hold them.
- Set out a cutting board and knife for last-minute preparations, as well as plenty of trivets for casseroles.
- Gather your serving utensils in advance so you're not scrambling to find them at the last minute.
- Have extra chips and crackers on hand; so many people bring dips or cheese—but either forget the crackers or don't bring enough.
- Place your trash can in an easily accessible area; you won't want guests stashing dirty plates on your grandmother's antique sideboard.



CHEESY STUFFED MUSHROOMS

Starters to Share

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Spiced Nuts

At parties and potlucks, spiced nuts usually disappear faster than the host can replenish the bowl. But most spiced nuts are made with a heavy sugar syrup, which can leave your hands sticky and cause the nuts to clump together in unappealing, indelicate clusters. We wanted a clump-free nut mix with bold flavors that wasn't overly sweet.

Finding the right coating method required a good deal of testing on our part. The most common technique, boiling the nuts in a thick, sweetened, seasoned syrup, was not an option because it made the nuts sticky. Another popular method, toasting or sautéing the nuts in butter or oil before tossing them with spices, dulled the finish of the nuts, made them taste bland or oily, and left a residue on our fingers. A third possibility, coating the nuts with a spiced egg white mixture, created such a chunky, candy-like coating that the nuts themselves were barely visible.

Our answer came when we made a light glaze for the nuts from very small amounts of liquid (water or alcohol), sugar, and butter. It worked like a charm. This treatment left the nuts shiny and just tacky enough for a dry spice coating to stick perfectly, giving the nuts both a consistent, beautiful appearance and plenty of flavor. We used brown sugar instead of granulated sugar for a rich caramel flavor.

As for the spice coating, we started with a base of cinnamon, sugar, and kosher salt—which adds crunch and has a clean flavor—then included potent spices. For our rummy pecans, we added a touch each of cloves and allspice. For a spicy, Mexican-inspired snack, we added cayenne, coriander, cumin, and garlic powder to a combination of almonds, peanuts, and pumpkin seeds.

RUM-GLAZED PECANS

SERVES 8

We like the crunch of kosher salt in this recipe, but table salt can be substituted—just reduce the amount by half. If you can, make the nuts ahead of time; as they sit they will better absorb the flavorings.

2 cups unsalted pecans

SPICE MIX

2 tablespoons granulated sugar
¼ teaspoon kosher salt (see note above)
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
¼ teaspoon ground allspice

GLAZE

1 tablespoon rum, preferably dark
1 tablespoon unsalted butter
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 teaspoon brown sugar

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Spread the pecans evenly on the prepared baking sheet. Toast until fragrant and the color deepens slightly, about 8 minutes, rotating the sheet halfway through. Transfer the baking sheet with the nuts to a wire rack.

2. **FOR THE SPICE MIX:** Meanwhile, combine the spice mix ingredients in a medium bowl; set aside.

3. **FOR THE GLAZE:** Bring the glaze ingredients to a boil in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat, whisking constantly. Stir in the toasted pecans and cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the nuts are shiny and almost all the liquid has evaporated, about 1½ minutes.

4. Transfer the glazed pecans to the bowl with the spice mix; toss well to coat. Return the glazed and spiced pecans to the parchment-lined baking sheet to cool. (The nuts can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.)

MEXICAN-SPICED ALMONDS, PEANUTS, AND PUMPKIN SEEDS

SERVES 8

If substituting table salts for kosher, reduce the amount specified by half.

- 1 1/4 cups sliced almonds
- 2/3 cup unsalted roasted peanuts
- 1/4 cup raw pumpkin seeds

SPICE MIX

- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt (see note above)
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon garlic powder

GLAZE

- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon brown sugar

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Spread the almonds evenly on the prepared baking sheet. Toast for 4 minutes, rotate the pan, and add the peanuts and pumpkin seeds. Continue to toast until fragrant and the color deepens slightly, about 4 minutes longer. Transfer the baking sheet with the nuts and seeds to a wire rack.

2. **FOR THE SPICE MIX:** Meanwhile, combine the spice mix ingredients in a medium bowl; set aside.

3. **FOR THE GLAZE:** Bring the glaze ingredients to a boil in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat, whisking constantly. Stir in the toasted nuts and seeds and cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the nuts are shiny and almost all the liquid has evaporated, about 1 1/2 minutes.

4. Transfer the glazed mixture to the bowl with the spice mix; toss well to coat. Return the glazed and spiced nuts to the parchment-lined baking sheet to cool. (The nuts can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.)

Party Snack Mixes

Crunchy, salty, and borderline addictive, homemade party snack mix is guaranteed to be gone just minutes after it's set out. But after making a back-of-the-box recipe recently, we felt there was room for improvement. The cereal and other snacks (which included pretzels, Melba toast, and nuts) were tossed with melted margarine and a splash of Worcestershire before being sprinkled with seasoned salt. It's not that we're complaining—we had more than a few handfuls—but we knew it could be so much better.

In head-to-head tests, the nutty sweetness of melted butter was preferred to margarine and olive oil, both of which left a greasy finish and made napkins necessary. Though Worcestershire sauce certainly added flavor to the mix, some tasters found it too dominant. Substitutes such as soy sauce, hot sauce, and barbecue sauce were more successful, lending inspired flavors without steamrolling the other ingredients.



As for the seasonings, a few carefully chosen dried spices gave well-rounded flavors without the staleness of seasoned salt. Bold seasonings such as chili powder, garlic powder, cayenne pepper, and ground ginger held their flavor through baking. When it came to the baking, the original recipe was pretty much spot-on: 45 minutes in a 250-degree oven was sufficient to bloom the spices and crisp the snacks.

We found that no one combination of snacks was best. Along with the usual Chex cereal, Melba toast, and nuts, we punctuated the mixes with unexpected ingredients such as oyster crackers, smoked almonds, and wasabi peas. In the end, we came up with an Asian-inspired mix, a barbecue-flavored party mix, and a snack featuring Goldfish crackers and Old Bay seasoning that could be the opening number at a summer clambake.

ASIAN FIRECRACKER PARTY MIX

SERVES 20

Wasabi peas can be found in the international aisle of most grocery stores.

- 5 cups Rice Chex cereal
- 2 cups sesame sticks
- 1 cup wasabi peas (see note above)
- 1 cup chow mein noodles
- 1 cup honey-roasted peanuts
- 6 tablespoons ($\frac{3}{4}$ stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon garlic powder
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 250 degrees. Combine the cereal, sesame sticks, wasabi peas, chow mein noodles, and peanuts in a large bowl. Whisk the melted butter

and soy sauce together in a small bowl, then drizzle over the cereal mixture. Sprinkle evenly with the ginger, garlic powder, and cayenne and toss until well combined.

2. Spread the mixture on a rimmed baking sheet and bake, stirring every 15 minutes, until golden and crisp, about 45 minutes. Cool to room temperature. Serve. (The mix can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 1 week.)

BARBECUE PARTY MIX

SERVES 20

Fritos corn chips work well in this recipe.

- 5 cups Corn Chex cereal
- 2 cups corn chips (see note above)
- 1 cup Melba toast rounds, lightly crushed
- 1 cup pretzel sticks
- 1 cup smoked almonds
- 6 tablespoons ($\frac{3}{4}$ stick) unsalted butter, melted
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup barbecue sauce
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon dried oregano
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 250 degrees. Combine the cereal, chips, Melba toast, pretzels, and almonds in a large bowl. Whisk the melted butter and barbecue sauce together in a small bowl, then drizzle over the cereal mixture. Sprinkle evenly with the chili powder, oregano, and cayenne and toss until well combined.

2. Spread the mixture on a rimmed baking sheet and bake, stirring every 15 minutes, until golden and crisp, about 45 minutes. Cool to room temperature. Serve. (The mix can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 1 week.)

FISHERMAN'S FRIEND PARTY MIX

SERVES 20

The test kitchen prefers Frank's RedHot Original Hot Sauce. If using a hotter brand, such as Tabasco Sauce, reduce the amount to 1 tablespoon.

- 5 cups Corn Chex or Rice Chex cereal
- 2 cups oyster crackers
- 1 cup Pepperidge Farm Cheddar Goldfish
- 1 cup Pepperidge Farm Pretzel Goldfish
- 1 cup Melba toast rounds, lightly crushed
- 6 tablespoons ($\frac{3}{4}$ stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 2 tablespoons hot sauce (see note above)
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon Old Bay seasoning

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 250 degrees. Combine the cereal, oyster crackers, Goldfish, and Melba toast in a large bowl. Whisk the melted butter, hot sauce, and lemon juice together in a small bowl, then drizzle over the cereal mixture. Sprinkle evenly with the Old Bay and toss until well combined.

2. Spread the mixture on a rimmed baking sheet and bake, stirring every 15 minutes, until golden and crisp, about 45 minutes. Cool to room temperature. Serve. (The mix can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 1 week.)

Easy Cheese Balls

Stacked high in the refrigerator section of the supermarket, cheese balls promise to be the perfect hors d'oeuvre. But promises are made to be broken. With their unnatural orange hue and a flavor that's more Cheetos than cheddar, supermarket cheese balls make you wonder if there's any real cheese in them at all—or if they're simply made from "cheese" squirted out of a can.

By using real cheese, we figured we were already well on our way to creating a superior recipe. For the optimal consistency—firm, yet spreadable—we used equal parts semisoft cheese (such as cheddar or Havarti) and cream cheese. We had a definite distaste for cheese that felt mealy on crackers, so we worked on the creaminess factor next. For a silky texture, we added mayonnaise and combined everything in the food processor. We found that small amounts of assertive ingredients like Worcestershire sauce and cayenne pepper enhanced the cheese flavor without compromising texture.

After a few hours in the fridge to firm up, our cheese balls were almost ready to go, needing only a roll in toasted nuts or fresh herbs to get them ready for showtime. Following a quick rest—just 15 minutes—they were perfectly spreadable and creamy—and sure to disappear fast at your next party or potluck.

THE AMERICAN TABLE

CEREAL: FROM BREAKFAST TO PARTY SNACK

Breakfast cereal is relatively new to the American culinary landscape, developed in the late 1800s. But just 100 years later, one cereal had gone from healthy breakfast option to buttery, salty nighttime nosh. According to food historians, Chex mix debuted in the 1950s at a party hosted by one of Ralston-Purina's executives, whose wife had cleverly used the company's cereal to create an addictive salty snack mix. Chex mix became the poster child for cereal snack mixes and is still popular today.



CLASSIC CHEDDAR CHEESE BALL

SERVES 20

Serve with your favorite crackers.

- 2 cups shredded extra-sharp cheddar cheese
- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ½ cup sliced almonds, toasted (see page 39)

1. Process all of the ingredients (except the almonds) in a food processor until smooth, scraping down the sides of the bowl as necessary, about 1 minute.

2. Following the photos, transfer the cheese mixture to the center of a large sheet of plastic wrap. Seal the cheese in the wrap and shape into a rough ball (the mixture will be somewhat loose).

SHAPING A CHEESE BALL



1. Place the processed cheese mixture in the center of a large sheet of plastic wrap.

2. Twist the cheese to seal it in the wrap and shape the cheese into a rough ball.

Refrigerate until firm, about 3 hours. (The cheese ball can be refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

3. Once the cheese ball is firm, reshape it as necessary into a smooth sphere. Unwrap the cheese ball and roll it in the almonds. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.

ZESTY SMOKED SALMON CHEESE BALL

SERVES 20

Bagel chips are especially good with this cheese ball.

- 2 cups shredded dill Havarti cheese
- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 4 ounces smoked salmon, chopped
- 1 shallot, minced
- 1 teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest plus 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- ½ cup minced fresh chives

1. Process all of the ingredients (except the chives) in a food processor until smooth, scraping down the sides of the bowl as necessary, about 1 minute.

2. Following the photos, transfer the cheese mixture to the center of a large sheet of plastic wrap. Seal the cheese in the wrap and shape into a rough ball (the mixture will be somewhat loose). Refrigerate until firm, about 3 hours. (The cheese ball can be refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

3. Once the cheese ball is firm, reshape it as necessary into a smooth sphere. Unwrap the cheese ball and roll it in the chives. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.

Pimiento Cheese

Pimiento cheese is a popular Southern spread made of cheddar cheese, jarred pimiento peppers, and mayonnaise. This deconstructed cheese ball is typically slathered on crackers, toast, and crudité or used as a sandwich filling, but if you ask any true Southerner, you'll be told there's little that pimiento cheese doesn't taste good on. You can buy it premade at the grocery store, but home-made spreads are infinitely better and take less time to make than driving to the supermarket.

We began our testing by whipping up batches from several recipes found in our research, and we were surprised by the variations in ingredients, texture, and flavor. After tasting them all, we agreed that the best pimiento cheese exhibited a tangy flavor spiked by a bit of spice and a creamy, but not smooth, texture. For a spread that had all of these traits, we'd have to create our own recipe.

Most recipes use extra-sharp cheddar cheese either by itself or in conjunction with milder cheddar or Monterey Jack, but we found that batches made with all sharp cheese tasted more complex and satisfying. Both white and orange varieties of

extra-sharp cheddar worked fine, though we did find that very long-aged cheddar (more than one year) had a crumbly, greasy texture that didn't work terribly well in the spread.

As for the namesake ingredient, all the recipes we found used widely available 4-ounce jars of diced pimientos. These worked well, though we found that regular roasted red peppers worked fine, too, as long as they were well drained, patted dry, and chopped before being blended with the cheese.

Mayonnaise acts as a binder for the spread and adds a slight richness. We quickly realized that too much of the stuff made the spread greasy and bland, so we pared it back to the absolute minimum necessary to hold the mix together (just 6 tablespoons).

While some pimiento cheese recipes are as simple as cheese, peppers, and mayonnaise, we preferred those with a bit more flavor. We quickly nixed the common additions of grated onions and chopped pickles in favor of minced garlic and a spoonful or two of hot sauce. In a few recipes the spread was spiked with sweet-tart Worcestershire sauce, and once we tried it, we knew it was a must.

THE AMERICAN TABLE PIMIENTO CHEESE

A Southern staple for at least a century, pimiento cheese grew from a simple snack to being a feature on lunch menus at restaurants. Even today, this spread is still served every year at the Masters Tournament between two slices of white bread in a classic pimiento sandwich. The origins of pimiento cheese are hazy, but most historians agree the tangy orange spread came about in the late 1800s, when hoop cheese (a firm, dry cheese similar to farmer's cheese that was available in country stores) was grated and mixed with mayonnaise, canned or jarred pimientos, and flavorings like Worcestershire sauce, mustard, and cayenne pepper. At picnics and church potlucks, Southern families would feast on deviled eggs, fried chicken, and pimiento sandwiches—especially convenient because the spread didn't make the bread soggy and it was an economical dish. During World War II, the sandwiches provided a protein-rich stand-in for rationed meat. Seventy years later, this regional favorite can still be found in tea sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

As for mixing the spread, recipes fall into two camps: hand blended or machine processed. We tasted batches of each and preferred the more homogenous texture of the processed spreads. While some recipes just instruct you to process all of the ingredients until smooth, we liked the cheese to have a bit of texture, so we pulsed it into the blended mayonnaise, peppers, and flavorings. After making over a dozen batches of pimiento cheese, we finally understood why Southerners love the stuff so much.

PIMIENTO CHEESE

SERVES 8

Both white and orange extra-sharp cheddar work well here. Don't substitute store-bought, preshredded cheese; it doesn't blend well and produces a dry-textured spread. If you can't find jarred pimientos, an equal amount of roasted red peppers may be substituted.

- 1 (4-ounce) jar pimiento peppers, drained and patted dry (½ cup) (see note above)
- 6 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1½ teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce, plus more to taste
- 4 cups shredded extra-sharp cheddar cheese (see note above)
- Salt and pepper

Process the pimiento peppers, mayonnaise, garlic, Worcestershire sauce, and hot sauce together in a food processor until smooth, about 20 seconds. Add the cheese and pulse until uniformly blended, with fine bits of cheese throughout, about 20 pulses. Season with salt, pepper, and more hot sauce to taste. Serve or refrigerate until needed. (The pimiento cheese can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 weeks; let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.)

Hot Crab Dip

Along the Mid-Atlantic and Southern seaboard, where the feisty blue crab rules the ocean, its sweet meat finds its way into all kinds of dishes. In our humble opinion, one of the best is hot crab dip, a creamy, subtly spiced baked dip loaded with fresh crabmeat. Swiped thick onto crackers and crispy toast points, it might just be the perfect hors d'oeuvre. *Might*, however, is the operative word. We've had some pretty bad batches of the stuff—batches in which the crab's flavor is buried by seasonings or the dip's texture is as thin as bisque. Given the considerable price of crabmeat, we wanted to develop the perfect rendition of this classic appetizer.

Unless you want to buy a bushel of kicking crabs and pick your own meat, there are three options for purchasing it: fresh-picked, pasteurized, and canned. Fresh-picked meat comes in several forms (lump, backfin, claw) at varying prices. Pasteurized usually costs a bit less and canned is less yet—comparable to tuna fish. So what's best for dip? After making batches with each, we thought fresh and pasteurized worked well; canned did not. Its tinny, less-than-fresh flavor and watery texture were deemed unacceptable by all tasters; this is one instance where quality is worth every penny. Whether you buy fresh meat or pasteurized, make sure to thoroughly pick through it for bits of shell and cartilage.

For the best dip—sweet crab in a creamy, slightly tangy base—we tried various dairy products, from yogurt, buttermilk, and sour cream to cream cheese, Monterey Jack, and heavy cream. In the end, cream cheese had the best flavor and texture, if it was loosened a bit with milk. The cream cheese contributed some tanginess, but tasters wanted more. Lemon juice made the most sense to us, and we found the more we added, the better the results.

The dip's flavorings should frame the crab, not obscure it. We started with a spoonful of Dijon mustard, which helped to cut through the richness of the cream cheese, especially when boosted with a bit of minced onion and fiery hot sauce. Next we tried Worcestershire sauce, a suggestion common in research recipes, and loved its sweet-tart, earthy flavor. Almost done, we looked for a final spice to accent the crab and settled on Old Bay seasoning, the quintessential spice blend used on crabs (and other seafood) in the Mid-Atlantic region (easily found at most supermarkets).

Once blended (we used a rubber spatula to combine the ingredients), the dip stores and travels well. All it needs is a few minutes in a hot oven (475 degrees proved ideal) to bring out its best.

HOT CRAB DIP

SERVES 12

This dip is best served warm, so make sure it comes out of the oven just as your guests are starting to arrive, or if you are traveling with it, be sure to pack it up right away (see page 2). Both fresh and pasteurized crabmeat work well in this recipe. Just don't use canned crabmeat, as it won't taste nearly as good. Serve with toast points or your favorite crackers.

- 2 (8-ounce) packages cream cheese, softened, cut into 1-inch chunks
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup milk
- 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons minced onion
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons Old Bay seasoning
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce
- 1 pound crabmeat, picked over for shells (see note above)
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 475 degrees. Grease a shallow 2-quart baking dish.

2. Whisk the cream cheese, milk, lemon juice, onion, Worcestershire sauce, mustard, Old Bay, and hot sauce together in a large bowl until smooth. Gently fold in the crabmeat with a rubber spatula.

3. Transfer the mixture to the prepared baking dish and smooth the top. (The unbaked dip can be wrapped tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day; microwave on high until bubbling around the edges, 1 to 2 minutes, and stir before baking uncovered.) Bake until browned and bubbling, 20 to 25 minutes. Sprinkle with the parsley and serve.

Cowboy Caviar

Like Rocky Mountain oysters, "cowboy caviar" is a euphemism for an inland dish having nothing at all to do with the sea. Instead of overpriced, salty fish eggs, cowboy caviar is a robustly flavored dip of beans and finely chopped vegetables spiked with garlic, chiles, vinegar, and olive oil. So why is it called caviar? We're not sure, but we reckon that many out there will find a big bowl of the stuff a lot more enticing than the real deal.

We easily collected a thick stack of recipes for cowboy caviar and were a bit surprised to find that each was a little different from the next. All of them based the dip on either black-eyed peas or black beans, but the vegetables and flavorings they included ranged broadly. Some all but hid the beans behind a crisper drawer's worth of produce; others were so spicy only the true fire-eaters in

3. Combine the avocados, the remaining 3 tablespoons lime juice, and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt in a large bowl and mash with a potato masher until smooth.

4. Spread the bean mixture evenly over the bottom of an 8-inch square glass baking dish or 1-quart glass bowl. Spread the sour cream mixture evenly over the bean layer and sprinkle evenly with the remaining $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups cheese. Spread the avocado mixture over the cheese and top with the tomato mixture. Sprinkle with the sliced scallions and serve. (The dip can be covered tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day; let sit at room temperature for 1 hour before serving.)

Hot Artichoke Dip

There are various permutations of hot artichoke dip, but most involve a simple concoction of canned artichokes, mayonnaise, and Parmesan cheese, combined in the food processor. The mixture is then topped with buttery bread crumbs and baked. What results should be a creamy, tangy, crowd-pleasing dip ready to be scooped up with crackers. Unfortunately, all too often the dip is one-dimensional and there is nary a hint of artichoke flavor. We wanted to dust off this relic and give the flavors a fresher spin.

Right off the bat, we knew we'd need to find a replacement for the tinny-tasting canned artichoke hearts this recipe typically relies on. Fresh artichokes were too expensive and too much effort for the return. Jarred marinated artichokes (packed in oil with herbs and spices) made our dip over-seasoned and greasy, even when we rinsed them.

We had much better success with frozen artichokes. Boiling the artichokes until just tender resulted in a muted, bland flavor, but roasting them with olive oil, salt, and pepper intensified their flavor.

With the artichokes settled, we turned to the dip's other key ingredients: mayonnaise and Parmesan cheese. Typical recipes use equal amounts of mayo and cheese, but this ratio made for a grainy dip. We tested different amounts until we hit upon the perfect ratio of mayonnaise to Parmesan—2 to 1. The only issue now was that the dip lacked creaminess. Looking at other recipes, we noticed that some also included sour cream or cream cheese. After a few more trials, we determined that sour cream was too tangy, but cream cheese gave the dip the creamy body it lacked.

For additional flavorings, sautéed onion and garlic were a natural pairing with the artichokes and cheese. Lemon juice lent the dip a certain zinginess, and the woody flavor of fresh thyme won tasters over. A pinch of cayenne pepper gave the dip a welcome bit of heat. We put together the standard topping—a mixture of butter and bread crumbs—but spruced it up with a bit more Parmesan cheese, which boosted the flavor and made the topping crisp. Finally, since we were making this dip for a party, we wanted to see how it would hold up if made a few days in advance.

Freezing the dip turned out to be a complete disaster. Every dip that we froze and reheated emerged from the oven as a greasy, broken mess. But, fortunately, we found that the flavors and ingredients in our dip held up well in the refrigerator. Even the crumb topping, which we worried might soak up moisture from the dip, crisped and browned just fine.

HOT ARTICHOKE DIP

SERVES 12

This dip is best served warm, so make sure it comes out of the oven just as your guests are starting to arrive, or, if you're traveling with it, be sure to pack it up right away (see page 2). Serve with crackers or toasted baguette slices.

TOPPING

- 2 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted

DIP

- 2 (9-ounce) boxes frozen artichokes (do not thaw)
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 1 onion, minced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 4 ounces cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme
- Pinch cayenne pepper

1. FOR THE TOPPING: Pulse the bread in a food processor to coarse crumbs, about 6 pulses. Toss the bread crumbs with the Parmesan and melted butter; set aside.

2. FOR THE DIP: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil. Toss the artichokes with 1 tablespoon of the oil, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper and spread evenly on

the prepared baking sheet. Roast the artichokes, stirring occasionally, until browned at the edges, about 25 minutes. Cool the artichokes, then coarsely chop them.

3. Meanwhile, heat the remaining 1 tablespoon oil in a medium skillet over medium-high heat until just shimmering. Add the onion and cook until softened, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer the onion mixture to a large bowl and set aside.

4. Add the mayonnaise, cream cheese, Parmesan, lemon juice, thyme, and cayenne to the onion mixture and stir until uniform, smearing any lumps of cream cheese against the side of the bowl with a rubber spatula. Gently fold in the chopped artichokes; season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer the mixture to an 8-inch square baking dish and smooth the top. Sprinkle the bread crumbs evenly over the top. (The dip can be covered tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

5. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Unwrap the dip and bake, uncovered, until hot throughout and the bread crumbs are golden brown, 20 to 25 minutes. Serve.

Variation

HOT ARTICHOKE DIP WITH SPINACH

Removing the excess moisture from the spinach is crucial here; we found it best to wrap the thawed spinach in paper towels and squeeze out as much liquid as possible.

Follow the recipe for Hot Artichoke Dip, reducing the amount of artichokes to 1 box. Add 1 (10-ounce) box frozen chopped spinach, thawed and squeezed dry, to the pan along with the garlic in step 3.

Spinach Dip

Spinach dip—an elementary combination of vegetable soup mix, sour cream, and frozen spinach—often tastes flat, exorbitantly salty, and nowhere near fresh. We wanted a rich, thick, and creamy spinach dip brimming with big, bold flavors, especially that of spinach.

To begin, we gathered four varieties of spinach: curly-leaf, flat-leaf, baby, and, for the sake of comparison, frozen. We then trimmed, washed, chopped, and wilted the fresh spinaches in hot pots (we simply thawed the frozen spinach), made the dips, chilled them to set (cool and thicken), and let tasters dig in. The results were so surprising we had to tally them twice. Frozen spinach was the victor. Tasters liked its “familiar,” “intense” flavor and even used the word “fresh” to describe it. The fresh varieties, on the other hand, were too “meek,” their flavor lost among the other ingredients. After a few more tests, we found that in just 30 seconds the food processor chopped the thawed frozen spinach into small, manageable bits and made the dip smooth and creamy.

Armed with a host of fresh herbs and other pungent ingredients, we began developing the flavor components for the dip sans soup mix. Among the herbs, parsley and dill were standards, and for good reason. Onions and shallots were problematic, however, as they required cooking to mellow their astringency and soften their crunch. Since we weren’t cooking the spinach, we decided it would be a waste of time and effort to start pulling out pots and pans now. In the end, a combination of scallion whites and a clove of garlic added the perfect amount of bite and pungency. With a dash of hot sauce for a kick of heat and some salt and pepper, the dip came out of the food processor light, fresh, and full of bold flavors—far better than the soup mix recipe and not much more work.

The only problem remaining was that the dip, which took only about 15 minutes to make, took almost 2 hours to chill—not exactly the convenient, last-minute starter we were after. Wanting to save time, we found that the solution was simple. Instead of thawing the spinach completely, we thawed it only partially. Before processing, we microwaved the frozen block briefly, broke it into icy chunks, and squeezed each to extract a surprising amount of liquid. The chunks were still ice cold, and they thoroughly cooled the dip as they broke down in the processor. This dip was quick to make, thick, creamy, and cool enough to be served right away.

HERBED SPINACH DIP

MAKES ABOUT 1½ CUPS

Partially thawing the spinach produces a cold dip that can be served without further chilling. If you don’t have a microwave, the frozen spinach can be thawed at room temperature for 1½ hours, then squeezed to get rid of excess liquid. The garlic must be minced before going into the food processor; otherwise, the dip will contain large chunks of garlic. Serve with crudité.

- 1 (10-ounce) box frozen chopped spinach
(see note above)
- ½ cup sour cream
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- ½ cup packed fresh parsley
- 3 scallions, white parts only, sliced thin
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh dill
- 1 small garlic clove, minced
(see note above)
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon hot sauce
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- ½ red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded,
and chopped fine

1. Microwave the spinach on high until the edges are thawed but not warm and the center is soft enough to be broken into icy chunks, 1 to 3 minutes. Squeeze the partially frozen spinach to get rid of excess water.

2. Process the spinach, sour cream, mayonnaise, parsley, scallions, dill, garlic, salt, hot sauce, and pepper in a food processor until smooth and creamy, about 30 seconds. Transfer the mixture to a serving bowl and stir in the bell pepper; serve. (The dip can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

Variations

SPINACH DIP WITH BLUE CHEESE AND BACON

If making this dip in advance, hold off on sprinkling the bacon over it until just before serving.

Cut 3 slices bacon into ¼-inch pieces and cook in a small skillet over medium-high heat until crisp and browned, about 5 minutes; using a slotted spoon, transfer the bacon to a paper towel-lined plate and set aside. Follow the recipe for Herbed Spinach Dip, omitting the dill, salt, hot sauce, and red bell pepper and processing ½ cup crumbled blue cheese along with the spinach. Season with salt to taste; sprinkle the bacon over the top before serving.

SPINACH DIP WITH FETA, LEMON, AND OREGANO

Follow the recipe for Herbed Spinach Dip, omitting the salt, hot sauce, and red bell pepper and processing ½ cup crumbled feta cheese, 2 tablespoons fresh oregano, 1 teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest, and 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice along with the spinach. Season with salt to taste.

Classic Deviled Eggs

Sometimes the simplest recipes are the trickiest to execute, and we've made more than our fair share of deviled eggs with greenish yolks and bland fillings. We wanted to bulletproof our recipe for deviled eggs—the perfect party starter if there ever was one, thanks to its portability, short ingredient list, and quick and easy preparation. We figured we would start with the most difficult task: hard-cooking the eggs.

Most recipes have you simmer the eggs for a specified period, but they tend to turn out greenish eggs that look like they'd pair well with ham. After some research, we learned that the green color appears when the iron in the yolk reacts with the sulfur in the white to produce ferrous sulfide. Prolonged heating is the culprit. This led us to wonder if all those not-so-foolproof recipes were falling down over the definition of "simmer." We found that eggs cooked for 15 minutes at a hard simmer (might as well call it a boil) overcook, whereas those cooked for 15 minutes at a gentle simmer don't. To remove the guesswork, we decided to start the eggs in cold water, bring the water to a boil, then turn off the heat and put the cover on the pan. The residual heat cooked the eggs, which were done in exactly 10 minutes. Plunging the eggs into ice water stopped the cooking process and prevented the green ring from forming. To make the eggs easier to peel, we shook them in the saucepan until the shells started to crack.

With the eggs cooked and peeled, it was time to mash the yolks and season them with the usual suspects: mayonnaise, vinegar, and mustard. Plain mayonnaise was too bland, but Miracle Whip (called for in many recipes) had an odd sweet-tart flavor that tasters did not love. Instead, mixing a little sour cream with plain mayonnaise added that much-needed punch. As for mustard, plain yellow

was too bland, but Dijon was too potent; spicy brown mustard was a good compromise. Fancier recipes use cider vinegar or even balsamic vinegar, but we found that plain old distilled white vinegar produced quite enough pucker without adding any distracting flavors.

Now our deviled eggs were truly foolproof—so foolproof, in fact, that we could take our basic recipe and create a host of variations using a few of our favorite flavors, like blue cheese and dill pickles.

FILLING DEVILED EGGS WITHOUT A PASTRY BAG



1. Set a zipper-lock bag inside a measuring cup and fold the bag over the lip. Spoon the filling into the bag.



2. After filling the bag, use scissors to snip about 1/2 inch off one corner.



3. Twist the top of the bag and squeeze to force the filling to the snipped corner. Fill the egg whites by squeezing the filling through the hole.

CLASSIC DEVILED EGGS

MAKES 1 DOZEN FILLED HALVES

For filling the eggs, a spoon works just fine, but for eggs that look their Sunday best, use a pastry bag fitted with a fluted (star) tip, or make your own pastry bag with a zipper-lock bag. Dust the filled eggs with paprika for a traditional look.

HARD-COOKED EGGS

6 large eggs

FILLING

- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon sour cream
- 1/2 teaspoon white vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon spicy brown mustard
- 1/4 teaspoon sugar
- 1/6 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon pepper

1. FOR THE EGGS: Combine 4 cups water and 4 cups ice cubes in a large bowl; set aside. Place the eggs in a saucepan, cover with 1 inch water, and bring to a boil over high heat. Remove the pan from the heat, cover, and let stand 10 minutes. Pour off the water from the saucepan and gently shake the pan back and forth to crack the shells. Transfer the eggs to the ice water and cool for 5 minutes, then peel.

2. FOR THE FILLING: Halve the eggs lengthwise and transfer the yolks to a fine-mesh strainer set over a medium bowl. Using a spatula, press the yolks through the strainer into the bowl. Stir in the remaining ingredients until smooth. Arrange the whites on a serving platter. Transfer the yolk mixture to a pastry bag or, following the photos, a zipper-lock bag with a corner snipped off and squeeze the mixture into the whites; serve. (The deviled eggs can be assembled, covered with plastic wrap, and refrigerated for up to 2 hours before serving.)



Variations

HERBED DEVILED EGGS

You can substitute an equal amount of finely chopped watercress for the chervil.

Follow the recipe for Classic Deviled Eggs, replacing the white vinegar with ½ teaspoon white wine vinegar and the brown mustard with ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard. Stir 2 teaspoons each finely chopped fresh tarragon, fresh parsley, fresh chives, and fresh chervil into the remaining ingredients.

SPANISH-STYLE DEVILED EGGS

For a smoky, spicy kick, use smoked rather than plain paprika.

Follow the recipe for Classic Deviled Eggs, replacing the white vinegar with ½ teaspoon sherry vinegar. Stir ¼ cup finely chopped green olives with pimiento, ¼ cup shredded cheddar cheese, and 1 teaspoon paprika into the remaining ingredients.

DILL-PICKLED DEVILED EGGS

Avoid dried dill here. Used in this quantity, it will taste dusty and stale.

Follow the recipe for Classic Deviled Eggs, replacing the white vinegar with ½ teaspoon dill pickle juice and the brown mustard with ½ teaspoon yellow mustard. Stir 1 tablespoon finely chopped dill pickles and 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh dill into the remaining ingredients.

BLUE CHEESE DEVILED EGGS

A relatively mild blue cheese like Stella Blue works best here.

Follow the recipe for Classic Deviled Eggs, replacing the white vinegar with ½ teaspoon cider vinegar and the brown mustard with ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard. Increase the amount of pepper to ¼ teaspoon and stir ¼ cup crumbled blue cheese into the remaining ingredients.

Cheesy Stuffed Mushrooms

Small enough to eat in one bite, stuffed mushrooms are a welcome addition to any cocktail party. But the amount of work required to make them is often a drawback—who wants to spend all that time right before a party assembling and stuffing individual mushroom caps? We wanted mushrooms that could be stuffed a day or so in advance and then simply baked for a few minutes just before serving.

We knew from past experience that mushrooms shed water when cooking, so we started by roasting the mushroom caps before stuffing and baking them. Roasting helped them release moisture that would have made our assembled hors d'oeuvres soggy. It also intensified their earthiness. For additional flavor, we combined the mushrooms with olive oil and garlic before setting them in the oven.

As for the filling, we came across a variety of ingredients in our research, but essentially the fillings all fell into one of three categories: breadcrumb fillings seasoned with herbs and Parmesan cheese, mushroom fillings based on a mixture of cooked mushrooms and shallots, and cheese fillings that used soft, creamy cheese such as goat cheese or cream cheese. We tested all three by stuffing the roasted mushrooms, refrigerating them overnight, and baking them the next day.

Overall, we found that each type of stuffing had good flavor, but only the cheese filling held up overnight and baked up well. The filling was simple—just softened goat cheese (its richness and tanginess paired perfectly with the mushrooms) flavored with fresh herbs, a bit of olive oil, and a little salt and pepper. Even better, it was quick to throw together and easy to work with. Best of all, the warm, soft cheese was a real crowd-pleaser when paired with the roasted, earthy mushroom caps.

For textural contrast, we added a fresh bread-crumb topping (made with olive oil and garlic for flavor) before baking, but the bread crumbs were still soft and pale by the time the mushrooms were done. The secret was toasting the bread crumbs prior to topping the mushrooms. Now our stuffed caps had some much-needed crunch.

But when we considered that the stuffed caps would spend a day or two in the fridge before baking, we worried the crumbs would draw moisture from the filling and not crisp in the oven. After a little experimenting, we were happy to find that we could go ahead and sprinkle the crumbs on top when preparing the mushrooms, as the crumbs crisped and browned just fine after some time in the fridge. The mushrooms—topping and all—hold well for up to 3 days refrigerated, but freezing them isn't an option, as they will bake up with a rubbery texture.

CHEESY STUFFED MUSHROOMS

MAKES 24 STUFFED MUSHROOMS

Mushrooms shrink significantly as they cook, so choose larger white mushrooms. We use a zipper-lock bag to stuff the mushrooms; the technique is identical to the way we fill deviled eggs (see page 26). If traveling with the stuffed mushrooms, pack them in mini muffin tins to ensure that they remain upright. Garnish the mushrooms with fresh parsley for an elegant touch.

- 1 slice high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 9 garlic cloves, minced
- Salt and pepper
- 24 large white mushrooms, stems removed
- 4 ounces goat cheese, softened
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 300 degrees. Pulse the bread in a

food processor to coarse crumbs, about 6 pulses. Toss the bread crumbs with 1 tablespoon of the oil, 1 tablespoon of the garlic, $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon pepper. Spread the crumbs on a rimmed baking sheet and bake, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned and dry, about 20 minutes; set aside to cool.

2. Increase the oven temperature to 450 degrees and line a rimmed baking sheet with foil. Combine 4 tablespoons more oil, the remaining 2 tablespoons garlic, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper in a large bowl; add the mushrooms and toss to coat. Set the mushrooms, gill-side down, on the prepared baking sheet and cook until they release their juice, about 20 minutes. Flip the mushrooms and continue to cook until the liquid has evaporated completely and the mushrooms are well browned, about 10 minutes longer. Remove the mushrooms from the oven, flip gill-side down, and set aside to drain any excess moisture.

3. Line a second baking sheet with foil; set aside. Combine the goat cheese, thyme, and remaining 1 tablespoon oil in a medium bowl and stir until smooth; season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer the cheese mixture to a zipper-lock bag and snip a corner off the bag using scissors. Squeeze about 1 teaspoon of the cheese mixture into each mushroom cap and top with the bread crumbs; set the stuffed mushrooms on the prepared baking sheet. (The unbaked stuffed mushrooms can be stacked inside a baking dish, with layers separated by parchment paper, covered with plastic wrap, and refrigerated for up to 3 days. Uncover the mushrooms and set, in a single layer, on a foil-lined baking sheet before baking.)

4. Bake until the mushrooms and filling are hot and the crumbs are crisp, about 10 minutes. Serve.



SOCK-IT-TO-ME CAKE

Bring Along Brunch

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Make-Ahead Breakfast Casserole

On busy mornings when you have to feed a crowd, few things are easier than popping a breakfast casserole into the oven. The beauty of it is, of course, that you make it the day before—combining dried cubes of bread with browned sausage in a casserole dish, scattering cheese over that, pouring on eggs mixed with milk or cream, and letting it soak overnight. The next morning, the casserole bakes into puffy, golden, savory goodness.

Not so fast. The recipes we tried had a host of problems. Some were the texture of baby food, others were heavy and greasy. We were looking for a flavorful breakfast casserole with a crisp top and a soft, custardy interior.

We tackled the texture first. Many recipes call for cubed white sandwich bread, but even when we gently staled the cubes in the oven first, the bread drank up too much custard and turned to mush after an overnight stay in the refrigerator. Sturdy, dense Italian bread—sliced, not cubed—held up better. We experimented with leaving the slices in the oven until they were toasted, not merely dry. The texture and flavor of the casserole improved.

Most recipes use a dozen eggs for casseroles made in 13 by 9-inch dishes, which is about right to meld with one loaf of sliced Italian bread. The 6 cups of milk or cream, however, was too much by far. Even the toasted bread practically dissolved in so much liquid. A few tests showed that 4 cups was ideal. In further tests, tasters preferred whole milk to cream or half-and-half; the latter were too heavy and rich. A glug of hot sauce added a touch of vinegary heat.

Recipes vary widely in the amounts of sausage and cheese they call for. To determine the right ratios for heft without heaviness, we subjected tasters to more breakfast casseroles than most people eat in a lifetime.

When we used a lot of sausage, the casserole was greasy; too little seemed like an afterthought. One pound of breakfast sausage, browned with onion, struck the right balance. Extra-sharp cheddar added even more flavor.

Building the casserole with care helped ensure that every bite had flavor: We shingled the bread in two layers and layered the sausage-onion mixture and the cheese. But the casserole was dry in spots; the custard wasn't soaking in evenly. We tried wrapping the casserole with plastic wrap, then weighting it with boxes of sugar and a cast-iron pan to compress it. Problem solved. Brunch was never so easy.

MAKE-AHEAD BREAKFAST CASSEROLE

SERVES 10

Frank's RedHot Original Hot Sauce is the test kitchen's top-rated hot sauce. If using a spicier sauce such as Tabasco, reduce the amount to 1½ teaspoons. Look for a loaf of bread that is approximately 14 inches long. One-pound boxes of sugar and a cast-iron pan can be used to weight the casserole in step 4 (see page 34).

- 1 (1-pound) loaf supermarket Italian bread, ends trimmed (see note above)
- 1 pound bulk pork sausage
- 1 small onion, minced
- 3 cups shredded extra-sharp cheddar cheese
- 12 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 4 cups whole milk
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1 tablespoon hot sauce (see note above)

1. Adjust the oven racks to the upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Slice the bread in half lengthwise, then slice each half crosswise into ½-inch-thick pieces.

Arrange the bread in a single layer on two rimmed baking sheets and bake until golden, 15 to 20 minutes, flipping the bread and switching and rotating the baking sheets halfway through. Cool for 15 minutes.

2. Cook the sausage in a large skillet over medium heat, breaking it apart with a wooden spoon, until it is no longer pink, about 5 minutes. Add the onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes.

3. Grease a 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Shingle half of the bread in the prepared dish so that the edges overlap slightly. Top with half of the sausage mixture and 1 cup of the cheese. Repeat with the remaining bread, the remaining sausage mixture, and the remaining 2 cups cheese.

4. Whisk the eggs, milk, salt, pepper, and hot sauce together in a large bowl. Pour the mixture evenly over the casserole. Wrap the casserole with plastic wrap and place weights on top. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour, or up to 1 day.

5. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Let the casserole stand at room temperature while the oven is heating. Remove the weights, unwrap the casserole, and bake until the edges and center are puffed and the top is golden brown, about 1 hour. Serve.

Variations

BREAKFAST CASSEROLE WITH CHORIZO AND PEPPER JACK

Follow the recipe for Make-Ahead Breakfast Casserole, substituting 1 pound chorizo sausage, halved lengthwise and sliced thin, for the bulk pork sausage and 3 cups shredded pepper Jack cheese for the cheddar. In step 2, add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped fresh cilantro to the sausage-onion mixture off the heat.

BREAKFAST CASSEROLE WITH ITALIAN SAUSAGE AND FONTINA

Follow the recipe for Make-Ahead Breakfast Casserole, substituting 1 pound hot or sweet Italian sausage, casings removed, for the bulk pork sausage and 3 cups shredded fontina cheese for the cheddar. In step 2, add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped fresh basil to the sausage-onion mixture off the heat.

Maple Sausage and Waffle Casserole

In its simplest form, a breakfast casserole consists of bread soaked in custard (a mixture of eggs and cream), layered with sausage and cheese, and baked until golden and puffy. But this common brunch buffet centerpiece is often so rich that after just one bite, you're too full to sample the other goods on the table. This casserole should be lighter and—here's the catch—tastier.

After making several over-the-top recipes, we were convinced that the custard was obliterating the other flavors. We could barely taste the sausage and cheese—they added heaviness but not much else. We knew we needed to lighten the custard. Most recipes use in the range of 4 to 8 eggs and 2 to 3 cups of cream. We couldn't do much about the eggs—we found that 6 was the right number—but could we use less cream or maybe a less rich dairy?

To our surprise, tasters actually preferred a casserole made with milk to one made with cream—and just $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of it. There was still plenty of fat in our working recipe (from the sausage and cheese), but now we could taste those ingredients instead of just the dairy richness of the custard.

We next tested three types of breakfast sausage (hot, maple, and regular). Tasters liked the touch of sweetness added by the maple sausage. As for the

cheese, cheddar and Monterey Jack are the standards, but cheddar is far more flavorful and got the thumbs up in the test kitchen.

Up until this point, we had been using white sandwich bread (as most recipes suggest); we wondered if a change might be in order. We tried French and Italian loaves, but they were too chewy. Challah, a slightly sweet, egg-rich Jewish bread, was better but still not perfect. Tasters liked its sweet yeasty flavor but not its dense texture.

After scouring the bread aisle for something sweet but not too heavy, we wandered into the frozen food section and found what we were searching for: frozen waffles. Their airy, fluffy texture made the casserole much lighter. And the flavor combination of the waffles and the maple sausage was such a hit with tasters that we decided to replace some of the milk in the custard with maple syrup.

MAPLE SAUSAGE AND WAFFLE CASSEROLE

SERVES 6

Depending on their size and shape, you will need 6 to 8 waffles. Belgian-style frozen waffles are too thick for this recipe. This recipe is easy to double; use a 13 by 9-inch baking dish and increase the baking time by 30 to 40 minutes. One-pound boxes of sugar and a cast-iron pan can be used to weight the casserole in step 3.

- 6–8 frozen waffles (½ inch thick; see note above)
- 12 ounces maple breakfast sausage, crumbled
- 1½ cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 6 large eggs
- 1¼ cups whole or low-fat milk
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees. Arrange the waffles in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet and bake until crisp, about 10 minutes each side, rotating the baking sheet halfway through.

2. Cook the sausage in a nonstick skillet over medium heat, breaking it apart with a wooden spoon, until well browned, 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer to a paper towel-lined plate.

3. Grease an 8-inch square baking dish. Add half of the waffles in a single layer. Sprinkle with half of the sausage and ½ cup of the cheese. Layer the remaining waffles and sausage and ½ cup more cheese. Whisk the eggs, milk, maple syrup, salt, and pepper together in a medium bowl until combined. Pour the egg mixture evenly over the casserole. Wrap the baking dish with plastic wrap and place weights on top. Refrigerate the casserole for at least 1 hour, or up to 1 day.

4. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Let the casserole stand at room temperature for 20 minutes. Remove the plastic wrap and sprinkle the remaining ½ cup cheese over the top. Bake until the edges and center are puffed, 45 to 50 minutes. Serve.

WEIGHTING THE CASSEROLE



Cover the casserole with plastic wrap, then set 1-pound boxes of sugar on the plastic wrap and top with a cast-iron pan.

French Toast Casserole

French toast is best reserved for those leisurely mornings when you have time to toast the bread, make the eggy batter, and carefully cook it in batches on the stovetop. But when you're craving the flavors and richness of French toast without a fuss—enter French toast casserole, which is meant to be made the night before and, even better, can serve a big group all at once, no batches necessary.

After a sampling of many recipes, tasters decidedly favored one style: those that combined layers of rich, creamy custard and toothsome pieces of bread, all covered by a sweet, candy-like topping of brown sugar, butter, and pecans.

With a clear goal in mind, we set out to closely examine each component of the dish, starting with the choice of bread. Initially, we tried using tender, butter-enriched challah and brioche but found that their soft, spongy crumb disintegrated. We tried using several different varieties of sliced white bread, but the resulting casseroles still left us yearning for something with a denser, heartier texture. Rustic breads with hearty crusts made the casserole far too dense. Next up were supermarket loaves of French and Italian bread. The dense texture and thin, chewy crust of these loaves were exactly what we were looking for.

We also found during our tests that the consistency of the French toast was better if we first dried the bread in the oven. The casserole made with the toasted bread had a firmer texture and deeper flavor and was able to withstand a longer stay in the refrigerator before being baked.

For the custard, we tried using milk, half-and-half, heavy cream, and combinations of the three and found that whole milk and cream together provided us with a rich, silky base that was neither too cloying nor too bland and watery. We made custards with both whole eggs and with a combination of whole eggs and yolks; whole eggs won out, giving the custard a firm consistency and eggy flavor. To prevent a curdled and grainy custard, we baked the casserole at a relatively low oven temperature of 350 degrees.

The topping of the casserole was the last component to address. In our initial test, tasters had preferred a topping that called for creaming brown sugar and butter with a dash of corn syrup, into which we folded pecans. Considering that the topping was mostly brown sugar, we wondered if the corn syrup was really necessary. To our surprise, we found that it wasn't there for sweetness but to keep the sugar and butter from separating during baking. Without the corn syrup, the French toast turned into a greasy mess. We achieved our goal

THE AMERICAN TABLE

WHAT'S SO FRENCH ABOUT FRENCH TOAST?

Just as french fries are not exclusively "French," neither is French toast. The first written recipe for cooked bread that had been soaked in milk and beaten eggs appears in the writings of Apicius, ancient Rome's leading food writer, who lived in the first century AD. From China to Europe, most cultures now have recipes for soaking leftover bread in dairy and/or eggs and then frying it up for breakfast (or dessert). Here in the United States, before the term "French" toast came into vogue in the late nineteenth century, this dish was known variously as Spanish, German, American, cream, or nun's toast.

of a French toast casserole that could be made the day before, fulfilling the sweet breakfast cravings of a whole brunch bunch in one dish.

MAKE-AHEAD FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

SERVES 8

Do not substitute low-fat or skim milk for the whole milk in this recipe. Walnuts can be substituted for the pecans. Be sure to use supermarket-style loaf bread with a thin crust and dense texture; artisan loaves with a thick crust and chewy crumb don't work well here. The casserole needs to sit in the refrigerator, well covered, for at least 8 hours to achieve the desired consistency.

CASSEROLE

- 1 (1-pound) loaf supermarket French or Italian bread, torn into 1-inch pieces (see note above)
- 8 large eggs
- 2½ cups whole milk (see note above)
- 1½ cups heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg

TOPPING

- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 1½ cups packed light brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons light corn syrup
- 2 cups pecans, chopped (see note above)

1. FOR THE CASSEROLE: Adjust the oven racks to the upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Arrange the bread in a single layer on two rimmed baking sheets and bake until golden brown and dry, about

25 minutes, switching and rotating the baking sheets halfway through. Cool completely.

2. Grease a 13 by 9-inch baking dish and layer the toasted bread tightly in the prepared dish. Whisk the eggs, milk, cream, granulated sugar, vanilla, cinnamon, and nutmeg together in a large bowl until combined. Pour the egg mixture evenly over the bread and press on the bread lightly to submerge.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: Mix the butter, brown sugar, and corn syrup together until smooth, then stir in the pecans.

4. Transfer the topping to an airtight container and wrap the baking dish tightly with plastic wrap. Refrigerate the topping and casserole separately for at least 8 hours, or up to 24 hours.

5. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Unwrap the baking dish and sprinkle the topping evenly over the top, breaking apart any large pieces with your fingers. Place the baking dish on a rimmed baking sheet and bake until puffed and golden, about 1 hour. Serve.

Variation

RUM-RAISIN FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

Combine 1½ cups raisins and 1 cup rum in a microwave-safe bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and poke several vent holes in the plastic wrap with the tip of a paring knife. Microwave on high until the rum comes to a boil, 1 to 2 minutes. Set aside, covered, until the raisins are plump, about 15 minutes. Drain thoroughly, discarding the rum (or save it for another use). Follow the recipe for Make-Ahead French Toast Casserole, sprinkling the plumped raisins between the bread pieces in step 2.

Banana Bread

Overripe bananas are an excellent excuse to make banana bread. However, many banana breads are flat, gritty, or heavy. Worse, some loaves taste only remotely of bananas. Good banana bread is soft and tender with plenty of banana flavor and crunchy toasted nuts. It should be moist and light, something so delicious that you look forward to the bananas on the counter turning soft and mushy.

In our testing, we found it very important to pay close attention to the condition of the bananas. Older sweet, darkly speckled bananas infused the bread with both moisture and flavor. We experimented with the way we prepared the bananas for the batter: slightly mashed, mashed well, and pureed. Loaves with slightly mashed bananas contained chunks of fruit. We preferred a smoother texture, but pureeing meant the batter did not rise as well. Bananas well mashed by hand kept the batter thick and resulted in a well-shaped loaf.

For the dairy, we tried mixing in milk, buttermilk, sour cream, and plain yogurt. Sour cream added richness, but it also made for a heavy texture. Milk added little flavor and created a slick crust. Buttermilk added a delightful tang, but yogurt let the banana flavor stand out.

For mixing, we stuck with the quick bread method (wet and dry ingredients are mixed together independently, then combined); the creaming method (butter and sugar creamed together, wet and dry ingredients then mixed in) produced loaves that were too light in color and not as texturally satisfying.

Through our tests we also learned that a thick, chunky batter produces a better loaf. When we stirred the wet and dry ingredients into a smooth batter, the loaves turned out small and tough.

That's because the more the batter is stirred, the more the gluten proteins arrange themselves into long, orderly bundles. These bundles create a batter that resists changing shape and cannot rise as well. So to minimize gluten development, we gently folded the wet and dry ingredients together, just until the dry ingredients were moistened. After baking for about an hour, our bread had a tender, moist crumb and was bursting with banana flavor.

BANANA BREAD

MAKES ONE 8-INCH LOAF

The key to this recipe is using very ripe, soft, darkly speckled bananas.

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup walnuts, toasted (see page 39) and chopped
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 3 large ripe bananas, mashed well (see note above)
- 6 tablespoons ($\frac{3}{4}$ stick) unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup whole milk or low-fat plain yogurt
- 2 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Adjust an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 8½ by 4½-inch loaf pan.

2. Whisk the flour, walnuts, sugar, baking soda, and salt together in a large bowl; set aside.

3. Whisk the mashed bananas, melted butter, yogurt, eggs, and vanilla together in a medium bowl. Using



a rubber spatula, gently fold the banana mixture into the dry ingredients until just combined and the batter looks thick and chunky. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan and smooth the top.

4. Bake until the loaf is golden brown and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean, about 55 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through. Cool in the pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack and cool for at least 1 hour before serving. (The banana bread can be wrapped in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

Variations

BANANA-CHOCOLATE BREAD

Follow the recipe for Banana Bread, reducing the amount of sugar to 10 tablespoons and adding 2½ ounces grated bittersweet chocolate to the dry ingredients in step 2.

BANANA-COCONUT BREAD WITH MACADAMIA NUTS

Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Toast ½ cup flaked, sweetened coconut and 1 cup chopped macadamia nuts on a rimmed baking sheet, stirring occasionally, until golden brown, about 6 minutes. Follow the recipe for Banana Bread, substituting the toasted coconut and macadamias for the walnuts.

TOASTING NUTS

Toasting nuts is well worth the extra time—it intensifies their flavor and maximizes their crunch. Here's our preferred method. Toast the nuts in a dry skillet over medium heat, shaking the pan occasionally to prevent scorching, until they are fragrant and begin to darken slightly, about 3 to 5 minutes.

Dutch Apple-Cheese Muffins

We thought that we had made muffins in every conceivable flavor through the years, so imagine our surprise when we heard about Dutch apple-cheese muffins. In our research we found that the muffins were a popular lunch counter treat at one branch of the long-gone Dayton Hudson department store. The sweet-and-savory combination sounded eccentric to us, but once we made a batch, we were smitten. The cheddar-flavored muffins were capped with sliced apples glossed with a sweet cinnamon glaze. But while the original recipe was good, we thought it could benefit from a little test kitchen know-how.

Outside of the added cheese, the muffin itself was a pretty standard affair. It took us just a few batches and a bit of minor tweaking to produce a semisweet muffin sturdy enough to hold up the apples. However, we hit some bumps when it came to the mixing method and the muffin's texture. In the original recipe the ingredients were blended via the "quick bread" mixing method: the wet and dry ingredients were mixed together independently, then combined, portioned, and baked. While the method was easy, it required melting the butter, which, in conjunction with the cheese, produced a greasy muffin. Cutting cold butter into the dry ingredients, as we would for pie dough, produced a muffin with a far better texture, though doing this by hand was time-consuming and finicky.

Looking for a quicker approach, we turned to the food processor. Pulsing cold butter with the dry ingredients in a food processor worked great, except that adding the wet ingredients to the

processor resulted in rubbery muffins because of overmixing. We had better results when we transferred the blended dry ingredients to a bowl and stirred in the wet ingredients by hand.

So what about the cheese? In the original recipe it was simply mixed in along with the wet ingredients, which created pockets of cheese. For more thorough dispersal, we chopped the cheese into the dry ingredients. Now each bite tasted pleasantly cheesy.

As for the apple topping, we found that sweet-tart varieties, like Macoun, Jonagold, and Cortland, tasted best, as they retained their bright flavors to counter the glaze's sweetness and maximize the cheese's flavor. Simply pressing thin slices onto the top of the unbaked muffins worked just fine.

The glaze itself is just sugar, water, butter, cinnamon, and a little lemon juice simmered until thick. When we applied the glaze when the muffins were fully baked, it dripped off. A better approach, we found, was to apply a heavy coat of the glaze to the partially baked muffins and slide them back into the oven to finish. In this fashion the hot muffins soaked up the glaze and the flavor penetrated deeply. These muffins tasted so good that they'll be in standard rotation around the test kitchen.

PLACING APPLE SLICES ON MUFFINS



To add the apple slices, arrange them, cut-side down and slightly overlapping, on top of the batter.

DUTCH APPLE-CHEESE MUFFINS

MAKES 12 MUFFINS

Crisp, sweet-tart apples like Macoun, Jonagold, Cortland, and Empire work best here.

MUFFINS

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 8 ounces cheddar cheese, cut into ½-inch pieces (2 cups)
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¾ cup whole milk
- 1 large egg
- 1 pound apples (2 to 3 apples), peeled, cored, halved, and sliced thin crosswise (see note above)

GLAZE

- ½ cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons water
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

1. FOR THE MUFFINS: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees. Grease a 12-cup muffin tin. Pulse the flour, cheese, butter, sugar, baking powder, and salt together in a food processor until the mixture resembles coarse meal, about 10 pulses; transfer to a large bowl. Whisk the milk and egg together in a small bowl, then slowly stir into the flour mixture until combined.

2. Divide the batter among the muffin cups. Arrange the apple slices, cut-side down and on top of the batter, pressing gently to adhere. Bake until

the edges of the muffins are just golden, about 15 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through.

3. FOR THE GLAZE: Meanwhile, heat the glaze ingredients in a saucepan over medium heat until the butter is melted and the sugar is dissolved, about 3 minutes. Once the edges of the muffins are just golden, brush the muffins with the glaze. Return the muffins to the oven and bake until a toothpick inserted into the center of a muffin comes out clean, about 10 minutes. Cool the muffins in the pan for 10 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool for 10 minutes. Serve. (The muffins can be kept in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 2 days.)

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Muffin Tins: The best muffin tins brown muffins evenly, and the worst brown them on the top but leave them pallid and underbaked on the bottom. As we've learned from other bakeware tests, darker coated metals, which absorb heat, do the best job of browning baked goods. Our favorite muffin tin is the Wilton Ultra-Bake 12-Cup (\$10.99), which turns out ideal muffins and cupcakes and boasts a generous lip, making it easy to retrieve baked goods from the oven.

New York–Style Crumb Cake

Crumb cake has been around for a long time, but surprisingly few people can distinguish it from a regular streusel-topped coffee cake. That's because the origins of this cake are deeply rooted in just one part of the United States—New York, where it arrived with the influx of German immigrants in the

late 1800s. Many people associate crumb cake with Entenmann's, which started as a Brooklyn bakery, but its version of crumb cake doesn't do justice to the bakery-fresh original. We wanted to leave those cake boxes, with their familiar blue writing, at the grocery store, so we decided to come up with a recipe to make at home.

We chose to go with a butter cake, the style of many modern cakes, instead of the traditional yeast cake; that way, we didn't have to spend all day watching dough rise. Starting with the test kitchen's favorite yellow cake recipe, we divided it in half to make room for the crumb layer. But once it was topped with buttery crumbs, it crossed over the line to greasiness. Reducing the amount of butter lightened the cake but also made it dry. Increasing the amount of milk moistened the cake but made it less sturdy, so that in the oven the crumbs sank. We tried thicker dairy ingredients: buttermilk, sour cream, and yogurt. Buttermilk was the clear winner. The cake was still a little too rubbery, because it was egg-heavy. We tried removing an egg, but the structure of the cake was affected. We added back a yolk, and the cake problems were solved.

The best part of all crumb cakes is, of course, the crumb topping. Many recipes veer closer to a streusel topping—sandy, crunchy, and sugary—instead of staying on the crumb path—less sweet, softer, and almost cookie-like. We found that granulated sugar made the crumb topping powdery, but brown sugar resulted in a chewy, yet butterscotch-flavored, topping. Half of each type of sugar was the winning compromise.

Getting the butter right proved to be more challenging. Too much and the crumbs melted; too little and they reverted back to streusel. Switching from softened butter to melted butter gave the unbaked topping a unified, dough-like consistency—which we broke apart with our fingers before sprinkling it over the cake batter. As we

had hoped, these little nuggets held together when baked, giving us the quintessential crumb cake crumbs. Just a small amount of cinnamon finished off the crumbs with some warm spice.

NEW YORK-STYLE CRUMB CAKE

SERVES 9

Don't be tempted to substitute all-purpose flour for the cake flour, as doing so will make a dry, tough cake. If you can't find buttermilk, you can substitute an equal amount of plain low-fat yogurt. When topping the cake, take care not to push the crumbs into the batter. This recipe can be easily doubled and baked in a 13 by 9-inch baking dish; increase the baking time to about 45 minutes.

CRUMB TOPPING

- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted and still warm
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup packed dark brown sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups cake flour

CAKE

- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups cake flour (see note above)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- 6 tablespoons ($\frac{3}{4}$ stick) unsalted butter, softened, cut into 6 pieces
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup buttermilk (see note above)
- 1 large egg plus 1 egg yolk, room temperature
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Confectioners' sugar, for dusting

1. FOR THE CRUMB TOPPING: Whisk the melted butter, sugars, cinnamon, and salt together

in a medium bowl. Add the flour and stir until the mixture resembles a thick, cohesive dough; set aside to cool, 10 to 15 minutes.

2. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Line an 8-inch square baking dish with an aluminum foil sling (see page 225) and grease the foil.

3. In the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, mix the flour, sugar, baking soda, and salt on low speed to combine. With the mixer still running, beat in the butter, one piece at a time; continue beating until the mixture resembles moist crumbs, with no butter chunks remaining, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the buttermilk, egg, egg yolk, and vanilla; beat on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 1 minute, scraping the sides of the bowl as necessary.

4. Scrape the batter into the prepared baking dish and smooth the top. Using your fingers, break apart the crumb topping into large pea-sized pieces and spread in an even layer over the batter. Bake until the crumbs are golden and a toothpick inserted into the center of the cake comes out clean, 35 to 40 minutes. Cool on a wire rack for at

BREAKING APART THE TOPPING



Using both hands, break apart the crumb dough and roll the broken dough between your fingers to form crumbs about the size of large peas.



least 30 minutes. Remove the cake from the pan using the foil (see page 225). Dust with confectioners' sugar just before serving. (The cake can be wrapped with plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 2 days.)

Sock-It-to-Me Cake

Popularized by a TV show and then claimed by Duncan Hines as the title of a cake made from their boxed cake mix, the phrase "sock it to me" was just one of many rallying cries from the 1960s. Being that all things retro are "in," we decided to try our hand at the moist, velvety, cinnamon coffee cake.

We started by following the original recipe; we added eggs, sour cream, oil, and sugar to cake mix and then layered the resulting batter with cinnamon-pecan streusel in a Bundt pan. The cake had an unbelievably moist yet sturdy texture, but even the ripple of streusel couldn't mask the artificial flavor from the boxed mix. With a little extra work, we hoped to deliver a from-scratch cake with from-scratch flavor that retained the ease of the original and would be the perfect conversation starter at any get-together.

We began our search with a standard coffee cake recipe, made by beating together butter and sugar and then adding eggs, vanilla, milk, and dry ingredients (flour, baking soda and powder, and salt). The flavor was a vast improvement on the box, but the texture was dry. As in the original recipe, we replaced the milk with sour cream, which yielded a moister crumb but made the texture too fragile. Taking a step back, we considered the dump-and-stir ease of the original recipe, made possible, in part, by vegetable oil. We whisked in 1 cup of oil instead of butter. This produced a tighter and

more tender crumb, but tasters missed the flavor of butter. Next time, we melted the butter and stirred it in. At last, we had a flavorful, moist cake that was a snap to make.

The original streusel recipe called for a combination of 2 tablespoons of the boxed mix, brown sugar, cinnamon, and chopped pecans, but tasters deemed it dry. Toasting the pecans, which we ground in the food processor with the other ingredients, improved the taste, and melted butter added richness and moisture. Since we were dirtying the food processor for the streusel anyway, we wondered if we could use it to speed up the cake batter.

We processed the sugar, eggs, sour cream, and vanilla, added the melted butter, and then added the dry mixture. In minutes, we had a foolproof batter that baked up tall and golden with a pretty cinnamon-scented streusel. As a finishing touch, we drizzled a vanilla-scented glaze over it.

THE AMERICAN TABLE SOCK IT TO ME

Most Americans first heard the catchphrase "sock it to me" when Aretha Franklin's "Respect" topped the charts in 1967. Within a year, *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* took up "sock it to me" in a routine that usually involved dousing an actress with water. In the 1970s, Duncan Hines co-opted the phrase for its back-of-the-box recipe for Sock-It-to-Me Cake, which uses an easy dump-and-stir method—and a few extra ingredients—to transform yellow cake mix into a moist, velvety coffee cake. The recipe appears on the box to this day.

SOCK-IT-TO-ME CAKE

SERVES 12

If you don't have a food processor, you can make the streusel and butter by hand. For the streusel, finely chop the pecans, then combine them in a small bowl with the brown sugar, flour, and cinnamon. Stir in the melted butter until evenly incorporated. For the cake, combine the dry ingredients as directed in the recipe. Whisk together the sugar, eggs, sour cream, and vanilla separately in a large bowl, and then slowly pour in the butter and continue to whisk until the mixture is emulsified. Add the dry mixture to the wet mixture, whisking until just combined. Continue with filling the prepared pan and baking as directed.

STREUSEL

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup pecans, toasted (see page 39)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup packed light brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

CAKE

- $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 4 large eggs, room temperature
- 1 cup sour cream, room temperature
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons (2 sticks) unsalted butter, melted and cooled

GLAZE

- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups confectioners' sugar
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons whole or low-fat milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. FOR THE STREUSEL: Process the streusel ingredients together in a food processor until finely ground. Transfer the streusel to a small bowl and wipe out the food processor.

2. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Grease and flour a 12-cup nonstick Bundt pan. Combine the flour, baking powder, salt, and baking soda in a medium bowl. Process the granulated sugar, eggs, sour cream, and vanilla together in the food processor until smooth, about 1 minute. With the machine running, slowly pour in the melted butter until incorporated. Add the flour mixture and pulse until just combined.

3. Pour half of the batter into the prepared pan and top evenly with the streusel mixture. Cover with the remaining batter and, using a rubber spatula, smooth the top. Bake until golden brown and a toothpick inserted into the center of the cake comes out clean, 50 to 60 minutes. Cool the cake in the pan for 20 minutes.

4. FOR THE GLAZE: Meanwhile, whisk the glaze ingredients together in a medium bowl until smooth. Turn out the cake onto a wire rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet. Pour the glaze over the warm cake. Cool completely, at least 2 hours. Serve. (The cake can be wrapped with plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 2 days.)

Moravian Sugar Cake

We recently learned of a sweet brunch dish that combines two very different foods—coffee cake and potatoes. Moravian sugar cake is a tender, potato-based cake with a crunchy, caramelized brown sugar topping. Also called sugar bread, this coffee cake is made by enriching a bread dough (made with yeast, mashed potatoes, milk, eggs, flour, and butter) with bursts of buttery brown sugar through a unique shaping method. The unbaked dough is indented by hand to form small craters for a topping of light brown sugar, butter, and cinnamon to nestle into during baking.

One famous bakery known for its Moravian sugar cake is Winkler Bakery in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; a large community of Moravians settled there in the late 1700s and brought with them their devotion to farming, furniture making, and—arguably most important—baking. We wanted to develop a recipe that rivaled the tender, crunchy sugar cake still made at Winkler Bakery, so we unearthed a few basic recipes and got to work.

Curious as to what the potato was adding to the dough, we prepared cakes with and without it. The potato-free cake was dry, tough, and yeasty, whereas the cake made with potato was moist, tender, and rich. The potato adds moisture to a fairly lean dough (our working recipe contained just one egg and 4 tablespoons of butter), creating a slightly chewy, bread-like texture. But we disliked the fact that we had to make mashed potatoes first. Instant potatoes were a logical substitution, and they provided a comparably light texture and round flavor without the work of making a mash.

As for the topping, most recipes call for brown sugar to be sprinkled over the dough before a stream of melted butter is poured on top, but toppings prepared this way baked up greasy in

some areas and lean in others. Striving for a more homogenous topping, we melted the butter and brown sugar together, but this time the topping baked up tough and candied. We had better luck by combining cold butter, brown sugar, and cinnamon into a streusel-like mixture to sprinkle over the dimpled dough.

After 20 minutes in the oven, the cake emerged golden and bubbly, but the top was smooth, devoid of the signature sugary craters. Dejected, we headed back to the research library. But 30 minutes later, one of our test cooks noticed something—the cake had transformed itself! The hot sugar mixture had cooled and sunk into the cake, creating the characteristic pocked appearance. Not only did our cake taste like the original Moravian sugar cake, it now looked like it, too.

THE AMERICAN TABLE MORAVIAN ROOTS

In 1766 a group of Moravians (Protestants with roots in the present-day Czech Republic) left Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and established Salem, North Carolina. Many religious communities of the era were centered around farming, but the Moravians in Salem focused on producing consumer goods like furniture, candles, and food. The Moravians have a long history as bakers, and in 1808 Brother Christian Winkler took over the bakery that now bears his name and still uses the original wood-fired beehive oven. Today, employees at Winkler Bakery wear period costumes and bake an array of cookies, cakes (including Moravian Sugar Cake), and breads using traditional Moravian recipes and techniques.

MORAVIAN SUGAR CAKE

SERVES 12

Potato flakes and potato buds both work well here, but avoid potato granules, which can have off-flavors.

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup milk, warm (110 degrees)
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons rapid-rise or instant yeast
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup instant potato flakes (see note above)
- 4 tablespoons ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick) unsalted butter, softened, plus 6 tablespoons ($\frac{3}{4}$ stick) unsalted butter, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces and chilled
- 1 large egg, room temperature
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups packed light brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 200 degrees. Maintain the temperature for 10 minutes, then turn off the oven. Grease a 13 by 9-inch glass baking dish.

2. Stir the milk and yeast together until the yeast is dissolved. In the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, mix together the yeast mixture, flour, granulated sugar, potato flakes, softened butter, egg, and salt on medium speed until smooth and shiny, about 2 minutes. Transfer the dough to a large, lightly greased bowl and cover with greased plastic wrap. Place in the warm oven until the dough has doubled in size, about 30 minutes.

3. Press the dough evenly into the prepared dish. Cover the pan with plastic wrap and place in the warm oven until the dough has doubled in size, about 30 minutes. Using your fingers, combine the chilled butter, brown sugar, and cinnamon in a medium bowl until the mixture resembles coarse meal.

4. Remove the baking dish from the oven and heat the oven to 375 degrees. Using floured fingertips, indent the surface of the dough and sprinkle evenly with the brown sugar mixture. Once the oven is fully heated, bake until the topping is bubbling

MAKING SUGAR CAKE



1. Press the dough into an even layer in a greased 13 by 9-inch baking dish to rise.



2. Using your fingers, combine the butter, brown sugar, and cinnamon until the mixture resembles coarse meal.



3. Using floured fingertips, make shallow indentations on the entire surface of the risen dough.



4. Evenly sprinkle the brown sugar mixture over the indented dough.

and deep brown, 18 to 22 minutes. Cool for at least 30 minutes before serving. (The cake can be wrapped with plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 2 days.)

To Make Ahead: After pressing the dough into the baking dish and covering it with plastic wrap in step 3, refrigerate the dough for up to 24 hours. When ready to bake, let the dough sit at room temperature for 30 minutes before proceeding with step 4.

St. Louis Goopy Butter Cake

As any St. Louis native will tell you, this city is home to a quirky confection known as Goopy Butter Cake. There are actually two distinct styles of the cake. There's the chewy (and messy) version, more like a bar cookie than a cake, with a cake batter base and cheesecake-like topping. The second style is more like an old-fashioned coffee cake, with a rich yeast dough and custardy topping. We wanted to re-create the second kind, with its combination of tender yeast cake and silky custard that literally melts in your mouth, which is substantial enough (but not too sweet) to be a brunch offering.

Our initial recipe tests were pretty far from the mark. The bases were dry and tough (more like pizza dough than coffee cake), and the toppings were runny and soupy. In the best of these early recipes the cake portion was made by mixing 1½ cups of flour, an egg, and 4 tablespoons of butter with yeast, water, sugar, and salt in a mixer;

the dough was then kneaded and allowed to rise before being pressed into the pan. The topping was made by creaming butter and sugar, then mixing in corn syrup, an egg, vanilla, and flour. Once assembled, the cake was baked in a 350-degree oven.

We knew we needed to enrich, tenderize, and sweeten the cake base. Taking inspiration from rich yeasted doughs like brioche and Danish, we doubled the number of eggs. Doubling the amount of butter to a full stick made the dough a little greasy; 6 tablespoons was the right compromise. Switching from water to milk gave the cake even more substance. Doubling the amount of sugar (from 2 tablespoons to 4) lent more than the obvious sweetness; it also helped tenderize the cake.

With a richer, more tender foundation in place, we moved on to the topping. Bakers in St. Louis told us that by the time the cake base is cooked through, the topping should still jiggle slightly. As the cake cools, the topping sets up into a velvety, custard-like consistency.

Unfortunately, our experience with the topping was quite different. It was much too runny and puddled like melted ice cream when the cake was sliced. We first thought to add more flour, but the filling became pasty. We had better luck when we beat some cream cheese with the butter and sugar. The cream cheese partially firmed up the filling without making it pasty, but using any more than 2 ounces made the topping too tangy and cheesecake-like. Cornstarch gave the filling an unpleasant slippery texture but inspired us to try instant pudding (which contains cornstarch as a thickener). Sure enough, a few tablespoons of vanilla pudding mix added flavor and provided the creamy, gooey-yet-sliceable texture that makes this cake famous.



ST. LOUIS GOOEY BUTTER CAKE

SERVES 9

Remove the cake from the oven when the perimeter is golden brown and the center is still slightly loose; the topping will continue to set as the cake cools.

DOUGH

- ¼ cup whole milk, warm (110 degrees)
- 1½ teaspoons rapid-rise or instant yeast
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 2 large eggs, room temperature
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 6 tablespoons (¾ stick) unsalted butter, cut into 6 pieces and softened

TOPPING

- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 2 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons light corn syrup
- 1 large egg, room temperature
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons instant vanilla pudding mix
- 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar

1. FOR THE DOUGH: Adjust an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 200 degrees. When the oven reaches 200 degrees, turn it off. Line an 8-inch square baking dish with an aluminum foil sling (see page 225) and grease the foil.

2. In the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, mix the milk and yeast together on low speed until the yeast dissolves. Add the flour, granulated sugar, eggs, vanilla, and salt and mix until combined, about 30 seconds. Increase the speed to medium-low and add the butter, one piece at a time, until incorporated, then continue mixing for 5 minutes. Transfer the batter to a medium greased bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and place in the warm oven until the dough has doubled in size, about 30 minutes. Transfer the dough to the prepared baking dish. Heat the oven to 350 degrees.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: In the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the granulated sugar, butter, and cream cheese on medium speed until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Reduce the speed to low and add the corn syrup, egg, and vanilla and mix until combined. Add the flour and pudding mix and mix until just incorporated. Drop dollops of the topping evenly over the batter, then spread them into an even layer.

4. Once the oven is fully heated, bake the cake until the exterior is golden and the center of the topping is just beginning to color and jiggles slightly when the pan is shaken, about 25 minutes. Cool in the pan for at least 3 hours. Remove the cake from the pan using the foil (see page 225). Dust with the confectioners' sugar and serve. (The cake can be wrapped with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

Sour Cream Coffee Cake

A sour cream coffee cake with mounds of streusel topping is the king of coffee cakes. Not only does it taste rich and satisfying, but it is easy to make and can be served any time of day. We were after a recipe for the ultimate coffee cake, but we wanted to be able to mix the batter the night before, refrigerate it, and then bake it in the morning, eliminating all last-minute prep. And we wanted to keep the recipe simple and convenient, preferably using melted butter (no softening or creaming required) and with no complicated layering of the streusel.

Starting off, we took two of our own coffee cake recipes and headed into the kitchen for further tests. We pitted our sour cream coffee cake (a simple recipe made with all-purpose flour, white and dark brown sugars, eggs, butter, sour cream, baking powder, and baking soda) against our buttermilk coffee cake recipe. Both batters were made the day before (the streusel was placed on top) and refrigerated overnight. When we baked them the next day, we were very disappointed. The streusel topping melted into the buttermilk cake and sank into the sour cream cake. Both cakes were chewy and dry. Tasters preferred the sour cream cake, though, because the streusel had not disappeared and because it had a moister crumb.

Using this as our working recipe, we turned to making a sturdier cake that could keep the topping afloat. We had been making the cake with two eggs and decided to try three and four eggs, thinking that more eggs would both make a heartier batter and keep the cake moist. The four-egg version was too eggy and didn't add any richness. Using three eggs was exactly the solution we were hoping for; the cake was moist and lightly golden, and the crumb was just dense enough.

Next we looked at the fat content. We thought the more, the better, since this is what helps make cakes moist and would enable us, we hoped, to refrigerate the cake batter without loss of flavor and texture. We had been using 5 tablespoons of butter, so we tested cakes made with 10, 8, and 6 tablespoons of butter. The cake made with 10 tablespoons of butter was too greasy and rich. The cake made with 8 tablespoons of butter was just a tad too rich, and the 6-tablespoon cake seemed a little too dry. So we settled on 7 tablespoons.

We tried putting the streusel on top right before baking the cake but had the same sinking problem again. Then a test kitchen colleague suggested that the cake was too large (too much surface area) to bake evenly when cold. So we divided the batter between two 9-inch cake pans instead of putting it all in one 13 by 9-inch pan and repeated the overnight refrigerator test. This worked perfectly. The streusel topping stayed on top, and we had two great-looking coffee cakes.

OVERNIGHT SOUR CREAM COFFEE CAKE

MAKES TWO 9-INCH CAKES, EACH SERVING 8

Do not try to put all of the batter into one large cake pan or else the cake will bake unevenly (especially if refrigerated or frozen). The unbaked coffee cakes can be refrigerated for up to 24 hours, frozen for up to 1 month, or baked right away.

STREUSEL

- ½ cup packed light brown sugar
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
- 1 cup pecans, almonds, or walnuts, chopped

CAKE

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1¾ cups sour cream
- 1 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 3 large eggs, room temperature
- 7 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled

1. FOR THE STREUSEL: Using your fingers, combine the sugars, flour, butter, and cinnamon in a medium bowl until the mixture resembles coarse meal. Stir in the nuts and set aside.

2. FOR THE CAKE: Grease two 9-inch cake pans. Combine the flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, and salt in a large bowl. In a separate bowl, whisk the sour cream, sugars, eggs, and melted butter together until smooth. Gently whisk the egg mixture into the flour mixture until the batter looks smooth and well combined (do not overmix).

3. Scrape the batter into the prepared pans and smooth the tops. Sprinkle the streusel evenly over the tops of both cakes. Wrap the pans tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 24 hours or freeze for up to 1 month. (Do not thaw the frozen cakes before baking.) (To bake the cakes right away, do not wrap the pans with plastic wrap. Bake the cakes as directed in step 4, reducing the baking time to 25 to 30 minutes.)

4. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Unwrap the cakes and bake until the tops are golden and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out with just a few

crumbs attached, 30 to 35 minutes if refrigerated, or 40 to 45 minutes if frozen. Cool the cakes on a wire rack for 15 minutes; serve.

Variation

LEMON-BLUEBERRY SOUR CREAM COFFEE CAKE

You can substitute frozen blueberries for the fresh; they must be thawed, rinsed, and dried, but they do not need to be tossed with flour.

Toss 2 cups fresh blueberries with 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour. Follow the recipe for Overnight Sour Cream Coffee Cake, adding 1 teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest to the flour mixture in step 2 and the floured berries to the finished batter in step 2.

Cinnamon Buns

Whether they're from a neighborhood bakery or the food court at the mall, sweet, gooey, softball-sized cinnamon buns are a once-in-a-while treat. This colossal breed of cinnamon bun is distinguished from its leaner, punier cousins by its size, yes, but also by the richness of the soft, buttery yeasted dough, the abundance of cinnamon-sugar filling, and the thickness of the sticky cream cheese glaze. We wanted to develop a recipe for the ultimate cinnamon bun, one that would make us the hero at any brunch.

Our research turned up recipes based on various types of dough. After trying several iterations of each, our tasters rejected recipes based on sweet bread dough (too lean), Danish dough (too buttery, flaky, and labor-intensive), and challah (not rich or soft enough). Buttery, tender brioche proved to be the best base for rich cinnamon buns. Most recipes use 2 or 3 cups of all-purpose flour to make eight buns. To bump them

up in size, we started our recipe with 4½ cups of flour. We added sugar and salt, then slowly stirred in 3 eggs, ¾ cup whole milk, and yeast. We tested various amounts of butter that we softened and slowly added to the mixer, and our tasters liked the richness brought by 12 tablespoons. The dough is kneaded and left to rise until doubled in size. It's then rolled out, sprinkled with filling, rolled up, cut into buns, and baked. While these buns tasted fabulous, they were a little tough.

We hoped we could tenderize the buns by replacing the all-purpose flour with lower-protein cake flour, which makes for especially tender cakes and other baked goods. But in this case the cake flour worked too well, producing buns that baked up so soft that they never rose properly. In the test kitchen, we sometimes approximate cake flour by cutting all-purpose flour with a little cornstarch (the ratio is ¾ cup flour to 2 tablespoons cornstarch). We found that if we manipulated that formula (we ended up at 4¼ cups of all-purpose flour and ½ cup of cornstarch), we got the benefit of good structure and height from the flour and tenderness from the cornstarch.

Our tasters found granulated sugar too bland for the filling and dark brown sugar too bold. Light brown sugar worked best. For big cinnamon pop, we blended 1½ tablespoons of cinnamon—and no other distracting spices—with the sugar. To keep this thick filling from spilling out as the dough was rolled up, we needed more than a simple brushing of butter and instead slathered 4 tablespoons of softened butter all over the dough. Baked together, the butter and cinnamon sugar turned into a truly rich, gooey filling.

Many recipes specify covering the buns with a frosting made of butter, cream cheese, and confectioners' sugar—which pushed these already rich buns over the edge. We wondered if a thick glaze made with just cream cheese, confectioners' sugar,

milk, and vanilla would do. We spread this mixture over the warm buns and everything seemed fine—until, 30 minutes later, the glaze had completely soaked into the buns. For the next batch, we reserved a little of the glaze to apply again after the buns cooled. Now our colossal buns were truly big in size and big in flavor.

COLOSSAL CINNAMON BUNS

MAKES 8 BUNS

In step 2, if after mixing for 10 minutes the dough is still wet and sticky, add up to ¼ cup flour (a tablespoon at a time) until the dough releases from the bowl. For smaller cinnamon buns, cut the dough into 12 pieces in step 3.

DOUGH

- ¾ cup whole milk, warm (110 degrees)
- 1 envelope (2¼ teaspoons) rapid-rise or instant yeast
- 3 large eggs, room temperature
- 4¼ cups all-purpose flour
- ½ cup cornstarch
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 12 tablespoons (1½ sticks) unsalted butter, cut into 12 pieces and softened

FILLING

- 1½ cups packed light brown sugar
- 1½ tablespoons ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, softened

GLAZE

- 1½ cups confectioners' sugar
- 4 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 1 tablespoon whole milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract



1. FOR THE DOUGH: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 200 degrees. When the oven reaches 200 degrees, turn it off. Line a 13 by 9-inch baking dish with an aluminum foil sling (see page 225) and grease the foil.

2. Whisk the milk and yeast together in a small bowl until the yeast dissolves, then whisk in the eggs. In the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the dough hook, combine the flour, cornstarch, sugar, and salt. With the mixer running on low, add the warm milk mixture in a steady stream and mix until the dough comes together, about 1 minute. Increase the speed to medium and add the butter, one piece at a time, until incorporated. Continue to mix until the dough is smooth and comes away from the sides of the bowl, about 10 minutes. Turn out the dough onto a clean counter and knead to form a smooth, round ball. Transfer the dough to a large greased bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and place in the warm oven until the dough has doubled in size, about 2 hours.

3. FOR THE FILLING: Combine the brown sugar, cinnamon, and salt in a small bowl. Turn out the dough onto a lightly floured counter. Following the photos, roll the dough into an 18-inch square, spread with the butter, and sprinkle evenly with the filling. Starting with the edge nearest you, roll the dough into a tight cylinder, pinch lightly to seal the seam, and cut into 8 pieces. Transfer the pieces, cut-side up, to the prepared pan. Cover with plastic wrap and place in a warm spot until the dough has doubled in size, about 1 hour.

4. FOR THE GLAZE: Heat the oven to 350 degrees. Whisk the glaze ingredients together in a medium bowl until smooth. Remove the plastic wrap and bake the buns until deep golden brown

and the filling is melted, 35 to 40 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack and top the buns with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the glaze; cool for 30 minutes. Remove the buns from the pan using the foil (see page 225) and top with the remaining glaze. Serve.

To Make Ahead: After transferring the pieces to the prepared pan in step 3, cover the buns with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 24 hours. When ready to bake, let the buns sit at room temperature for 1 hour before removing the plastic wrap and proceeding with step 4.

ASSEMBLING CINNAMON BUNS



1. Roll the dough into an 18-inch square on a lightly floured counter.



2. Leaving a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch border around the edges, spread the softened butter over the dough, sprinkle with the sugar mixture, and lightly press the sugar mixture into the dough.



3. Use a knife or metal dough scraper to cut the rolled log in half and then into 8 equal pieces.



SOUTHWESTERN BLACK BEAN SALAD

Cool Salads and Slaws

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Waldorf Salad

Named after its famously glamorous birthplace, the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in Manhattan, Waldorf salad is truly an American classic. Created in the 1890s, this salad is still a popular dish, partly because it's easy to prepare, but also because it can be made well in advance of any get-together.

In recent decades, however, recipe writers have tried to update the recipe, making it more complicated than it needs to be and adding to the standard mayo, apple, and celery mix everything from mandarin oranges and marshmallows to Cajun spices. But we love the original combination, so we decided to simply wake up the flavors of the early version and develop new variations.

Many recipes call for diced Granny Smith apples, but tasters preferred the salad when we balanced tart Grannies with sweet Braeburn or Gala apples; for color and presentation points, we left the peel on. Tasters preferred diced celery to larger slices, as the latter made the salad cumbersome to eat. We toasted the walnuts—usually tossed in raw—to enhance their flavor. We also liked golden raisins, plumped in a little water, for additional sweetness.

Dressed with mayonnaise alone, the salad was gloppy and greasy. Adding lemon juice helped, but tasters preferred cider vinegar, which subtly reinforced the taste of apple.

WALDORF SALAD

SERVES 10

Regular raisins will work in place of the golden raisins. Look for yellowish or light green Granny Smith apples—they are riper (and better-tasting) than dark green Grannies. If you are dicing the apples ahead of time, toss them with 1 teaspoon of the cider vinegar to prevent them from browning and reserve the rest of the vinegar for the dressing.

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup golden raisins (see note above)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup mayonnaise
- 3 tablespoons cider vinegar (see note above)
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 3 Granny Smith apples, cored and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch chunks (see note above)
- 3 Gala or Braeburn apples, cored and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch chunks (see note above)
- 3 celery ribs, chopped fine
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup walnuts, toasted (see page 39) and chopped
- Salt and pepper

1. Combine the raisins and water in a small bowl. Wrap the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and microwave until the water begins to boil, about 1 minute. Let stand until the raisins are soft and the liquid has been absorbed, about 5 minutes.

THE AMERICAN TABLE ON THE MENU AT THE WALDORF

Waldorf salad was created in 1893 at New York's posh Waldorf Hotel by maître d'hôtel Oscar Tschirky, who developed the salad for a charity fund-raiser hosted by Mrs. William Vanderbilt. The recipe, which appeared in the *Oscar of the Waldorf* cookbook three years later, was little more than apples, celery, and mayonnaise. But this simple combination of crispy and creamy ingredients became a classic almost overnight. To this day, it remains the single most-requested recipe at the hotel's restaurant.

2. Whisk the mayonnaise, vinegar, and honey together in a large bowl. Add the apples, celery, walnuts, and plumped raisins to the bowl and toss until well coated. Refrigerate, covered, for 30 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve. (The salad can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days.)

Variations

WALDORF SALAD WITH DRIED CHERRIES AND PECANS

Follow the recipe for Waldorf Salad, substituting $\frac{3}{4}$ cup dried cherries for the raisins and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup pecans, toasted and chopped, for the walnuts.

WALDORF SALAD WITH RED GRAPES AND ALMONDS

Follow the recipe for Waldorf Salad, omitting step 1. In step 2, substitute 1 cup seedless red grapes, halved, for the plumped raisins and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sliced almonds, toasted, for the walnuts.

CHOPPING AN APPLE



1. To make quick work of chopping apples and to dice them neatly, slice four planks away from each apple's core.

2. Then slice each plank into $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch-wide strips, and cut each strip crosswise into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch chunks.

Cucumber Salads

Cucumbers flood the summer markets with the promise of their cool, refreshing crunch, but once they're sliced up and prepared in a cucumber salad, more often than not the crisp vegetable goes soft and limp, losing its texture and diluting the dressing to a watery mess. Our main goal for perfecting this recipe was clear: maximize the crunch and the flavor. We envisioned a few variations for our cucumber salad: a classic creamy salad, a refreshing yogurt-based version, and a salad that offered the bright tang of vinegar.

The standard method for ridding watery vegetables of their excess moisture is to salt them. The salt draws out the water, leaving the vegetable wilted yet crunchy. The amount of salt called for in recipes we turned up ran the gamut. Some suggested just using the amount with which you would normally season a cucumber, and others said you should use significantly more, up to 2 tablespoons per cucumber. Cucumbers tossed with 2 tablespoons each gave up more liquid than those tossed with less, but they also had to be rinsed and blotted dry with paper towels to remove excess salt—and even then they still tasted too salty. We settled on $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of salt per cucumber, which drew out plenty of water without overseasoning.

To find out if weighting salted cucumbers really squeezes out more liquid, we set up six separate colanders in bowls, each with a seeded, sliced, and salted cucumber. Three batches had zipper-lock freezer bags filled with water placed on top; the other three were weight-free. At various time intervals, we found that the weighted cucumbers had released about 1 tablespoon more liquid than the unweighted ones. However, the weighted cukes didn't give off any more liquid after 12 hours than



they had after 3 hours. Weighting was a necessity, and we settled on 3 hours as the ideal drain time and 1 hour as the minimum; there was no point in draining overnight.

We also tested how the weighted and unweighted cucumbers performed once dressed. This is where the true value of better-drained cucumbers became obvious; every single taster preferred the salads made with pressed cucumbers for their superior crunch and less diluted dressings.

With the cucumbers settled, we moved on to flavors and dressings. After testing a number of

combinations, tasters settled on three favorites. For a classic creamy cucumber salad, we used sour cream as the base, with a little red onion and dill for punch and a touch of cider vinegar and sugar to round out the flavor. Our second salad relied on a combination of rice vinegar, jalapeño, and a little sugar to achieve the sweet-tart flavor we were after. Our final salad featured plain yogurt combined with garlic, olive oil, and a generous amount of mint for a refreshing taste.

SALTING CUCUMBERS



1. Peel each cucumber and halve lengthwise. Use a small spoon to remove the seeds and surrounding liquid from each cucumber half.



2. Place the cucumber halves flat-side down on a cutting board and cut them on the diagonal into 1/4-inch-thick slices.



3. Toss the cucumbers and salt in a colander set in a bowl. Place a gallon-sized zipper-lock bag filled with water on top of the cucumbers to weight them down and force out the liquid. Drain for at least 1 hour, or up to 3 hours.

CREAMY DILL CUCUMBER SALAD

SERVES 12

Salting and draining the onion along with the cucumbers removes its sharp sting.

- 6** medium cucumbers, peeled, halved lengthwise, seeded, and sliced thin
- 1** medium red onion, halved and sliced thin
- Salt**
- 1½ cups** sour cream
- ⅓ cup** chopped fresh dill
- ¼ cup** cider vinegar
- 1½ teaspoons** sugar
- Pepper**

1. Toss the cucumbers and onion with 1 tablespoon salt in a colander set in a bowl. Following the photos, place a water-filled gallon-sized zipper-lock bag on top and let the cucumbers drain for at least 1 hour, or up to 3 hours.

2. Whisk the sour cream, dill, vinegar, and sugar together in a bowl. Add the drained cucumbers and onion and toss to coat. Cover and refrigerate until chilled, at least 30 minutes, or up to 8 hours. (If refrigerated for longer than 2 hours, let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.) Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.

SWEET AND TART CUCUMBER SALAD

SERVES 12

Salting and draining the onion along with the cucumbers removes its sharp sting.

- 6 medium cucumbers, peeled, halved lengthwise, seeded, and sliced thin
- 1 medium red onion, halved and sliced thin
- Salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup rice vinegar
- 4 jalapeño chiles, stemmed, seeded, and minced
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- Pepper

1. Toss the cucumbers and onion with 1 tablespoon salt in a colander set in a bowl. Following the photos on page 61, place a water-filled gallon-sized zipper-lock bag on top and let the cucumbers drain for at least 1 hour, or up to 3 hours.

2. Whisk the vinegar, jalapeños, and sugar together in a bowl until the sugar dissolves. Add the drained cucumbers and onion and toss to coat. Cover and refrigerate until chilled, at least 30 minutes, or up to 8 hours. (If refrigerated for longer than 2 hours, let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.) Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.

YOGURT-MINT CUCUMBER SALAD

SERVES 12

Low-fat yogurt can be substituted for the whole milk yogurt, but the dressing won't taste as rich.

- 6 medium cucumbers, peeled, halved lengthwise, seeded, and sliced thin
- Salt
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups plain whole milk yogurt (see note above)

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped fresh mint
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- Pepper

1. Toss the cucumbers with 1 tablespoon salt in a colander set in a bowl. Following the photos on page 61, place a water-filled gallon-sized zipper-lock bag on top and let the cucumbers drain for at least 1 hour, or up to 3 hours.

2. Whisk the yogurt, mint, oil, and garlic together in a bowl. Add the drained cucumbers and toss to coat. Cover and refrigerate until chilled, at least 30 minutes, or up to 8 hours. (If refrigerated for longer than 2 hours, let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.) Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.

24-Hour Picnic Salad

Green salads are perfect for picnics—they don't require any fussy reheating, they travel well, and they are easy to divvy up among individual plates (no fancy carving or slicing necessary). But if made too far in advance, salads can get waterlogged, leaving a pool of liquid at the bottom of the serving dish, or the greens and vegetables can wilt and turn mushy. That's why we were excited when we heard about a make-ahead picnic salad that features layers of iceberg lettuce, peas, hard-cooked egg, shredded cheddar cheese, and bacon, all neatly arranged in a huge glass bowl. On top, the layer of iceberg is coated with a thick dressing, spread to the edges, like frosting on a cake. Called 24-Hour Picnic Salad because it's made a day in advance, the salad gets tossed together just before serving. The lettuce and vegetables remain crisp, and the creamy



dressing brings all the flavors together. What a great idea, we thought, so we decided to create our own version.

We found a handful of recipes online and prepared them in the test kitchen. All shared the concept of layering the ingredients, but most of these salads were overdressed with thick, bland, and sweet dressings (mostly just sugar and mayo) that didn't properly coat the components. We had a lot of work to do.

We tried using other lettuces, but iceberg retained the most crunch after sitting with the dressing for a day. We found that soft ingredients like mushrooms, spinach, and scallions wilted into mush, whereas crunchy ones like celery, bell pepper, cucumber, and red onion (which we sliced thin and rinsed to remove some of its harshness) stayed crisp. Tasters preferred assertive blue cheese over the mild flavor of cheddar, especially when we layered the dressing on top of the blue cheese, which allowed the flavors to mingle overnight.

For the dressing, our first step was to cut back on the amount of sugar and add tart cider vinegar and hot sauce for brightness and depth. The flavor was great, but the dressing was still too thick to blend into the salad. Thinning it out caused the dressing to run down through the ingredients overnight, resulting in soggy vegetables.

Then we remembered one recipe we had found (and quickly dismissed) that called for salting the layers of lettuce. We dutifully prepared the recipe and the next day found a pool of water sitting in the bottom of the bowl. We were sure we had made a mistake, but we tossed the salad together anyway and were pleasantly surprised that the thick dressing combined with the water to coat the salad beautifully. We now had the perfect picnic salad—and we could do all the slicing and chopping the day before.

24-HOUR PICNIC SALAD

SERVES 12

Frank's RedHot Original Hot Sauce is our favorite brand of hot sauce. If using a hotter brand, such as Tabasco Sauce, reduce the amount to 1 tablespoon. See page 26 for instructions on how to hard-cook eggs.

SALAD

- 1 medium head iceberg lettuce, cored and chopped rough (about 6 cups)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ medium red onion, sliced thin
- 6 hard-cooked eggs (see note above), peeled and chopped
- 1½ cups frozen peas
- 4 celery ribs, sliced thin
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and chopped
- 1 cucumber, halved lengthwise, seeded, and sliced thin
- 1 pound bacon, cooked and crumbled
- 1½ cups crumbled blue cheese

DRESSING

- 1½ cups mayonnaise
- 3 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons hot sauce (see note above)
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1½ teaspoons pepper

1. FOR THE SALAD: Place half of the lettuce in a large serving bowl and sprinkle with ½ teaspoon of the salt. Rinse the sliced onion under cold water; pat dry with paper towels. Layer the onion, eggs, peas, celery, bell pepper, and cucumber over the lettuce. Add the remaining lettuce to the bowl, sprinkle with the remaining ½ teaspoon salt, and top with the bacon and cheese.

2. FOR THE DRESSING: Combine all of the ingredients and spread the dressing evenly over the top of the salad. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 8 hours, or up to 1 day. Remove the plastic wrap and toss until the salad is evenly coated with the dressing. Serve.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Salad Spinner: To show off the multiple layers of 24-Hour Picnic Salad, we like to serve it in a clear bowl. But if you don't have a big glass bowl, you might have a suitable substitute on hand—the bowl from our top-rated OXO Good Grips salad spinner. Not only does this salad spinner have an ergonomic and easy-to-use hand pump, making it a breeze to wash lettuce quickly and thoroughly, but its clear bowl makes the perfect serving dish.

Succotash Salad

Succotash is a Southern classic. At its simplest, this side dish is nothing more than lima beans and corn cooked with butter and cream. It sounds delicious, but it can be awfully rich. Could we rethink this recipe and make it fresher? A room-temperature salad sounded appealing and modern.

We quickly determined that frozen lima beans were completely acceptable. Fresh lima beans were hard to find and not worth the 40 minutes it took to shell and cook them. When it came to the corn, however, frozen was fine, but tasters really liked fresh. For more crunch, we added green beans, a common ingredient in succotash recipes. We found it easy to cook all the vegetables in one pot. The green beans needed a head start, but otherwise the timing was simple. Rinsing the cooked vegetables under cool running water set their color and kept them from softening further.

For the dressing, we chose a simple mixture of olive oil and lemon juice. A little honey brought sweetness to the salad—much as the sweet cream does in the original recipe. For a splash of color and flavor, we finished the salad with minced red onion and chopped fresh basil. This cool, light salad now seemed in sync with modern tastes and warm nights.

SUCCOTASH SALAD

SERVES 12

If making the salad in advance, add the basil just before serving.

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup olive oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh lemon juice (2 lemons)
- 2 teaspoons honey
- 1 small red onion, minced
- Salt and pepper
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds green beans, trimmed and cut in half crosswise
- 4 ears corn, kernels removed from cobs (see page 99)
- 1 pound frozen lima beans
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped fresh basil (see note above)

1. Whisk the oil, lemon juice, honey, onion, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper together in a small bowl.
2. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the green beans and cook for 1 minute. Add the corn and lima beans and cook until tender, about 5 minutes. Drain the vegetables and rinse with cold water until cool. Drain the vegetables well and transfer to a serving bowl.
3. Pour the dressing over the vegetables and toss to coat evenly. Stir in the basil and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve. (The salad can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day.)

Dilly Beans

Dilly beans are crunchy, sweet-sour pickled green beans flavored—as the name implies—with dill, plus the classic pickling spices of garlic, mustard seeds, and peppercorns. Traditionally, it takes hours to make them (and lots of special equipment) and days before they're ready to eat. These bright, tangy beans make a refreshing side dish on any buffet table, so we set out to speed up the process and make a quicker recipe without sacrificing flavor or texture.

The usual canning method begins with pouring hot pickling liquid (vinegar, sugar, spices) over raw beans, so that's where we started, too. But instead of portioning the beans into sterilized jars and vacuum-sealing them in boiling water, we simply marinated them and then refrigerated them for an hour. Tasters found them tough, as the accelerated pickling time meant the beans didn't soften. We tried blanching them, hoping the technique would soften the beans so that the hot pickling liquid could penetrate. Three minutes in boiling water (followed by a shock in ice water to prevent overcooking) produced crisp-tender beans that were ready for their vinegar soak.

Dill comes in three forms: seed, dried (or weed), and fresh. After testing each, we determined that dill seed was the most pungent and aromatic—exactly what was needed to boost flavor in the shortened pickling time. We stirred dill seeds, mustard seeds, peppercorns, and garlic into a hot vinegar-sugar mixture, but the liquid (and beans) tasted flat. Dry-toasting the spices boosted their flavor considerably. After a brief simmer, the liquid was infused with the flavors of the spices, so we strained them out (they were crunchy when left in). For a fresh-from-the-garden touch that reinforced the dill flavor, we finished the beans with chopped fresh dill.

DILLY BEANS

SERVES 12

For the best dill flavor, use dill seeds—not dried dill—in the pickling brine.

- 2 pounds green beans, trimmed
- Salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup dill seeds (see note above)
- 2 tablespoons mustard seeds
- 2 tablespoons black peppercorns
- 3 cups white vinegar
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups sugar
- 1 cup water
- 12 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup finely chopped fresh dill

1. Fill a large bowl with ice water. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot over high heat. Add the beans and 1 tablespoon salt and cook until just tender, about 3 minutes. Drain the beans, transfer to the ice water, and let sit until cool, about 2 minutes. Drain well and pat dry with paper towels. (The beans can be refrigerated in a zipper-lock bag for up to 1 day.)

2. Toast the dill seeds, mustard seeds, and peppercorns in a medium saucepan over medium heat until fragrant and the seeds begin to pop, about 2 minutes. Add the vinegar, sugar, water, garlic, and 1 teaspoon salt and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and simmer until the mixture darkens, about 5 minutes.

3. Strain the vinegar mixture through a fine-mesh strainer into a large bowl; discard the solids. Add the beans and fresh dill, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and refrigerate, stirring occasionally, for at least 1 hour, or up to 2 weeks. Serve.



Southwestern Black Bean Salad

Starting in the 1990s, it seemed no picnic was complete without a bowl of black bean salad. Most recipes instruct the cook to open a couple of cans of black beans, add a combination of Southwestern ingredients (avocado, corn, tomatoes, bell peppers, onion, and chiles), and dress the mix with a lime-cilantro vinaigrette. Sounds like a winner, but too many recipes take an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach, resulting in a mishmash of competing flavors and textures. Clearly, for black bean salad, it's important to know what will fit—and when to quit.

We started with two standard-sized cans of black beans, which would serve about eight, making a good amount for a potluck. We quickly edited out harsh onion, replacing it with scallions; bland bell pepper followed right behind. Creamy avocados stayed, though; they gave the salad some richness. Tasters welcomed the addition of tomatoes, which lent a juicy freshness; corn added some sweetness, and sautéing it first amplified its flavor. It was time to move on to the dressing.

Dressing recipes typically use a ratio of 1 part acid (lime juice) to 3 parts oil (olive). But this salad needed a wake-up call. After loads of experimentation, we turned that ratio nearly upside down. A single teaspoon of honey balanced the citrus kick, and throwing the scallions into the dressing mellowed them nicely. Rather than concoct a complicated mix of spices and chiles, we found that a tablespoon of minced canned chipotle chiles provided plenty of heat and accentuated the Southwestern tone of our salad, as did a generous helping of chopped cilantro.

Finally, we combined the vegetables, beans, and dressing before taking a tentative bite. Suddenly, black bean salad was back—and better than ever.

SOUTHWESTERN BLACK BEAN SALAD

SERVES 8

We much prefer the flavor of fresh corn here, but 2 cups frozen corn, thawed, can be substituted.

- 4 scallions, sliced thin
- ½ cup fresh lime juice (3 limes)
- 1 tablespoon minced canned chipotle chiles in adobo
- 1 teaspoon honey
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 3 ears corn, kernels removed from cobs (see page 99; see note above)
- 2 (15.5-ounce) cans black beans, drained and rinsed
- 2 ripe avocados, pitted, peeled, and chopped (see page 20)
- 2 medium tomatoes, cored, seeded, and cubed
- ¼ cup finely chopped fresh cilantro

1. Combine the scallions, lime juice, chipotles, honey, ½ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper in a large bowl. Slowly whisk in 2 tablespoons of the oil. (The dressing can be stored in an airtight container and refrigerated for up to 1 day.)

2. Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add the corn and cook until spotty brown, about 5 minutes.

3. Transfer the cooked corn to the bowl with the dressing; add the beans, avocados, tomatoes, and cilantro and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Paring Knives: When we have to cut corn kernels off cobs or core tomatoes, we reach for a paring knife. Paring knives are best for small jobs where larger knives would be too bulky and awkward. Our favorite paring knife is the Victorinox Forschner Fibrox 4-inch Paring Knife (\$5.95), which is very flexible and has a super-thin blade, perfect for getting into tight corners.

Hawaiian Macaroni Salad

Macaroni salad is an integral part of what's known as a "plate lunch," Hawaii's version of diner food: one big scoop of macaroni, two big scoops of sticky white rice, plus a meaty main dish. Plate lunches can be found at fund-raisers, church picnics, and beach parking lot trucks throughout the Islands. We thought it was time to bring this creamy, peppery pasta salad to the mainland.

We started our research wondering what exactly—beyond the fact that shredded carrot was absolutely essential—made this dish different from traditional macaroni salad. In every recipe we uncovered, the elbow macaroni was cooked until very soft, or "fat." Also, the ingredients included a hefty amount of mayonnaise cut with milk for an incredibly creamy dressing. With recipes in hand, we set out to create our own version of this Hawaiian classic—a new twist on an old favorite, perfect for livening up the buffet table.

Following Hawaiian tradition, we cooked the macaroni until super-soft. Overcooking the macaroni actually enables it to absorb more of the dressing.

Next we tackled the dressing. We quickly learned that it can't be too thick, or it won't soak into the

pasta. It took 2 cups each of mayonnaise and milk to get the right consistency, and we included some brown sugar for sweetness. We added cider vinegar to boost the flavor, but it curdled the milk—not pretty. Instead we poured the vinegar directly over the hot macaroni. After it soaked in, we poured on some dressing, gave the mixture a stir, and let it cool. This way, the pasta could absorb a good amount of dressing before we added the rest along with some grated carrot, chopped celery (for crunch), and scallions.

After just one rich and creamy bite, we knew why the locals were so crazy about their sublime macaroni salad.

HAWAIIAN MACARONI SALAD

SERVES 10

Don't use low-fat milk or mayonnaise for this recipe; it will make the dressing too thin.

- 2 cups whole milk (see note above)
- 2 cups mayonnaise (see note above)
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound elbow macaroni
- ½ cup cider vinegar
- 4 scallions, sliced thin
- 1 large carrot, peeled and shredded on a box grater
- 1 celery rib, chopped fine

1. Whisk 1 ½ cups of the milk, 1 cup of the mayonnaise, the brown sugar, ½ teaspoon salt, and 2 teaspoons pepper in a bowl.

2. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta and cook, stirring often, until very soft, about 15 minutes. Drain the pasta and return to the pot. Add the vinegar and toss until absorbed, then transfer the



pasta to a large bowl. Cool for 10 minutes, then stir in the dressing until the pasta is well coated. Cool completely.

3. Add the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup milk, remaining 1 cup mayonnaise, the scallions, carrot, and celery to the pasta and stir to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour. Serve. (The salad can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes, stir in warm water as needed to adjust the consistency, and season with salt and pepper to taste before serving.)

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Mayonnaise: In the test kitchen, we've been fans of the Hellmann's brand (known as Best Foods west of the Rockies) for a while, but nowadays Hellmann's makes several options that offer fewer calories and less fat. To find out how they measure up to the original, we tasted a few different types of Hellmann's, plain and in macaroni salad. Hellmann's Real Mayonnaise (90 calories, 10 grams of fat, and 1.5 grams of saturated fat per tablespoon) is the gold standard: "creamy and eggy—just like mayo should be." Tasters also liked Hellmann's Light Mayonnaise (35 calories, 3.5 grams of fat, 0 grams of saturated fat per tablespoon), finding it slightly sweeter than the original. Some disliked the "tangier" flavor of Hellmann's Canola Cholesterol Free Mayonnaise (45 calories, 4.5 grams of fat, 0 grams of saturated fat per tablespoon). Finally, there's Hellmann's Low-Fat Mayonnaise (15 calories, 1 gram of fat, 0 grams of saturated fat per tablespoon)—the lightest of the bunch. The bottom line? If calories and fat are an issue, Hellmann's Light or Canola Cholesterol Free will do, but we prefer Hellman's Real Mayonnaise for the richness and creaminess it brings to salads.

Barbecue Macaroni Salad

Few at a buffet will pass up a creamy macaroni salad like our Hawaiian Macaroni Salad (see page 69), but sometimes a change of pace is welcome. Enter barbecue macaroni salad—just as creamy, but rich with the smoky flavors of barbecue.

Unfortunately, in most of the recipes we found for the dish, the pasta was simply drowned in ketchup-y barbecue sauce that was much too sweet and sticky. While we appreciate the tangy, smoky sweetness of barbecue sauce, too much of a good thing wasn't working in this case.

After a battery of tests, we found that a combination of barbecue sauce and mayonnaise proved more effective; the assertive tang of the barbecue sauce was nicely balanced by the neutral creaminess of the mayonnaise. To keep the barbecue sauce's flavor from dominating and creating a one-note macaroni salad, we used twice as much mayonnaise (1 cup mayo to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup barbecue sauce) and decided to incorporate other ingredients to give our macaroni salad a more complex flavor profile.

For spices, a combination of chili powder, cayenne pepper, and garlic powder won tasters over; cider vinegar and hot sauce brought even more heat and tang. For freshness and texture, bell pepper, celery, and scallions introduced just the right vegetal bite.

We knew this spicy summertime side dish wouldn't last long at any barbecue—our tasters scooped it up almost immediately after the last sprinkling of salt and pepper.

BARBECUE MACARONI SALAD

SERVES 10

We like the sweet, smoky flavor of Bull's-Eye Original Barbecue Sauce, but feel free to substitute your favorite. As the salad sits, it can become dry; just before serving, stir in a few tablespoons of warm water to bring back its creamy texture.

Salt

- 1 pound elbow macaroni
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and chopped fine
- 1 celery rib, chopped fine
- 4 scallions, sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- ½ cup barbecue sauce (see note above)

Pepper

1. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the macaroni and cook, stirring often, until nearly tender, about 5 minutes. Drain the pasta and rinse with cold water until cool, then drain once more, briefly, so that the pasta is still moist; transfer to a large bowl.

2. Stir in the bell pepper, celery, scallions, vinegar, hot sauce, chili powder, garlic powder, and cayenne and let sit until the flavors are absorbed, about 2 minutes. Stir in the mayonnaise and barbecue sauce and let sit until the salad is no longer watery, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve. (The salad can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes,

stir in warm water as needed to adjust the consistency, and season with salt and pepper to taste before serving.)

Variation

MEATY BARBECUE MACARONI SALAD

Heat 1 teaspoon vegetable oil in a small nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add 8 ounces smoked sausage, kielbasa, or deli ham, cut into ½-inch chunks, and cook until browned, about 5 minutes. Transfer the meat to a paper towel-lined plate. Follow the recipe for Barbecue Macaroni Salad, adding the browned meat with the vegetables in step 2.

Picnic Pasta Salad

Every summer, we see them at picnics and barbecues—the tall plastic containers of store-bought pasta salad. Often made with fusilli (tricolor fusilli in trendier markets), this salad always looks unappetizing. The pasta is so mushy you can see it falling apart through the glass deli case. And the vegetables are tired and sad. The broccoli has faded to drab olive green, and the shredded carrots that most markets add have wilted. As for the flavor—these unattractive salads usually look better than they taste.

The problem with most of these traditional pasta salads is that the acid causes the pasta to soften and dulls the color and flavor of many vegetables. But if you decide to leave out the lemon juice or vinegar, the salads taste flat and have absolutely no flavor. We wanted to develop a light, vinaigrette-dressed vegetable pasta salad that looked good and tasted even better.

We started by making salads with four very simple vinaigrettes. Each contained a different

acidic liquid, along with olive oil, salt, and pepper, and was used to dress a simple pasta salad with blanched and cooled broccoli. The salad made with white wine vinegar looked fine but tasted too acidic. The salad made with a lemon juice vinaigrette was clearly the best of the bunch. It had a nice bright flavor but was neither puckery nor sour. After half an hour, we noticed that the broccoli in the three salads with vinegar was turning olive green and starting to fall apart. But even after several hours, the broccoli in the salad with lemon juice was green and crunchy.

With lemon juice now our choice of acid, we focused on the sequence of assembling the dish. Would hot vegetables absorb more dressing and taste better? Should we run the vegetables under cold water after cooking to set their color? Neither idea panned out. We found that green vegetables like broccoli are most susceptible to the effects of acid when they are hot. Letting them cool to room temperature helped stem any color loss, but unfortunately you can't speed up the process by running the veggies under cold water. No matter how well we drained them, the vegetables became waterlogged and soggy after being rinsed. The best method is to simply let the vegetables rest in the colander—with no rinse at all—until they are barely warm before tossing them with the pasta and dressing.

At this point we had a recipe that we liked pretty well, but it needed some additional flavoring. An herb—we liked fresh basil the best—perked things up almost instantly, and a generous amount of kalamata olives provided a briny counterpart to the acidic lemon juice. Our picnic pasta salad, with its firm pasta and bright green broccoli florets, was the perfect remedy to fix our pasta salad blues.

PICNIC PASTA SALAD

SERVES 10

If you like more heat, increase the amount of red pepper flakes.

Salt

- 2 pounds broccoli, florets cut into bite-sized pieces
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh lemon juice plus $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest (2 lemons)
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes (see note above)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 pound fusilli, farfalle, or orecchiette
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pitted kalamata olives, chopped
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup shredded fresh basil

Pepper

1. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the broccoli and cook until crisp-tender, about 2 minutes. Drain well and cool for 15 minutes.
2. Rinse the pot and bring 4 quarts more water to a boil. Combine the lemon juice, lemon zest, garlic, $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt, and the red pepper flakes in a large bowl. Slowly whisk in the oil.
3. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta to the boiling water and cook, stirring often, until tender. Drain the pasta and rinse with cold water until cool, then drain well. Whisk the dressing again and add the pasta, broccoli, olives, and basil. Toss until evenly coated. Cool to room temperature, season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve. (The salad can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day; let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.)

Pesto Pasta Salads

Pesto pasta salads are a popular dish at any hot-weather gathering or cookout. Traditional pesto is a no-cook sauce made by pureeing pine nuts, garlic, olive oil, Parmesan cheese, and basil. But we've seen a lighter, more contemporary take on pesto that scales back on the herbs and uses pureed vegetables as the main ingredient. Tossed with pasta and served as a cookout side dish, this variation sounded like a great addition to our roster of salads.

We prepared a handful of recipes for our tasters; they liked the idea but not the execution. Most we tested were quite bland, and the thick vegetable pesto made the pasta dry and sticky. Raw vegetables yielded particularly bland pesto, but we didn't want the additional step of cooking the vegetables. After testing a dozen ready-to-use possibilities, we landed on frozen peas (which have already been cooked) and jarred roasted red peppers as two options for the vegetable component.

Garlic and olive oil were a must for both pestos, as were nuts, cheese, and fresh herbs. For the pea-based pesto, tasters liked pistachios, Pecorino Romano cheese, and mint, plus lemon zest for freshness; for the roasted red pepper pesto, they liked almonds, Asiago cheese, and parsley.

The flavors were right, but the texture of our pestos was still too dry and pasty. We tried adding creamy ingredients, including mayonnaise, sour cream, and cottage cheese, but none of them worked (too greasy, too tangy, and too bland, respectively). Pureed ricotta cheese, however, lent a mild flavor and silky creaminess that worked to unify the other ingredients, especially when we thinned it with a little of the pasta cooking water.

At last, our finished pesto pasta salads were light and bright—the perfect fare for any outdoor get-together.

PEA AND PISTACHIO PESTO PASTA SALAD

SERVES 10

Either whole milk or part-skim ricotta cheese will work in this recipe. As the salad sits, it can become dry; just before serving, stir in a few tablespoons of warm water to bring back its creamy texture.

Salt

- 1** pound penne, fusilli, or campanelle
- ¾** cup ricotta cheese (see note above)
- 1 ¼** cups frozen peas, thawed
- ½** cup unsalted pistachios, toasted (see page 39) and chopped
- ¼** cup grated Pecorino Romano cheese
- ¼** cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2** tablespoons chopped fresh mint
- 1** garlic clove, minced
- 1** teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest

Pepper

- 1.** Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta and cook, stirring often, until tender. Reserve ¾ cup of the pasta cooking water. Drain the pasta and rinse with cold water until cool, then drain well. Transfer to a large bowl.
- 2.** Process the ricotta and 2 tablespoons of the reserved pasta cooking water in a food processor until smooth. Add ¾ cup of the peas, ¼ cup of the pistachios, the Pecorino Romano, oil, mint, garlic, lemon zest, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper and process until smooth.
- 3.** Stir the pesto into the pasta until well coated, adding the reserved pasta cooking water as needed to adjust the consistency. Fold in the remaining ½ cup peas and ¼ cup pistachios. Season with salt

and pepper to taste and serve. (The salad can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes, stir in warm water as needed to adjust the consistency, and season with salt and pepper to taste before serving.)

ROASTED RED PEPPER PESTO PASTA SALAD

SERVES 10

Either whole milk or part-skim ricotta cheese will work in this recipe. As the salad sits, it can become dry; just before serving, stir in a few tablespoons of warm water to bring back its creamy texture. Parmesan can be substituted for the Asiago.

Salt

- 1 pound penne, fusilli, or campanelle
- ¼ cup ricotta cheese (see note above)
- 1 ¼ cups drained jarred roasted red peppers, chopped
- ½ cup slivered almonds, toasted (see page 39)
- ¼ cup grated Asiago cheese (see note above)
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes

Pepper

1. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta and cook, stirring often, until tender. Reserve ¾ cup of the pasta cooking water. Drain the pasta and rinse with cold water until cool, then drain well. Transfer to a large bowl.

2. Process the ricotta and 2 tablespoons of the reserved pasta cooking water in a food processor

until smooth. Add ¾ cup of the roasted peppers, ¼ cup of the almonds, the Asiago, oil, parsley, garlic, red pepper flakes, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper and process until smooth.

3. Stir the pesto into the pasta until well coated, adding the reserved pasta cooking water as needed to adjust the consistency. Fold in the remaining ½ cup roasted peppers and ¼ cup almonds. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve. (The salad can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes, stir in warm water as needed to adjust the consistency, and season with salt and pepper to taste before serving.)

Creamy Buttermilk Coleslaw

It's hard to imagine a summer barbecue or cook-out without cool, creamy coleslaw, whether it's a side dish or served piled atop a pulled pork sandwich. We especially like tangy buttermilk coleslaw with barbecue, but not when the slaw makes a watery pool on the plate. Part of the problem is the buttermilk, which tastes great but makes a thin dressing. The other part of the problem is the cabbage, which sheds liquid as the slaw sits and turns the already thin dressing downright watery. Many recipes tackle this problem by having you salt the shredded cabbage to remove excess water before dressing it. The salting worked like a charm, as the salted cabbage shed nearly ½ cup of liquid after just an hour.

But this method doesn't address the bigger problem: the thin buttermilk. To thicken the dressing, we wanted to add a creamier ingredient.



Mayonnaise had the right body but dulled the buttermilk flavor too much. Sour cream had great tang, but it left the dressing thin. The solution was to use both mayonnaise (to thicken the dressing) and sour cream (to restore some tang).

To bring the dressing's flavors into balance, we found that 2 tablespoons of sugar gave the dressing a nice hit of sweetness and that Dijon mustard added a subtle sharpness. Tasters also liked a hefty amount of chopped scallions—not only for their oniony flavor but also for the flecks of color that they lent our creamy slaw.

CREAMY BUTTERMILK COLESLAW

SERVES 10

Don't skip the step of salting the cabbage, or your coleslaw will be watery.

- 1 medium head green cabbage, cored and sliced thin
- 2 carrots, peeled and shredded on a box grater

Salt

- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup buttermilk
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup mayonnaise
 - $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sour cream
 - 8 scallions, minced
 - 2 tablespoons sugar
 - 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- ### Pepper

1. Toss the cabbage and carrots with $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons salt in a colander set in a bowl. Let sit until wilted, about 1 hour. Rinse the cabbage mixture with cold water, then drain and dry well with paper towels. Transfer to a large bowl.

2. Stir the buttermilk, mayonnaise, sour cream, scallions, sugar, mustard, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper into the cabbage. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until chilled, at least 30 minutes, or up to 1 day. (If refrigerated for longer than 2 hours, let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.) Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.

PREPARING CABBAGE FOR COLESLAW



1. After cutting the cabbage into quarters, trim and discard the hard core from each quarter.



2. Separate the cabbage into small stacks of leaves that flatten when pressed.



3. Cut each stack of cabbage leaves into strips [$\frac{1}{8}$ inch thick for sliced coleslaws and $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick for chopped coleslaws].



4. For chopped slaws, cut the strips into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch pieces.

Tangy Apple-Cabbage Slaw

In most parts of the country, “coleslaw” means one thing: shredded cabbage dressed with mayonnaise. But south of the Mason-Dixon Line you’ll also find lighter, brighter slaws enlivened by oil-and-vinegar dressings. One such Southern slaw features chopped cabbage studded with refreshing bits of apple and coated in a sweet, tangy, and spicy dressing. But as early test recipes revealed, this simple side dish can easily go awry, especially if the apples are mushy, the cabbage is chewy, and the dressing just pools at the bottom of the bowl.

We started by chopping a single head of green cabbage. Since cabbage is a relatively watery vegetable, we salted it to draw out excess moisture that would dilute the dressing later.

We tested several varieties of apple, but most were mushy and bland when dressed. The exception was Granny Smith, which had a sturdy crunch and tart bite. Cutting the apples into matchsticks meant they could be easily mixed with the cabbage while retaining their crispness.

The classic dressing for this slaw calls for sugar, white vinegar, vegetable oil, and various seasonings. We tried swapping out the granulated sugar for more flavorful brown sugar, maple syrup, and honey, but in the end nothing beat the clean sweetness of regular sugar. Cider vinegar contributed a fruity flavor lacking in the traditional white vinegar. Red pepper flakes, chopped scallions, and mustard added some punch. Now our dressing tasted good, but it wasn’t clinging to the cabbage and apples.

In one research recipe we found, the dressing was simmered before being poured—still hot—over the cabbage. We wondered if this technique might work here as well. We were pleased to discover that the cabbage and apples more readily

absorbed a hot dressing—especially if the slaw was allowed to sit for an hour before serving. Piled on top of a pulled pork sandwich or standing on its own, this tangy slaw is a welcome addition to any barbecue, no matter where you live.

TANGY APPLE-CABBAGE SLAW

SERVES 10

Look for yellowish or light green Granny Smith apples—they are riper (and better-tasting) than dark green Grannies. Don’t skip the step of salting the cabbage, or your coleslaw will be watery.

- 1 medium head green cabbage, cored and chopped fine (see page 77)
- Salt
- 2 Granny Smith apples (see note above), cored and sliced into thin matchsticks
- 2 scallions, sliced thin
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cider vinegar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar
- 6 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- Pepper

CUTTING APPLES FOR SLAW



1. Cut the cored apples into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick planks.

2. Stack the planks and cut them into thin matchsticks.

1. Toss the cabbage with 1½ teaspoons salt in a colander set in a bowl. Let sit until wilted, about 1 hour. Rinse the cabbage with cold water, then drain and dry well with paper towels. Transfer to a large bowl and stir in the apples and scallions.

2. Bring the vinegar, sugar, oil, mustard, and red pepper flakes to a boil in a medium saucepan. Pour the mixture over the cabbage and toss to coat. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until chilled, at least 1 hour, or up to 1 day. (If refrigerated for longer than 2 hours, let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.) Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.

Ranch Potato Salad

With its tangy, creamy base and big hits of garlic, dill, and cilantro, it's easy to see why cooks employ ranch dressing for dishes other than green salad. Perhaps the most popular of these dishes is ranch potato salad, in which a bottle of the creamy dressing is poured over boiled potatoes. But bottled ranch dressing is so sweet and bland; to make this recipe worthwhile, we'd have to whip up a quick ranch dressing that would pack a real wallop.

Starting with the potatoes, we found that tasters preferred the firmness of red potatoes. We also found that peeling the potatoes allowed them to absorb more dressing. Cutting them into chunks made for a hearty, substantial salad.

Most recipes for homemade ranch dressing start with a base of buttermilk and mayonnaise, and that's where we began. We doubled the amount of cilantro used in most recipes and found that fresh garlic and scallions added welcome bite. The dill proved to be a little trickier—with too little fresh dill tasters didn't know it was there, but too much made the dressing taste overpoweringly grassy.

THE AMERICAN TABLE HIDDEN VALLEY RANCH DRESSING

The original ranch dressing first became popular at the Hidden Valley Guest Ranch near Santa Barbara, California, in the late 1950s. It began as a dried herb mixture that Steve Henson, the ranch's owner, combined with mayonnaise and buttermilk to make a creamy, tangy dressing for the ranch's house salad. It was so well received that guests clamored for bottles of the dressing to take home with them. Recognizing the potential of his concoction, Henson began marketing the mix in small packets, and the rest is culinary history. The little packets are still around, but the dressing really took off in 1983 when manufacturers figured out how to bottle this creamy dressing in a shelf-stable format.

The solution was to use just ½ teaspoon dried dill. Dijon mustard and vinegar provided acidity and flavor, and for a sweet counterpoint we added chopped roasted red peppers.

This dressing tasted great on the spoon, but tossing it with hot boiled potatoes cooked the buttermilk and mayo into a decidedly unappealing slimy texture. Tossing the dressing with cooled potatoes resulted in a salad that still tasted a little flat because the dressing wasn't permeating the spuds. To better season the potatoes, we pulled the Dijon and some of the vinegar out of the dressing and tossed them with the hot potatoes. After the seasoned potatoes cooled, we mixed them with the flavorful dressing. Even tasters who claimed not to like ranch dressing came back for seconds of our Ranch Potato Salad.



RANCH POTATO SALAD

SERVES 8

We prefer the flavor of white wine vinegar here, but white vinegar and cider vinegar are acceptable substitutes.

- 3 pounds red potatoes, peeled and cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch chunks
- Salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup white wine vinegar (see note above)
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup mayonnaise
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup buttermilk
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup drained jarred roasted red peppers, chopped fine
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh cilantro
- 3 scallions, chopped fine
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon dried dill
- Pepper

1. Bring the potatoes, 1 tablespoon salt, and 4 quarts water to a simmer in a large pot and cook until the potatoes are just tender, about 10 minutes. Meanwhile, whisk 2 tablespoons of the vinegar and the mustard together in a small bowl.

2. Drain the potatoes, then spread them in an even layer on a rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle the mustard mixture over the hot potatoes and toss until evenly coated. Let sit until just warm, about 30 minutes.

3. Combine the remaining 2 tablespoons vinegar, the mayonnaise, buttermilk, roasted peppers, cilantro, scallions, garlic, dill, 1 teaspoon salt, and 2 teaspoons pepper in a large bowl. Stir in the potatoes, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate until chilled, at least 30 minutes. Serve. (The salad can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days. If refrigerated for longer than 2 hours, let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.)

German Potato Salad

A dish of sliced new potatoes and sautéed onions tossed in a mustardy, bacon-studded dressing and served warm is nothing new to most Americans. German potato salad hitched a ride with immigrants, acquiring new fans along with the “German” in its name. The combination of flavors makes it a popular alternative to mayonnaise-based potato salads, but this salad tends to suffer in many translations. Recipes we found variously produced waterlogged or unevenly cooked potatoes with stodgy dressings lacking the necessary tart-sweet balance. Surely we could fix that.

We started with the potatoes. Mild, waxy red potatoes tasted good and held up best when boiled. For an attractive presentation, we sliced them before boiling—that way we wouldn’t have to cut (and mangle) the cooked potatoes. In hopes of getting a jump start on seasoning the potatoes, we added vinegar to the cooking water. Now our spuds were both tender and well seasoned.

We turned to the dressing and started by frying four slices of chopped bacon. Tasters demanded more. At eight slices, they were happy. Next we had to sauté the onion, which we did in some of the leftover bacon fat. To the pan we also added olive oil—untraditional, but we found it cut the heaviness of the bacon fat.

For the acid component—key to German potato salad—we tested cider, distilled white, and both red and white wine vinegars. Tasters liked white vinegar best for its clean, sharp flavor. They also preferred whole grain mustard to creamy. We stirred in a little sugar to get the salad’s characteristic sweet-sour flavor. Finally, we coated the warm potatoes in warm dressing, folded in the cooked bacon and chopped parsley, and tasted. The bacon flavor had permeated the potatoes, and the dressing was nicely balanced. But something was missing.



In the old German recipes we found, we saw some interesting additions—chopped pickles, sauerkraut, and sliced cucumber. The cucumber added crunch and freshness; the pickles and sauerkraut, welcome brininess. For a quick pickle of our own, we sliced and marinated a cucumber in a mixture of vinegar, sugar, salt, and dried dill. This fresh “pickle” had a tang, crunch, and vibrancy that perfectly offset the tender potato slices. We revisited our dressing and decided to eliminate the vinegar and sugar, replacing them with the cucumber marinade. Now the dressing had a fresher, brighter flavor, as did the entire dish.

GERMAN POTATO SALAD

SERVES 8

Grey Poupon Country Dijon and Grey Poupon Harvest Coarse Ground are our favorite mustards to use here.

- 1 cucumber, peeled, halved lengthwise, seeded, and sliced $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick
- 1 cup white vinegar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon dried dill
- Salt
- 3 pounds small red potatoes, scrubbed and sliced $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick
- 8 slices bacon, chopped
- 1 onion, minced
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup whole grain mustard (see note above)
- Pepper
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped fresh parsley

1. Combine the cucumber, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the vinegar, the sugar, dill, and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt in a bowl; set aside.

2. Bring the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vinegar, the potatoes, 1 tablespoon salt, and 2 quarts water to a simmer in a large pot and cook until the potatoes are just tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Drain the potatoes and return them to the pot.

3. Meanwhile, cook the bacon in a large skillet over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until brown and crisp, about 8 minutes. With a slotted spoon, transfer the bacon to a paper towel-lined plate. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons of the bacon fat.

4. Add the onion and oil to the skillet and cook, stirring occasionally, over medium heat until the onion is soft and beginning to brown, about 4 minutes. Drain the cucumber and reserve the juice. Add the cucumber juice, mustard, and 1 teaspoon pepper to the pan and bring to a simmer. Pour the dressing over the warm potatoes, stir to combine, and let sit until slightly cooled and the potatoes have absorbed the dressing, about 10 minutes.

5. Add the parsley, drained cucumber, and bacon to the potatoes and stir to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste, transfer to a serving bowl, and serve. (The salad can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 1 day. Let sit at room temperature for 15 minutes before serving.)



SWEET POTATO CASSEROLE WITH MARSHMALLOWS

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Sides to Go

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Cheesy au Gratin Potatoes

Despite the elegant French name and pedigree, au gratin potatoes are at home at countless church suppers in America. Far from being a fancy French dish, what you usually get can range from curdled cream and unevenly cooked potatoes to cheese that's barely there and slices that fall into sloppy heaps. We were determined to get this crispy, creamy, golden dish just right, with layers of paper-thin, tender potatoes, a crunchy crust, lots of cheese, and the cohesiveness to be sliced into neat, elegant squares.

Starting with the potatoes, we found that Yukon Gold and red potatoes produced loose, wobbly gratins, so we decided on starchy russets and sliced them to an even, near-translucent thinness so they would lie flat in the dish, cook quickly, and fuse together. We found a mandoline to be essential for this task—even the cooks in our kitchen had a hard time getting the slices consistently thin enough with just a knife. We chose not to rinse the sliced potatoes; the extra starch would act as glue between the layers. As added insurance to help the gratin bind, we used some of the cheese in the center instead of sprinkling all of it on top. This had the added benefit of intensifying the cheese flavor. Our work paid off: this gratin sliced into attractive, cohesive squares.

Our working recipe, cobbled together from extensive research, called for milk and cream, but the dairy kept curdling in the oven. We saw a recipe that suggested baking the gratin at a low temperature (300 degrees), then cranking up the heat at the finish to brown the top. Alas, the gentle

temperature meant a longer cooking time without any payoff—the dairy curdled regardless. Next, we turned up the temperature to 350 degrees and made the gratin with all heavy cream; with less protein than milk, cream is less apt to curdle. This time it didn't curdle, but tasters found it one-dimensional and excessively rich. We tried cutting the cream with chicken broth. As we'd expected, it lightened the dish and let the potatoes be the star.

We'd been using 1 cup of grated sharp cheddar cheese, standard in American versions of the dish. Tasters weren't happy until we tripled that amount. Unfortunately, like most aged cheeses, sharp cheddar separates and becomes greasy when melted. Looking for better melting, we replaced some of the cheddar with an unconventional choice, Monterey Jack, which melts well. Unfortunately, it was so mild that we could barely taste it. By replacing some of the Monterey Jack with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of Parmesan, we achieved an acceptable balance of good melting and flavor. And, to prevent the cheese from clumping when melted, we tossed the shredded cheeses with cornstarch.

Finally, our au gratin potatoes were tender, cheesy, and creamy, with a golden, crispy crust.

SLICING POTATOES



To get perfectly sliced potatoes easily and efficiently, use a mandoline slicer. The thin, even slices will lie flat in the dish and cook evenly.



CHEESY AU GRATIN POTATOES

SERVES 6

You will need a 2- to 3-quart gratin dish for this recipe; a 13 by 9-inch glass baking dish will do in a pinch. Do not use a disposable baking pan or an 8-inch square baking dish—the gratin will not cook through properly. We recommend using a mandoline to slice the potatoes consistently thin; if you don't have a mandoline, the slicing disk on a food processor is a better option than cutting by hand. This dish is best served the day it is made (see page 4 for reheating guidelines).

- 1½ cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 1½ cups shredded Monterey Jack cheese
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 3 pounds russet potatoes (6 medium), peeled and sliced ⅛ inch thick (see note above)
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- ¾ cup heavy cream
- ½ cup low-sodium chicken broth

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Toss the cheeses with the cornstarch in a large bowl until evenly coated.

2. Place half of the potatoes in an overlapping layer in an ungreased 2- to 3-quart gratin dish, sprinkle evenly with 1 cup of the cheese mixture, ¾ teaspoon of the salt, and ¼ teaspoon of the pepper. Top with the remaining potatoes, remaining ¾ teaspoon salt, and remaining ¼ teaspoon pepper.

3. Combine the cream and broth in a bowl and pour over the potatoes. Top with the remaining 2 cups cheese mixture and bake until golden brown and a fork inserted into the center meets little resistance, 80 to 90 minutes. Serve.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Gratin Dishes: For our Cheesy au Gratin Potatoes, we used an oval gratin dish, which is designed to maximize surface area so that each serving of casserole gets the utmost ratio of crisp topping to creamy potatoes. Our favorite gratin dish is the Emile Henry 3-Quart Gratin Dish (\$54.95). The large surface area and shallow sides of this ceramic casserole dish guarantee a crispy crust and evenly cooked interior.

Delmonico Potatoes

Look up a modern recipe for Delmonico potatoes and you'll most likely find a casserole made of cubed, overboiled potatoes baked in a creamy cheddar sauce and topped with more cheese. We baked up a half dozen of these recipes and found them soggy, heavy, and bland—more like institutional fare than an elegant side dish.

But it wasn't always this way. Flash back to 1837 and the lavish dining room of Delmonico's Restaurant in New York City. Their signature side dish featured boiled, finely shredded potatoes cooked with milk and heavy cream, sprinkled with Parmesan cheese, and broiled to order. The result was a potato gratin with a creamy interior and a crusty, cheesy topping. We wanted to bring back the simplicity and refinement of the original dish but make it more practical to feed a crowd.

Reinventing the original dish as a casserole in a 13 by 9-inch baking pan was problematic. Shredding multiple pounds of potatoes was a massive undertaking, and we found that the shredded potatoes didn't cook through evenly in the large baking dish—by the time the middle of the casserole was cooked, the potatoes on the outside were pasty. It was clear that we'd have to take a cue from modern recipes and lose the shredded potatoes in favor of more manageable cubes.

We started by sautéing onions and garlic, adding cream, and, using a test kitchen trick, cooking the cubed potatoes until nearly tender right in the mixture so they would absorb flavor from the aromatics. Exchanging some cream for chicken broth lightened the dish, and lemon juice and zest brought a welcome brightness. We folded in 2 cups of cheddar and baked the casserole, but our tasters thought it was too heavy. We cut back on the cheddar until we weren't using any, and tasters approved. In a nod to the original recipe, we included a pinch of nutmeg, which adds a spicy sweetness that plays off the richness of the dish.

To create the crusty topping, we tried going back to the shredded potatoes of the original recipe, but shredded raw potatoes took too long to cook. We were starting to give up hope when we spotted a bag of frozen shredded hash browns (which are partially cooked) in a test kitchen freezer.

THE AMERICAN TABLE
DELMONICO'S RESTAURANT

Not far from today's boutique chocolatiers, the world-renowned Delmonico's started as a retail shop in the 1820s, selling fine pastries, bonbons, wine, and Havana cigars. Fast-forward 10 years, when Delmonico's Restaurant was one of Manhattan's premier fine dining destinations. The restaurant was run by two brothers, Swiss-born Giovanni "John" Del-Monico and Pietro "Peter" Del-Monico, who ditched the hyphen in their surname to adapt to their new homeland. With dishes like Lobster Newburg, Baked Alaska, and Delmonico Steak, the restaurant quickly gained a reputation for lavish, elegant dining.

To ensure a flavorful topping, we sautéed the thawed hash browns in butter, then added cream and chicken broth. Fresh chives added bite and color, and in a final nod to the original recipe, we added Parmesan cheese to the topping before layering it on the partially cooked casserole and baking until it was golden brown and crusty.

DELMONICO POTATOES

SERVES 10

We prefer the buttery flavor of Yukon Gold potatoes here, but all-purpose and red potatoes also work. We had good results with Ore-Ida Country Style shredded hash brown potatoes, available in the freezer section of most supermarkets.

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 onion, minced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2½ cups heavy cream
- 1½ cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 2½ pounds Yukon Gold potatoes (5 medium), peeled and cut into ½-inch cubes (see note above)
- ⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1½ teaspoons pepper
- 1 teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest plus 2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice
- 5 cups frozen shredded hash brown potatoes, thawed and patted dry with paper towels (see note above)
- ¾ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- ¼ cup minced fresh chives

1. Adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Melt 1 tablespoon of the butter in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add the onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and

cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add 2 cups of the cream, 1 cup of the broth, the cubed potatoes, nutmeg, salt, and 1 teaspoon of the pepper and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer until the potatoes are translucent at the edges and the mixture is slightly thickened, about 10 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the lemon zest and juice.

2. Transfer the potato mixture to a 13 by 9-inch baking dish and bake until just golden and bubbling around the edges, about 20 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, melt the remaining 2 tablespoons butter in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add the shredded potatoes and cook until beginning to brown, about 2 minutes. Add the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cream, remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup broth, and remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper to the skillet and cook, stirring occasionally, until the liquid has evaporated, about 3 minutes. Off the heat, stir in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the Parmesan and 2 tablespoons of the chives.

4. Remove the baking dish from the oven and top with the shredded potato mixture. Sprinkle with the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Parmesan and continue to bake until the top is golden brown, about 20 minutes longer. Cool for 15 minutes, then sprinkle with the remaining 2 tablespoons chives. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 1. Cool the potatoes completely, then transfer to a 13 by 9-inch baking dish, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap and proceed as directed in step 2, increasing the baking time to 25 to 30 minutes.

Mashed Potato Casserole

Light, fluffy mashed potatoes are a homey, comforting classic any time of year. Because they're a snap to make, we thought these spuds could be easily transformed from humble side dish into a convenient casserole. Smooth, cheesy, and topped off with a crunchy topping, this casserole would make a perfect partner to a variety of main dishes.

We started by boiling peeled and sliced russet potatoes. Russets gave the casserole that classic mashed potato flavor that tasters were craving. We knew that the secret to keeping the potatoes creamy and smooth all the way to the buffet table was to mix them with a variety of dairy products. Butter and milk were obvious choices because they added good flavor and helped loosen the consistency of the potatoes. But using butter and milk alone didn't work; the potatoes tasted dry and grainy (much like leftover mashed potatoes). We tested cottage cheese, cheddar cheese, sour cream, and cream cheese in various batches. The cottage cheese left warm, curdled chunks behind, and while the cheddar tasted good, it didn't incorporate well into the mashed potatoes. The cream cheese added a velvety texture and the flavor was OK, but sour cream turned out to be the tasters' favorite, adding a nice richness and tang.

Looking for ways to enhance the overall flavor, we tried adding dry mustard but found that the fresher flavor of Dijon mustard tasted better. To liven up the mash even more, we added some cheddar cheese along with a pinch of cayenne. The cheddar didn't incorporate well, so we sprinkled it over the top of the casserole. To complete the dish, we sprinkled a bread-crumbs topping over the cheese.

We were thrilled to find not only that this casserole kept well for a couple of days in the refrigerator before baking, but also that the potatoes reheated to a smooth, creamy consistency and retained all of their rich flavor.

MASHED POTATO CASSEROLE

SERVES 10

For a slightly spicy casserole, substitute pepper Jack cheese for the cheddar.

TOPPING

- 4 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup minced fresh parsley
- Salt and pepper

CASSEROLE

- 5 pounds russet potatoes (10 medium), peeled and cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch slices
- $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups whole milk, warm
- 1 cup sour cream
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
- $2\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons Dijon mustard
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- Salt and pepper
- 2 cups shredded extra-sharp cheddar cheese (see note above)

1. FOR THE TOPPING: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 300 degrees. Pulse the bread in a food processor to coarse crumbs, about 6 pulses. Toss the bread crumbs with the melted butter. Toast the bread crumbs in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet, stirring

occasionally, until golden brown and dry, about 20 minutes. Cool the crumbs for 10 minutes, then toss with the parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste; set aside.

2. FOR THE CASSEROLE: Meanwhile, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Set the potatoes in a colander and rinse under running water, tossing with your hands, for 30 seconds. Transfer the potatoes to a Dutch oven, add water to cover by 1 inch, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer until the potatoes are tender, about 15 minutes.

3. Drain the potatoes, then set a ricer or food mill over the empty pot and press or mill the potatoes back into the pot. Stir in the milk, sour cream, melted butter, mustard, garlic, and cayenne. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Transfer the potato mixture to a greased 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Sprinkle the cheese evenly over the top, then sprinkle the bread crumbs evenly over the cheese.

5. Bake the casserole, uncovered, until hot throughout, 25 to 30 minutes. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 4. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 2 days. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap, cover the dish tightly with foil, and bake for 20 minutes. Remove the foil and continue to bake until the casserole is heated through and the crumbs are crisp, 20 to 30 minutes longer.

Sweet Potato Casserole with Marshmallows

Over the years, sweet potato casserole has lost its novelty and become something of an embarrassment—a kitschy, over-the-top, über-sweet confection. Then again, we've noticed that the guests who make the most fun of it are the same ones we find discreetly helping themselves to seconds. After testing recipes, we could see both sides. The marshmallow topping was visually stunning and tasted irresistibly good. But many casseroles were watery, too sweet, and so dolled up with spices you might mistake them for dessert—and that was before they donned their marshmallow caps. Our goal was to restore the reputation of a venerable—if often mistreated—casserole.

The dish is made by roasting or boiling sweet potatoes until tender; mashing them with butter, cream, sugar, and spices; spooning them into a dish; topping them with mini-marshmallows; and broiling. But boiling the sweet potatoes made the casserole watery and washed out their flavor, and roasting took too long. We wondered if cooking the sweet potatoes in the dairy ingredients

would help infuse them with flavor. We simmered our peeled and cubed sweet potatoes in a hefty amount of cream and melted butter, then took them off the heat and mashed them. They weren't firm enough for a casserole. We decreased the amounts of butter and cream—and the sweet potatoes were still soggy. Since we were mashing them in the pot anyway, we tried leaving the heat on medium-low while we mashed. Magically, the excess moisture vanished.

Unfortunately, by cutting back on the cream and butter, we'd inadvertently dialed back on the dish's richness. To restore it, we tried adding eggs (they turned the casserole into a soufflé), then evaporated milk (it made the casserole tinny and lean). That's when a colleague suggested creamy, relatively neutral cream cheese. Just 2 ounces made the casserole richer without making it wetter. Even better, its tang tempered the sweetness of the casserole.

Speaking of sweetness, some recipes we came across included as much as 3 cups of sugar! We found that a meager 2 teaspoons was enough to gently reinforce the sweet potatoes' natural sweetness. Next, we tested spices. Tasters rejected ginger, nutmeg, and cinnamon on the grounds that

THE AMERICAN TABLE THE MARSHMALLOW'S ROOTS

For most of their surprisingly long history, marshmallows have been luxuries out of reach for the average Joe. In 2000 B.C., Egyptians made them by boiling sugar with the root of the mallow plant, which grew in marshes. (Get it—"marsh mallow"?) Jump ahead to the mid-nineteenth century, when French candy makers combined mallow sap with egg whites and sugar, whipping and molding marshmallows by hand and selling them at a handsome price. As marshmallows became more popular, new recipes and cheaper ways to make them developed. By the early 1900s, U.S. manufacturers had replaced mallow root with gelatin and were selling marshmallows as penny candy. These days they've come full circle with handmade, artisanal marshmallows selling for as much as \$4 apiece.

they turned this side dish into a pie. In the end, we stopped at salt and pepper.

It was time to turn a critical eye on the topping. Some tasters grumbled that the roasted marshmallows were chalky and dried out. We did some checking and found that mini-marshmallows, unlike full-sized ones, are coated with a significant amount of cornstarch to keep them from sticking to each other in the bag. We ditched the minis and instead topped the casserole with large marshmallows that we cut in half through the equator (if left uncut, the large marshmallows were too thick and gooey). The toasted topping was now creamy and crispy, the perfect partner to the lightly sweetened, earthy sweet potatoes underneath.

SWEET POTATO CASSEROLE WITH MARSHMALLOWS

SERVES 10

Use sharp, clean scissors sprayed with vegetable oil spray to snip the marshmallows in half through the equator.

- 5 pounds sweet potatoes (8 medium),
peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks
- 6 tablespoons heavy cream
- 6 tablespoons ($\frac{1}{4}$ stick) unsalted butter,
cut into 6 pieces
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper
- 2 ounces cream cheese
- 1 (10-ounce) bag marshmallows, halved
crosswise (see note above)

1. Combine the potatoes, cream, butter, sugar, salt, and pepper in a Dutch oven. Cook, covered, stirring occasionally, over medium heat, until the potatoes begin to break down, 20 to 25 minutes.

2. Reduce the heat to medium-low and continue to cook, covered, until the liquid has been absorbed and the potatoes are completely tender, 15 to 20 minutes longer. Meanwhile, adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees.

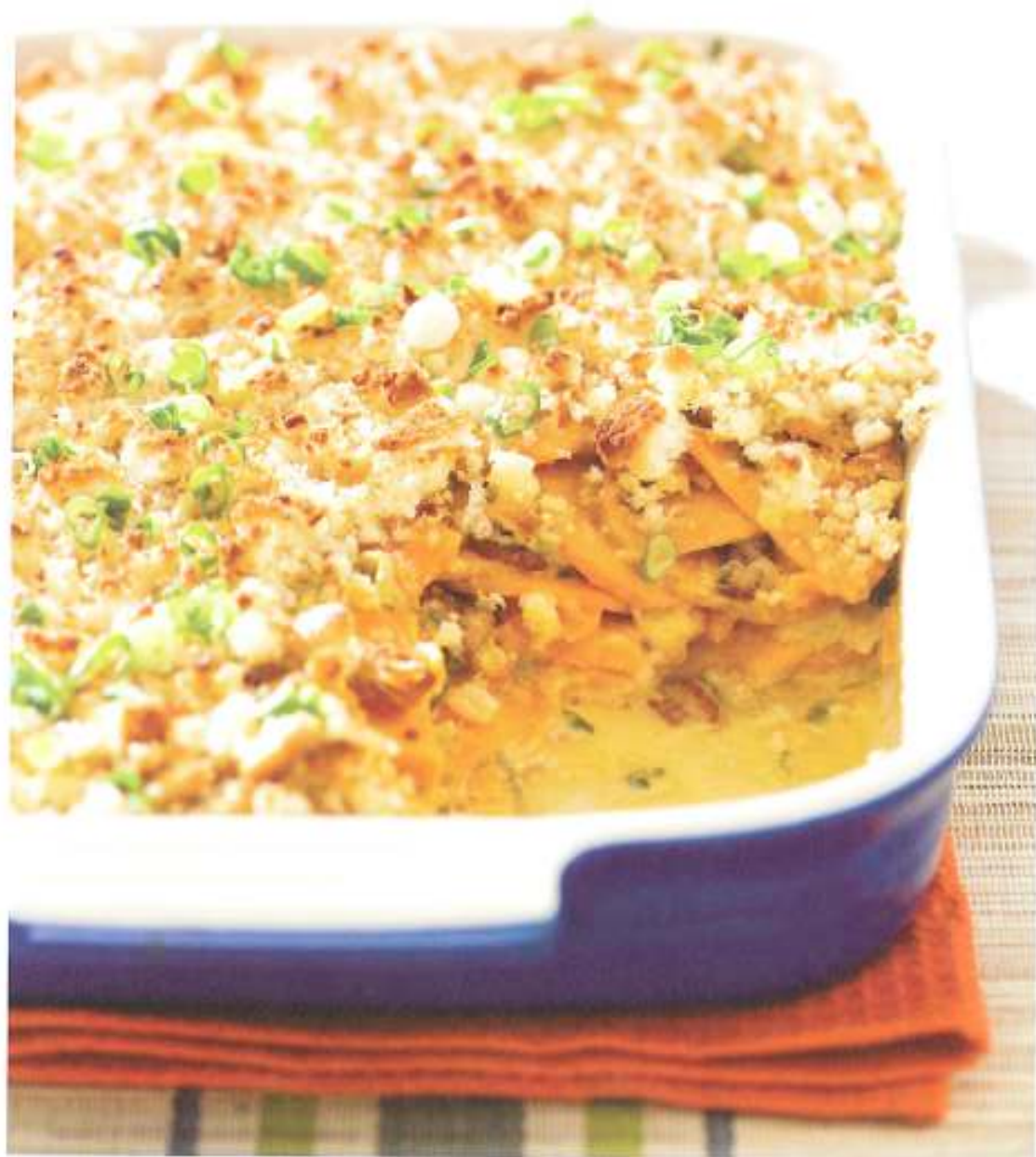
3. Add the cream cheese to the sweet potato mixture. Using a potato masher, mash until the cream cheese is fully incorporated and the sweet potatoes are a smooth consistency. Continue to cook, stirring constantly, until the sweet potato mixture has thickened, about 5 minutes longer. Transfer to a 2-quart baking dish.

4. Top the sweet potato mixture evenly with a layer of marshmallows. Bake until the marshmallows are browned, about 5 minutes. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 3. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 2 days. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Microwave on high until warm, 4 to 7 minutes. Uncover and proceed as directed in step 4.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Inexpensive Dutch Ovens: We use our trusty Dutch oven in many recipes. So what do we look for in a Dutch oven? It should have a minimum capacity of 6 quarts, a thick base, and a tight-fitting lid. Our favorites are made by All-Clad and Le Creuset, but they're over \$200. We found a less expensive alternative in Tramontina's 6.5-Quart Cast Iron Dutch Oven, which performs nearly as well and is only \$40.



Spicy Sweet Potato and Bacon Casserole

While we love traditional sweet potato casserole with its gooey marshmallow topping, we also welcome a savory take on the dish. Close to jazzed-up scalloped potatoes, our ideal savory sweet potato casserole features creamy, cheesy sweet potatoes accented with smoky bacon and a subtly spicy bite, all under a coating of crunchy bread crumbs. We aimed to create the ultimate version.

To begin, we simmered the sweet potatoes in heavy cream (similar to the method we used in our Sweet Potato Casserole with Marshmallows; see page 93). The sweet potatoes were soft (not mealy) and absorbed the flavors of the dairy mixture, but they were incredibly rich and had a one-note flavor. We tried using heavy cream combined with other dairy ingredients, including plain yogurt, sour cream, and buttermilk. Buttermilk won out for the pleasant, light tang it added to the dish. Unlike regular potatoes, sweet potatoes don't soak up moisture, so they required only half as much dairy as regular potatoes (just 1½ cups for 5 pounds of sweet potatoes).

Now that the sweet potato mixture was pre-cooked, it was easy to assemble our casserole for baking. We mixed in crisp bacon for salt and smoke, cayenne for kick, cheddar cheese for richness, and chopped scallions for a fresh bite. We topped the seasoned sweet potatoes with coarse bread crumbs and more cheddar, then popped the casserole into the oven. After just 15 minutes it emerged golden and bubbly, with a rich, savory flavor that would draw a crowd at just about any gathering.

SPICY SWEET POTATO AND BACON CASSEROLE

SERVES 10

For milder heat, reduce the amount of cayenne to ¼ teaspoon.

- 4 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 2½ cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 8 slices bacon, chopped
- 1 onion, minced
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper (see note above)
- 5 pounds sweet potatoes (8 medium), peeled, halved lengthwise, and sliced thin
- ¾ cup heavy cream
- ¾ cup buttermilk
- 2½ teaspoons salt
- 5 scallions, sliced thin

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 425 degrees. Pulse the bread, melted butter, and ½ cup of the cheese in a food processor until coarsely ground, about 6 pulses. Set aside.
2. Cook the bacon in a Dutch oven over medium heat until crisp, about 8 minutes. Transfer the bacon to a paper towel-lined plate and pour off all but 1 tablespoon of the fat. Cook the onion in the fat until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and cayenne and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in the sweet potatoes, cream, buttermilk, and salt. Reduce the heat to medium-low and cook, covered, until the potatoes are just tender, about 30 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the remaining 2 cups cheese, the cooked bacon, and 4 of the scallions. Transfer the mixture to a 13 by 9-inch baking dish.

3. Top the sweet potato mixture evenly with the reserved bread crumbs. Bake until the crumbs are golden brown, about 15 minutes. Cool for 10 minutes, then sprinkle with the remaining 1 scallion. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 2. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 1 day. Refrigerate the breadcrumb mixture separately in an airtight container for up to 2 days. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 425 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap, cover the baking dish with foil, and bake until hot and bubbly, about 40 minutes. Uncover and proceed as directed in step 3.

Classic Green Bean Casserole

Green bean casserole was originally created by the Campbell Soup Company in 1955, solely to feature one of its star products, condensed cream of mushroom soup. That original recipe might be worth a spin, if it weren't made entirely of processed convenience foods, like frozen green beans and canned fried onions. We knew that with a little tinkering, we could revitalize this buffet and holiday table staple and come up with a casserole of tender, fresh green beans, creamy "sauce," and crisp, savory onion topping.

We began the makeover armed with bushels of green beans. Adding raw beans to the almost-finished sauce so both could finish cooking simultaneously turned the beans a dull green and made them mushy. Steaming the beans gave us the same results. Finally, we tried blanching (dropping the raw beans into boiling salted water), cooking them

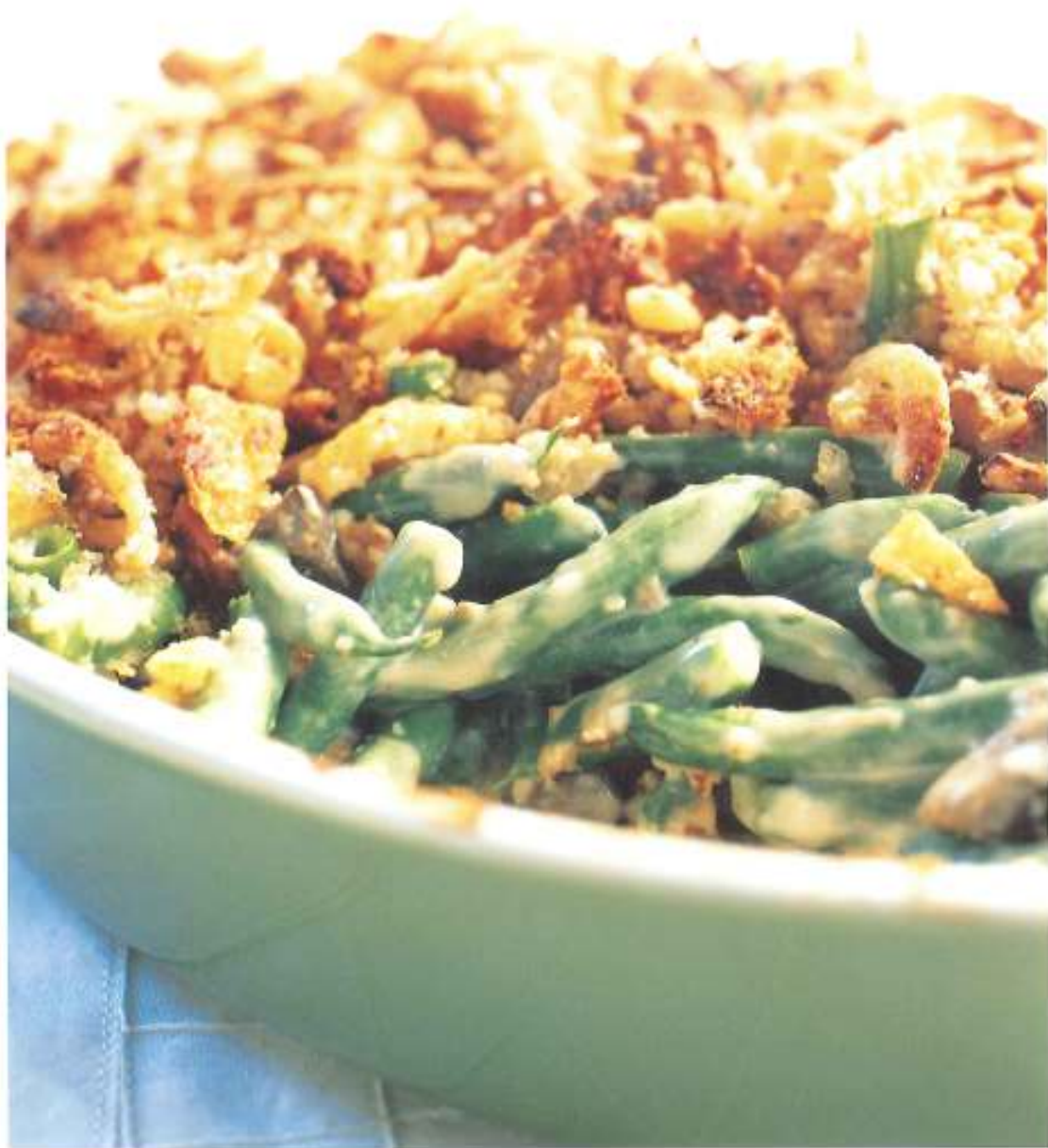
until tender, and moving them to an ice water bath to stop the cooking. This worked; the beans were crisp-tender, bright green, and nicely seasoned.

Like Campbell's cream of mushroom soup, our sauce needed a distinct mushroom flavor and rich, velvety consistency. For a knockoff version, we sautéed sliced mushrooms in butter, added flour, then poured in some chicken broth. To finish the sauce, we added some heavy cream. The flavor was great, with just the right balance of savory and creamy. For additional flavor, we experimented with exotic wild mushrooms, but tasters didn't notice a difference. They did notice, however, that they liked the rustic texture of unevenly broken mushroom pieces, so we stopped cutting elegant slices and simply broke each white mushroom into pieces with our fingers.

Seeing that the beans and sauce were improved, we moved on to the fried-onion topping. The usual topping, Durkee's canned fried onions (now made by French's), is just what it sounds like: thinly cut onions, dredged in flour, deep-fried, and salted. We tried the same thing and loved the flavor—but not the time, mess, or half gallon of oil we went through.

Since this was a side dish, we wanted to keep the preparation simple and speedy. We attempted topping the casserole with fresh bread crumbs only but got a mixed response from our tasters—they loved the crunch but missed the onion flavor. To get some onion flavor into the topping both quickly and conveniently, we would have to cave in.

In our next test, we secretly added canned fried onions to the bread crumbs. When the casserole came out of the oven, tasters instantly noticed the topping's great taste and superbly crisp texture. At last, our green bean casserole—with fresh, tender beans, a from-scratch sauce, and a crunchy, oniony topping—was a success.



CLASSIC GREEN BEAN CASSEROLE

SERVES 12

This recipe can be halved and baked in an 8-inch square baking dish. If making a half batch, reduce the cooking time of the sauce in step 3 to about 6 minutes (reduce to 1¾ cups) and the baking time in step 4 to 10 minutes.

TOPPING

- 4 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅓ teaspoon pepper
- 1 (6-ounce) can fried onions (about 3 cups)

BEANS AND SAUCE

- Salt
- 2 pounds green beans, trimmed and halved
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 pound white mushrooms, broken into ½-inch pieces
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- Pepper
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1½ cups heavy cream

1. FOR THE TOPPING: Pulse the bread, butter, salt, and pepper together in a food processor until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs, about 10 pulses. Transfer to a large bowl and toss with the onions; set aside.

2. FOR THE BEANS AND SAUCE: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 425 degrees. Fill a large bowl with ice water.

Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a Dutch oven. Add 2 tablespoons salt and the beans and cook until bright green and crisp-tender, about 6 minutes. Drain the beans and transfer to the ice water. Drain and spread the beans on a paper towel-lined baking sheet.

3. Melt the butter over medium-high heat in the now-empty Dutch oven. Add the mushrooms, garlic, ¾ teaspoon salt, and ⅓ teaspoon pepper and cook until the mushrooms release their moisture and the liquid has evaporated, about 6 minutes. Add the flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 1 minute. Stir in the broth and bring to a simmer. Add the cream, reduce the heat to medium, and simmer until the sauce has thickened and reduced to 3½ cups, about 12 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Add the green beans to the sauce and stir until evenly coated. Arrange the green bean mixture in an even layer in a 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Sprinkle with the topping and bake until the top is golden brown and the sauce is bubbling around the edges, about 15 minutes. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Refrigerate the bread-crumbs topping (minus the onions) in an airtight container for up to 1 day. Prepare the recipe through step 3. Combine the green beans and cooled sauce in a 13 by 9-inch baking dish, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 425 degrees. Combine the bread crumbs and onions. Remove the plastic wrap and bake the casserole for 10 minutes. Sprinkle with the topping and bake as directed in step 4.

Southern Corn Pudding

Most corn pudding recipes aren't much more than a can of creamed corn, milk, heavy cream, and an egg or two. Baked until firm, the pudding tastes of rubbery canned corn. We wanted to keep the casserole close to its simple roots but ditch the can in favor of fresh corn, thereby boosting the pudding's flavor. We also wanted to improve upon the typically gluey texture of this dish.

We originally thought that this baked custard would be a no-brainer. Many Southern cookbooks include recipes for corn pudding, and they all seem to boil down to varying combinations of the four main ingredients. Seeing that this was the common thread, we were surprised when our first puddings were all failures. Every single pudding curdled and wept, leaving behind a pool of watery liquid on the surface. While puddings cooked in a water bath fared better than those exposed directly to the oven heat—we decided to keep this gentle cooking method because it helps preserve the pudding's moist texture—it was clear to us that the water bath alone was not enough to produce a perfectly smooth, tender custard. It seemed obvious that the corn was the source of the extra liquid; the question was how to get rid of the corn's moisture without losing that fresh corn flavor.

After experimenting with various options, we settled on a simple two-step approach. First, we cooked fresh corn kernels in a little butter until the moisture in the pan had almost evaporated. Then we drew out a bit more of the kernels' liquid by simmering them in heavy cream; heavy cream, unlike milk or even light cream, can be cooked at a boil without curdling. After simmering, we had a thick mixture that, once baked, made for a dish with great flavor and without any seeping liquid.

Now we were ready to move on to the final steps of balancing ingredients and flavors. The first thing we noticed about our now smooth and creamy custard was the corn—there was too much of it, interfering with the smooth texture. We thought that perhaps pureeing some of the corn would smooth out the texture without sacrificing any of the corn flavor. Pureeing turned out to be overkill; we wanted the pudding to have some texture, and now it didn't have enough.

As an in-between solution, we grated some of the corn directly off the cobs on the large holes of

PREPARING THE CORN



1. Stand the corn upright inside a large bowl and carefully cut the kernels from the cobs, using a paring knife.



2. Grate an ear of corn on the large holes of a box grater to release more corn flavor and starch.



3. Before discarding the cobs, scrape any remaining milk from them, using the back of a butter knife.



a box grater, and we used a butter knife to scrape the remaining “milk” off the cobs. This approach gave us just what we were looking for in terms of flavor as well as texture. A touch of sugar drew out the sweetness of the corn, and cayenne pepper added the final kick.

SOUTHERN CORN PUDDING

SERVES 6

Fresh corn is essential for the flavor of this savory pudding; do not substitute frozen corn. This dish benefits from a 10-minute rest before serving and is best served the day it is made.

- 6 ears corn, husks and silk removed
(see note above)
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup heavy cream
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups whole milk
- 4 large eggs, room temperature
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 8-inch square baking dish. Cover the bottom of a roasting pan with a dish towel. Bring a kettle of water to a boil.

2. Following the photos on page 99, cut the kernels from 5 of the ears of corn into a large bowl, using a paring knife. Grate the remaining 1 ear of corn on the large holes of a box grater into the same bowl. Using the back of a butter knife, scrape any remaining milk from the cobs into the bowl.

3. Melt the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Stir in the corn mixture and cook, stirring occasionally, until the corn is bright yellow and

the liquid has almost evaporated, about 5 minutes. Stir in the cream, salt, sugar, and cayenne and continue to cook until the mixture has thickened and a spoon leaves a trail when dragged on the bottom of the pan, about 5 minutes longer.

4. Transfer the corn mixture to a medium bowl. Whisk in the milk, then the eggs and cornstarch, until thoroughly combined.

5. Pour the mixture into the prepared baking dish and set inside the roasting pan. Place the roasting pan in the oven and carefully pour boiling water into the pan until it reaches halfway up the sides of the dish. Bake the pudding until the top is lightly browned in spots and the center is soft but set, 20 to 25 minutes.

6. Remove the baking dish from the water bath and serve.

Sweet Noodle Kugel

In Jewish cuisine, the term *kugel* defines a broad category of eggy baked puddings traditionally served with the main course. One such rendering is sweet noodle kugel, a mixture of egg noodles, butter, raisins, cinnamon, and nuts, all bound with an egg-cottage cheese mixture. This Jewish comfort food often gets a bad rap for being a tasteless, starchy nest of noodles weighed down by goopy dairy products. We aimed to create a rich, full-flavored kugel that wasn't overly dense—one that would have dinner guests reaching for extra helpings.

We did some research and tested a number of recipes that used the standard cottage cheese, raisins, and cinnamon, plus some that incorporated other ingredients, like applesauce and preserves.

After testing several batches, we decided to stay with the classic recipe. We preferred the light flavor and curdy consistency of the cottage cheese, the raisins' small bursts of sweetness, and the cinnamon's addition of depth and warmth. Our tests, however, revealed we would need to fix the dairy element of the dish; in too many recipes the cottage cheese was the dominant factor, becoming heavy and gloppy. We also wanted to make our kugel more flavorful.

Sticking with tradition, we kept the cottage cheese but turned to other types of dairy in hopes of lightening up the dish. We tried different combinations of sour cream, cottage cheese, and cream cheese. The mix of sour cream and cottage cheese proved to be watery, overly tangy, and not rich enough, and sour cream and cream cheese together created a dense, overly rich kugel that was still too tangy. Using just cottage cheese and cream cheese created a bland disaster. A mix of all three, however, gave us a good balance of tangy sour cream, substantial cottage cheese, and rich-textured cream cheese. When we added some fresh lemon zest and a cup of golden raisins, we had a rich dairy filling with a touch of lightness and a good bit of sweetness—exactly what we wanted.

For some textural contrast, we looked into the traditional kugel toppings. We opted for a sweet, crunchy nut topping, similar to a streusel without the flour. While testing different types of sugar in our topping, we discovered that granulated sugar was cloying and plain. Light brown sugar was good but lacked a deep enough flavor; dark brown sugar was the winner, with its deep molasses flavor. When we added crunchy walnuts, we had the extra boost of texture and flavor we were after.

SWEET NOODLE KUGEL WITH RAISINS AND WALNUTS

SERVES 12

We like the clean, sweet flavor of golden raisins in this kugel; however, regular raisins will work just fine. This noodle kugel is good warm or chilled. Low-fat sour cream, cottage cheese, or cream cheese can be substituted for one of the dairy products, but do not use low-fat versions for two or all three, as the kugel will be dry.

TOPPING

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup packed dark brown sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped walnuts
- 4 tablespoons ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

FILLING

- Salt
- 1 pound extra-wide egg noodles
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 cups sour cream (see note above)
- 2 cups cottage cheese (see note above)
- 1 pound cream cheese (see note above)
- 2 large eggs plus 2 egg yolks
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh lemon zest
- 1 cup golden raisins (see note above)

1. FOR THE TOPPING: Combine the topping ingredients in a small bowl; set aside.

2. FOR THE FILLING: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 13 by 9-inch baking dish; set aside.

3. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the noodles and cook until almost tender but still firm to the bite, about

6 minutes. Drain the noodles, transfer to a large bowl, and toss with the butter. Cool to room temperature.

4. Meanwhile, in a large bowl, beat the sour cream, cottage cheese, and cream cheese together with an electric mixer on medium speed until smooth, 1 to 3 minutes. Beat in the eggs, egg yolks, sugar, vanilla, and lemon zest until combined, scraping down the sides of the bowl as needed.

5. Add the cream cheese mixture and raisins to the cooled noodles and toss to combine. Transfer the mixture to the prepared baking dish. Sprinkle the topping evenly over the noodles.

6. Bake until the noodles on top are golden and crispy, 40 to 45 minutes. Serve warm, or refrigerate and serve cold. (The kugel can be covered in plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 5. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap, cover the baking dish with foil, and bake until hot, about 20 minutes. Remove the foil and continue to bake until the top is golden, about 25 minutes longer.

Tomato Pie

Bright red, juicy tomatoes are the ultimate celebration of summer's bounty, and our discovery of tomato pie took the summer fruit to another stratosphere. This recipe was popularized by the late novelist and food writer Laurie Colwin, who first took a bite of tomato pie at a Connecticut tea shop. Layers of fresh tomato were topped with herbs, shredded

cheddar cheese, and a lemon juice-mayonnaise dressing and baked inside a buttery crust.

For such a simple ingredient list, we quickly learned that a lot can go wrong. Many recipes gave us a soupy mess of mushy tomatoes resting in a pool of liquid that made the top and bottom crust soggy. We wanted a pie that highlighted the flavor of the tomatoes without compromising their texture, and a crisp, tender crust.

We began with the tomatoes. We considered several varieties but opted for beefsteaks for their neutral flavor and size (smaller tomatoes would require too much slicing and time spent assembling). We knew salting the tomatoes was key to removing extra moisture and ensuring undiluted flavor, as well as a crust that cooked through and stayed crisp. For extra insurance, after salting we dabbed the tomato slices with paper towels.

Many recipes call for pouring a sauce made from mayonnaise and lemon juice on top of the tomatoes before baking. The lemon juice seemed unnecessary since the tomatoes contained enough acidity, but we held on to the mayonnaise for its creaminess.

Next, we moved on to the crust. We used our standard buttery, flaky pie crust recipe, which uses a combination of butter and shortening. The butter contributes flavor while the shortening improves the texture. For the perfect flakiness and so we didn't overcook the dough, we first mixed the fat and flour in a food processor, then incorporated ice water by hand. As in the original tomato pie recipes, we cut round vent holes in the top crust to help steam escape and minimize the wateriness.

We were ready to assemble. Adding all the tomatoes and topping them with the cheese and mayonnaise left all the flavor floating on the top. We decided to mix the mayonnaise and cheese, then layer this mixture with the tomatoes to evenly distribute the flavors throughout. Placing a layer of cheese over the bottom was a smart move, giving

our pie a nice moisture barrier that would keep the crust crisp. For a fresh herb flavor, we added scallions, which held on to their color and flavor better than did other herbs, like basil and dill.

Finally, we were ready to bake. Unfortunately, after 40 minutes in a 450-degree oven, the mayonnaise in the filling had curdled, looking more like cottage cheese than custard. We decided to start the pie at the same high heat in order to set the crust, then lower the temperature to protect the filling, much as we would with a custard pie. After 40 minutes and a brief rest, we were crestfallen yet again. Would cornstarch, which helps prevent egg proteins in cooked custard from clumping, help? Indeed it did. Four teaspoons added to the mayonnaise and cheese mixture produced a creamy pie.

Slicing through the crisp, flaky crust—on top and bottom—revealed perfectly cooked tomatoes infused with flavor. We knew right away we had a winner.

TOMATO PIE

SERVES 8

We prefer the buttery flavor and flakiness of our Double-Crust Pie Dough (page 106); however you can substitute store-bought pie dough if desired. This dish is best served the day it is made.

- 1 recipe Double-Crust Pie Dough
(recipe follows; see note above)
- 2 pounds beefsteak tomatoes (4 large),
cored and cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch slices
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup mayonnaise
- 4 teaspoons cornstarch
- 4 scallions, sliced thin

1. On a lightly floured counter, roll one disk of dough into a 12-inch circle. Loosely roll the dough

around the rolling pin, then gently unroll it over a 9-inch pie plate. Lift the dough and gently press it into the pie plate, letting the excess dough hang over the edge; cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 30 minutes. Roll the other disk of dough into a 12-inch circle on a lightly floured counter, then transfer to a parchment-lined baking sheet; cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 30 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, spread the tomatoes over several layers of paper towels, sprinkle with the salt, and let sit for 30 minutes. Gently press the tops of the tomatoes dry with more paper towels.

3. Adjust an oven rack to the lowest position, place a foil-lined rimmed baking sheet on the rack, and heat the oven to 450 degrees.

4. Mix together 1 cup of the cheese, the mayonnaise, and cornstarch in a medium bowl until well combined. Sprinkle the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cheese over the bottom of the dough-lined pie plate, then lay one-third of the tomatoes evenly on top of the cheese. Spread half of the mayonnaise mixture over the tomatoes, then sprinkle with half of the scallions. Layer with another third of the tomatoes, the remaining mayonnaise mixture, and the remaining scallions. Top with the remaining tomatoes.

5. Loosely roll the second piece of dough around the rolling pin and gently unroll it over the pie. Following the photos on page 106, trim, tuck, and crimp the edges, then cut four oval-shaped vent holes in the top, each about 2 inches long and 1 inch wide.

6. Place the pie on the heated baking sheet, bake for 10 minutes, then lower the oven temperature to 325 degrees and bake until the top crust is golden brown, about 40 minutes. Cool the pie on a wire rack for at least 3 hours before serving.



DOUBLE-CRUST PIE DOUGH

MAKES ENOUGH FOR ONE 9-INCH PIE

If you don't have a food processor, you can make our Double-Crust Pie Dough by hand. Freeze the butter in its stick form until very firm. Combine the flour, sugar, and salt in a large bowl, add the chilled shortening, and press into the flour, using a fork. Grate the frozen butter on the large holes of a box grater into the flour mixture, then cut the mixture together, using two butter knives, until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Proceed as directed in step 2 of the recipe.

- 2½ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 8 tablespoons vegetable shortening, cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled
- 12 tablespoons (1½ sticks) unsalted butter, cut into ¼-inch pieces and chilled
- 6–8 tablespoons ice water

1. Process the flour, sugar, and salt together in a food processor until combined. Scatter the

shortening over the top and process until the mixture resembles coarse sand, about 10 seconds. Scatter the butter pieces over the top and pulse the butter into the flour until the mixture is pale yellow and resembles coarse crumbs, about 10 pulses. Transfer the mixture to a medium bowl.

2. Sprinkle 6 tablespoons of the ice water over the mixture. With a rubber spatula, use a folding motion to mix. Press down on the dough using the flat side of the spatula until the dough sticks together, adding up to 2 tablespoons more ice water if the dough does not come together.

3. Divide the dough into two even pieces and flatten each into a 4-inch disk. Wrap the disks tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 1 hour before rolling. (The dough can be refrigerated, wrapped tightly with plastic wrap, for up to 2 days, or frozen for up to 1 month. Thaw the frozen dough completely before rolling out.)

PREPARING THE TOP CRUST



1. After placing the top crust and trimming the dough, press the top and bottom crusts together; tuck the edges underneath, and crimp the dough.



2. Then cut four oval-shaped vent holes, each about 2 inches long and 1 inch wide, in the top crust.

Drunken Beans

Drunken beans, or *frijoles borrachos*, are pinto beans cooked with smoky pork (salt pork in traditional recipes and bacon in modern adaptations), onion, garlic, spices, and, of course, beer (hence the “drunken” part). Spicy, saucy beans enhanced with some suds? This dish had crowd-pleaser written all over it. Unfortunately, the recipes we tested produced bland, boring beans. With so many aromatic ingredients—and the kick from the brew—this side dish should be flavorful, meaty, and spicy.

We started rebuilding this recipe with the bacon. Although our tasters liked the smoky flavor of the bacon, they craved something meatier, and spicy chorizo sausage fit the bill perfectly.

To preserve the chorizo's texture, we browned it, then removed it from the pot while we sautéed our aromatics in the rendered fat. Onion, garlic, oregano, and chili powder gave us the best combination for a rich flavor base. To add back some of the smokiness we lost when we ditched the bacon, we added 2 teaspoons of minced chipotle chiles. The chipotles also provided the much-needed kick that one would expect from a south-of-the-border side dish.

Most recipes we found used dried beans that had been soaked to ensure even cooking. We used our quick-soak method, soaking the dried beans for just an hour, and prepared another batch of drunken beans. Tasters preferred the deep, meaty flavor of the cooked dried beans in this recipe to that of canned beans, so we went with dried. Sticking with tradition, we then simmered the beans in a dark, malty Mexican beer (such as Negra Modelo). An all-beer simmer made for über-boozy beans, so we toned it down by replacing some of the beer with water. Finished with a little lime juice and cilantro, our beans were now every bit as exciting as their name.

DRUNKEN BEANS

SERVES 8

We prefer a dark Mexican beer, such as Negra Modelo, but any lager or ale will work in this recipe. Andouille sausage may be substituted for the chorizo. If you're planning ahead, you can soak the beans in 6 cups water overnight (then skip step 1).

- 1 pound dried pinto beans, rinsed and picked over (see note above)
- 8 ounces chorizo sausage, cut into ½-inch pieces (see note above)
- 1 onion, minced
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano

- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 5 cups water
- 1 (12-ounce) bottle dark Mexican beer (see note above)
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons minced canned chipotle chiles in adobo
- Salt
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice

1. Place the beans and 6 cups water in a large Dutch oven. Bring to a boil over high heat and cook for 5 minutes. Remove the pot from the heat, cover, and let sit for 1 hour. Drain the beans. Clean and dry the pot.

2. Cook the sausage in the Dutch oven over medium heat until browned, about 8 minutes; transfer to a paper towel-lined plate. Add the onion to the pot and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic, oregano, and chili powder and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the drained beans, water, and beer and bring to a simmer. Reduce the heat to medium-low, cover, and cook until the beans are just soft, about 1 hour.

3. Stir in the brown sugar, chipotles, and 1 teaspoon salt. Continue to simmer, uncovered, until the beans are completely tender and the sauce is slightly thickened, about 50 minutes longer. Add the browned sausage to the pot and simmer until the sausage is tender, about 10 minutes. (If the mixture becomes too thick, add water until the mixture reaches the desired consistency.) Stir in the cilantro and lime juice and season with salt to taste. Serve. (The beans can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 4 days.)



Block Party Beans

Sometimes called calico beans or seven-bean casserole, block party beans are a perennial potluck and backyard barbecue favorite. They're a snap to make, they make enough to feed multitudes (hence the name), and they have definite crowd appeal. The recipe is pretty basic: brown ground beef, stir in canned beans and condiments, and bake.

Judging by the recipes we found, the dish seemed more like an exercise in can opening than actual cooking. We set out to pare down the ingredient list and focus on flavor.

First, we had to decide which beans to invite to the party. Almost every recipe we found started with canned baked beans, canned green beans, and canned lima beans. Other typical additions were canned navy, pinto, kidney, or black beans. We kept the recipe true to its simple nature and stuck with canned beans. We ditched the canned baked beans and used plain beans, which tasters found to have a fresher flavor. Instead of canned green beans and canned lima beans, we added fresh green beans and a box of frozen lima beans to the pot halfway through cooking so they didn't become dingy. Together, the two added crunch, freshness, and creaminess.

To make our own sauce, we mixed tomato sauce with brown sugar (for its pleasing hint of molasses), bottled barbecue sauce (which added a smoky note), and red pepper flakes and cider vinegar for a bright finish.

Next we turned to the meat. After various tests with sausage and bacon, we found the traditional choice was right—straight-up ground beef, which we seasoned with onion and garlic.

We baked everything in a Dutch oven and found that the flavors were excellent—beefy, sweet, tangy—and 100 percent party-worthy.

BLOCK PARTY BEANS

SERVES 12

For a festive presentation worthy of its name, we recommend using beans of varying shapes and colors, such as kidney beans, navy beans, black beans, and pinto beans.

- 2½ pounds 85 percent lean ground beef
- 1 onion, minced
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 (15.5-ounce) cans beans, drained and rinsed (see note above)
- 2 (28-ounce) cans tomato sauce
- ½ cup barbecue sauce
- ½ cup packed dark brown sugar
- ¼ cup cider vinegar
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- Salt and pepper
- 12 ounces green beans, trimmed and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 (10-ounce) package frozen lima beans

1. Adjust an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Cook the beef in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat until the beef is no longer pink, about 8 minutes. Drain the beef in a colander, discarding the drippings, then return the beef to the pot. Add the onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the beans, tomato sauce, barbecue sauce, sugar, vinegar, red pepper flakes, ½ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper and bring to a boil.

2. Transfer the pot to the oven and cook, covered, until the sauce is slightly thickened, about 30 minutes. Add the green beans and lima beans and continue to cook, covered, for 30 minutes longer. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve. (The beans can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 3 days.)



SPICY SPAGHETTI PIE

Crowd-Control Casseroles

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Chicken, Broccoli, and Ziti Casserole

Chicken, broccoli, and ziti tossed in a creamy sauce is such a popular dish on restaurant menus everywhere that it makes sense to turn it into a crowd-pleasing casserole. Adding a blanket of crunchy bread crumbs should make it that much better, but when we tried recipes for this casserole, what came out of the oven was a mess. The pasta was limp, the chicken was dry and tough, and the broccoli was gray and waterlogged. We wanted our version of this dish to have it all: moist chicken, crisp-tender broccoli, and firm ziti served in a cheesy sauce that stayed creamy after baking.

We started with the sauce. Some recipes call for a reduced cream sauce, which tasted great but made this casserole too rich. Other recipes use a béchamel sauce (made by cooking butter, flour, and milk until thickened), which had a creamy consistency when baked and wasn't too rich. We boosted the flavor by sautéing onion, lots of garlic (six cloves), and red pepper flakes in the butter before we added the flour and milk, and by replacing some of the milk with chicken broth. Parmesan is the traditional cheese in this dish, but it wasn't adding enough flavor. Asiago has a sharper, more pungent flavor that stayed strong when baked.

We quickly found that strips of boneless, skinless chicken breast needed to be precooked before going into the casserole to prevent the other ingredients from overcooking by the time the chicken was done. Browned chicken became tough and dried out in the oven, but poaching the chicken in the sauce flavored the meat and kept it moist.

Keeping the pasta from overcooking in the oven took more than just draining it when still slightly underdone. We also had to rinse it with cold water to stop the cooking. The best way to precook the

broccoli was in the microwave. Minced garlic, more Asiago, and fresh bread crumbs created a topping that was as flavorful as the casserole itself.

CHICKEN, BROCCOLI, AND ZITI CASSEROLE

SERVES 8

For a spicier casserole, add more red pepper flakes.

- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 4 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 8 garlic cloves, minced
- 2½ cups grated Asiago cheese
- Salt
- 1 pound ziti
- 1 onion, minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes (see note above)
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ½ cup white wine
- 3 cups whole milk
- 2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 4 (6-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed and cut crosswise into ¼-inch slices
- ¾ pound broccoli florets, cut into 1-inch pieces
- Pepper

1. Melt 2 tablespoons of the butter in a small saucepan over low heat. Pulse the bread, 2 of the minced garlic cloves, ½ cup of the Asiago, and the melted butter in a food processor until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs, about 10 pulses. Transfer to a medium bowl; set aside.

2. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and

the pasta and cook, stirring often, until nearly tender. Drain the pasta and rinse with cold water until cool. Set aside.

3. Wipe the pot dry. Melt the remaining 3 tablespoons butter in the pot over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the remaining 6 minced garlic cloves and the red pepper flakes and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in the flour and cook until golden, about 1 minute. Slowly whisk in the wine and cook until the liquid is almost evaporated, about 1 minute. Slowly whisk in the milk and broth and bring to a boil. Add the chicken and simmer until no longer pink, about 5 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the remaining 2 cups Asiago until melted.

4. Microwave the broccoli in a large bowl, covered with plastic wrap, on high until bright green and nearly tender, 2 to 4 minutes. Stir the broccoli and pasta into the chicken mixture and season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to a 13 by 9-inch baking dish.

5. Sprinkle the chicken-pasta mixture evenly with the reserved bread crumbs and bake until the sauce is bubbling around the edges and the topping is golden brown, 20 to 25 minutes. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 4. Cool slightly, about 30 minutes. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 1 day. Refrigerate the bread crumbs separately in an airtight container. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap, lightly spray a large sheet of foil with vegetable oil spray, and cover the baking dish tightly. Bake until warm, 15 to 20 minutes. Remove the foil and proceed with the recipe from step 5.

Best-Ever Baked Ziti

What potluck dinner would be complete without baked ziti? Sure, this Italian American dish sounds simple enough. Combine cooked pasta with tomato sauce, then mix in cheese, sprinkle more cheese on top, and bake. But if this dish is so easy to prepare, why are most versions so unappealing, rife with overcooked ziti in a dull, grainy sauce and with a rubbery mass of mozzarella on top? We wanted to develop a terrific recipe for the best baked ziti ever—tender noodles, tasty tomato sauce, and gooey cheese.

The first problem to tackle was the sauce. We didn't want to spend all day hovering over the stove, so we needed a sauce that was big on flavor and light on prep. Whole canned tomatoes and crushed tomatoes both had good flavor but took a long time to cook down. Canned sauce provided the thick sauciness we wanted but lacked bright tomato flavor. We finally struck the ideal balance by adding a can of diced tomatoes. Dried oregano, simmered in the sauce, released plenty of flavor; fresh basil, added off the heat, infused the sauce with its pungent aroma.

With the tomato sauce tasting great, we added the ricotta, but a familiar problem reared its head: Rather than baking up creamy and rich, the ricotta was grainy and dulled the sauce. We tried substituting various dairy products; heavy cream added lushness but dulled the flavor just as much as ricotta, and cream cheese added too much tang. We went out on a limb and experimented with cottage cheese. At last, success! Its pillowy curds have a texture similar to that of ricotta, but cottage cheese has a much creamier consistency and a lightly tangy flavor. The sauce was still too loose when it came out of the oven, so we added two eggs—a common baked ziti ingredient—and a bit of heavy cream thickened with cornstarch to the

cottage cheese. The combination of this milky, tangy mixture and the bright tomato sauce thrilled our tasters. We now had a sauce that was bright, rich, and creamy—all at the same time.

To conquer the soggy pasta problem, we made sure to undercook our pasta, so that after the casserole had baked, the ziti would be perfectly al dente. After several tests, we realized that the pasta was absorbing sauce while it baked, meaning there was less sauce in the finished dish. To avoid dry, crumbly ziti, we made sure to use almost twice the amount of sauce (8 cups) than most recipes use. Now we had perfectly al dente pasta in the baked dish and plenty of sauce to keep the whole thing moist.

The only remaining question was how to deal with the cheese. Grated cheese congeals into a mass that looks terribly unappetizing on the buffet table. Instead of shredding the mozzarella, we tried cutting it into small cubes, thinking that they would melt into distinct but delicious little pockets of cheese. We added half of the cheese to the sauce, sprinkled the rest over the top, and pushed our baking dish into the oven. This strategy yielded a hot, bubbly success. The cubes on top remained perfectly distributed, and the casserole below was dotted with gooey bits of cheese.

BEST-EVER BAKED ZITI

SERVES 10

Part-skim mozzarella can be substituted for the whole milk mozzarella, but avoid preshredded cheese, which does not work in this recipe.

- 1 pound whole milk or 1 percent cottage cheese
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1½ cups grated Parmesan cheese
- Salt
- 1 pound ziti
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

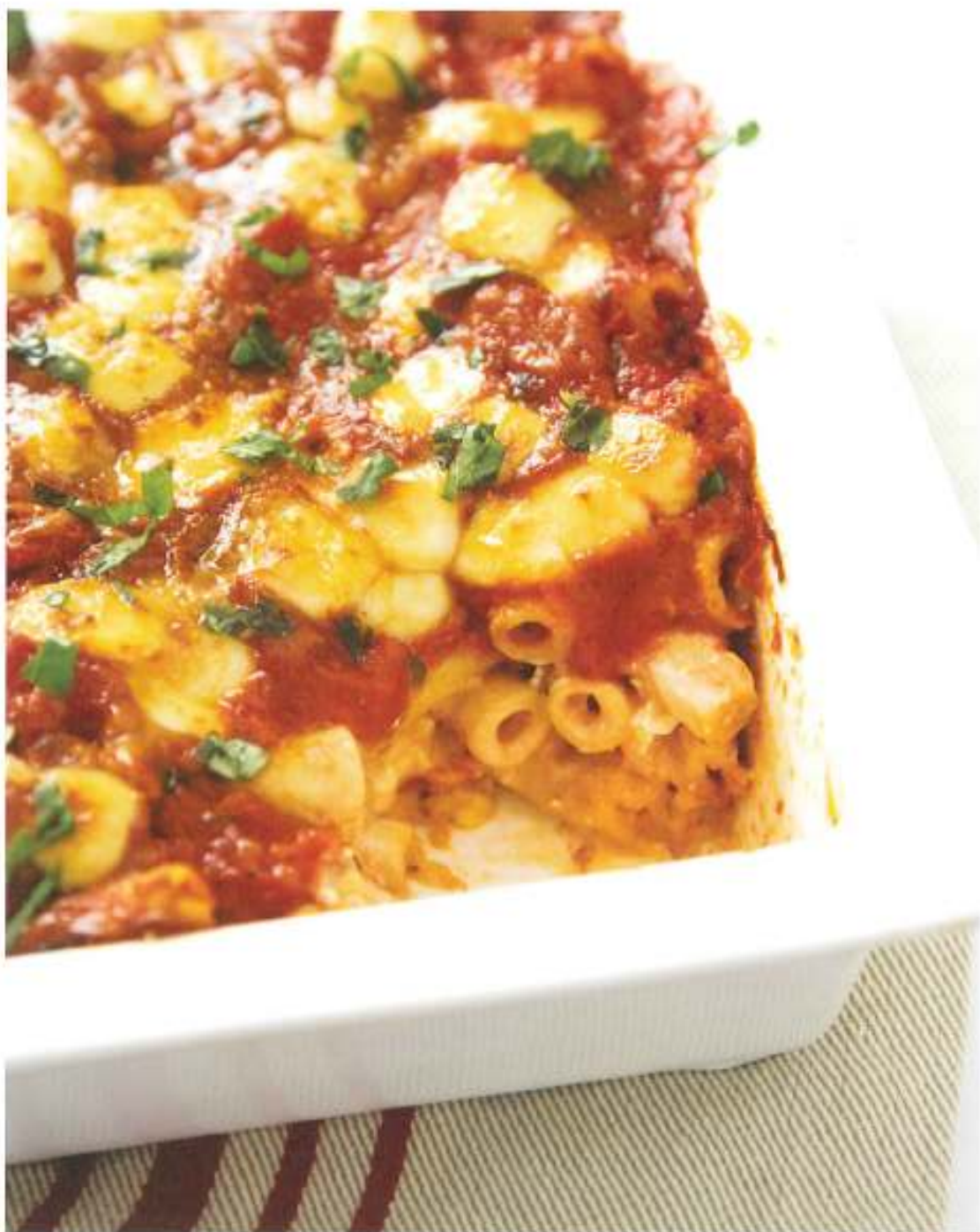
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 (28-ounce) can tomato sauce
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- ½ cup plus 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- Pepper
- 1 cup heavy cream
- ¾ teaspoon cornstarch
- 8 ounces whole milk mozzarella cheese, cut into ¼-inch pieces (see note above)

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Whisk the cottage cheese, eggs, and 1 cup of the Parmesan together in a medium bowl; set aside.

2. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a Dutch oven. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta and cook, stirring often, until nearly tender. Drain the pasta and leave in the colander (do not wash the Dutch oven).

3. Meanwhile, heat the oil and garlic in a large skillet over medium heat until fragrant but not brown, about 2 minutes. Stir in the tomato sauce, diced tomatoes, and oregano and simmer until thickened, about 10 minutes. Off the heat, stir in ½ cup of the basil and the sugar, then season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Stir the cream and cornstarch together in a small bowl; transfer the mixture to the now-empty Dutch oven. Bring to a simmer over medium heat and cook until thickened, 3 to 4 minutes. Off the heat, add the cottage cheese mixture, 1 cup of the tomato sauce, and half of the mozzarella, then stir to combine. Add the pasta and stir to coat thoroughly. Transfer the pasta mixture to a



13 by 9-inch baking dish and spread the remaining tomato sauce evenly over the top. Sprinkle the remaining mozzarella and the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Parmesan evenly over the top of the dish.

5. Lightly spray a large sheet of foil with vegetable oil spray and cover the baking dish tightly. Bake for 30 minutes, remove the foil, and continue to bake until the cheese is bubbling and beginning to brown, about 30 minutes longer. Cool for 10 minutes before sprinkling with the remaining 2 tablespoons basil. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 4. Cool slightly, about 30 minutes. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap and proceed with the recipe from step 5, baking the ziti for 40 minutes before removing the foil.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Garlic Presses: Hand mincing garlic is a chore many cooks avoid by using a garlic press. Our favorite garlic press is Kuhn Rikon's Easy-Squeeze Garlic Press (\$20). Though its plastic material might seem less sturdy than all the metal models we tested, this garlic press performed best—its longer handle and shorter distance between the pivot point and the plunger help make pressing less work. The deeply curving plastic handles are also easier to squeeze together than straight handles. Another favorite is the Trudeau Garlic Press (\$11.99)—with solid construction, it is sturdy, easy to use, and priced reasonably.

Spicy Spaghetti Pie

A spaghetti supper is satisfying, easy to prepare, and economical. But dishing it up can be a messy endeavor. Enter spaghetti pie. Essentially, it's baked pasta, but with a hook: The sauced, cheesy pasta is packed into a pie plate and baked until browned, bubbly, and sliceable. And it's portable, too—just the thing for hauling to a friend's house.

Once we started looking, we found a seemingly endless number of spaghetti pie recipes. Sadly, those we prepared were disappointing: bland-flavored, loose-textured, or both. And none sliced well, which we considered a must.

While most recipes make do with jarred pasta sauce, we knew a fresh-made sauce would pack more flavor. From previous testing we knew that a flavorful pasta sauce could be whipped up in minutes from canned tomatoes briefly simmered with sautéed garlic and red pepper flakes. We tried both crushed and diced tomatoes, and testers much preferred the chunkier texture of the latter. Chopped fresh basil added some much-needed brightness.

Some of our collected spaghetti pie recipes included ground beef in the sauce, but we thought it contributed little flavor and made the dish greasy. Looking for other options, we thought Italian sausage wasn't bad, but spicy deli pepperoni proved better. Fried crisp and simmered along with the sauce, the pepperoni provided both deep flavor and a chewy texture to the pie.

We also found that in some recipes the tomato sauce is enriched with cream. At first we considered this to be overkill, but after tasting it, we loved it. The richer sauce proved more satisfying, and the pie browned better.

Most recipes include a liberal amount of shredded mozzarella cheese in the pie for both flavor and binding purposes. We, however, thought the flavor was too one-dimensional. Looking farther

afraid, we experimented with store-bought cheese blends and discovered that Mexican cheese blend (which is typically composed of Monterey Jack, cheddar, and sharp asadero) melted smoothly and had a robust enough flavor to pump up that of the pie.

We tossed our fresh sauce and flavorful cheese together with cooked spaghetti, packed it into the pan, and slid it into a hot oven to crisp. The results looked promising, but the first slice revealed disaster: It fell apart into a messy pile. We considered everything from the amounts of cheese and sauce to oven temperature before we examined the pasta. Even though the name of the dish is “spaghetti pie,” we realized that no matter how firmly we packed the pasta into the pan, the strands of spaghetti didn’t really stick well to one another.

For our next test, we tried a batch with vermicelli, which is quite thin, and were rewarded with perfect slices of our full-flavored spaghetti pie (minus the spaghetti).

SPICY SPAGHETTI PIE

SERVES 6

For a bold flavor, be sure to use Mexican cheese blend, which is a combination of Monterey Jack, cheddar, and asadero cheeses. This dish is best served the day it is made (see page 4 for reheating guidelines). Thin spaghetti can be used in place of the vermicelli.

Salt

- 12 ounces vermicelli (see note above)
- 4 ounces sliced deli pepperoni, chopped fine
- 1 onion, chopped
- 3 (14.5-ounce) cans diced tomatoes
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 cups shredded Mexican cheese blend (see note above)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup heavy cream
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped fresh basil

1. Adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 475 degrees. Spray a 9-inch pie plate with vegetable oil spray. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta and cook, stirring often, until nearly tender. Drain the pasta and return to the pot.

2. Meanwhile, cook the pepperoni in a large skillet over medium-high heat until crisp, about 2 minutes. Add the onion and cook until softened, about 2 minutes. Stir in the tomatoes, red pepper flakes, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer until the sauce is thickened and reduced to 4 cups, about 10 minutes; cover and keep warm.

3. Add 2 cups of the tomato sauce, the cheese, cream, and basil to the pasta and toss to combine. Transfer the mixture to the prepared pie plate and press with a spatula to flatten the surface. Bake until golden brown and bubbling, 10 to 15 minutes. Serve with the remaining 2 cups sauce in a bowl on the side.

Meaty Lasagna

Traditional homemade lasagna takes the better part of a day to make—you have to boil the noodles, slow-cook the sauce, prepare and layer the ingredients, and then bake it. Who wants to spend all that time putting together a dish for a potluck, which by its nature is intended to simplify things for everyone involved? We wanted a lasagna that was so saucy, rich, and flavorful, no one would know that it took less than 2 hours to make.

We knew from the start that to expedite the lasagna-making process we would have to use no-boil lasagna noodles. After a few initial tests, we discovered that the secret of no-boil noodles is to



leave the tomato sauce a little on the watery side. The noodles can then absorb liquid without drying out the dish overall. With this in mind, we got to work on the other components of the lasagna.

We began with our choice of meat for the sauce. Working with a base of sautéed aromatics (onions and garlic), an all-beef sauce turned out to be one-dimensional and dull. But a sauce made with meatloaf mix, a combination of equal parts ground beef, pork, and veal, tasted robust and sweet. The texture wasn't right, though; we wanted something richer, creamier, and more cohesive, so our thoughts turned to Bolognese, the classic 3-hour meat sauce enriched with dairy. Borrowing this combination, we reduced $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of cream with the meat before adding the tomatoes. The ground meat soaked up the sweet cream, and the final product was rich and decadent. Even better, at this point we had been at the stove for only 12 minutes.

We started building the sauce with two 28-ounce cans of pureed tomatoes, but tasters found that this sauce was too heavy for the lasagna and overwhelmed the other flavors. Two 28-ounce cans of diced tomatoes yielded too thin a sauce. We settled on one can of each. The combination of pureed and diced tomatoes yielded a luxurious sauce, with soft but substantial chunks of tomatoes. We added the tomatoes to the meat mixture, warmed it through (no reduction necessary), and after just 15 minutes on the stove the meat sauce was rich, creamy, ultra-meaty, and ready to go.

Most people like their lasagna to be cheesy. It was a given that we would sprinkle each layer with mozzarella cheese—the classic lasagna cheese—and after a test of whole milk cheese versus part-skim we decided that whole milk mozzarella was better for the job. As for ricotta, we found that it made little difference whether we used whole milk or part-skim. Both were characteristically creamy

and rich. And tasters liked the ricotta even more when it was mixed with Parmesan cheese. An egg helped to thicken and bind this mixture, and some chopped basil added flavor and freshness. Tucked neatly between the layers of lasagna, this ricotta mixture was just what we wanted.

We found that lasagna made with no-boil noodles takes a little longer in the oven than conventional lasagna. The real time saved is in the preparation. Our lasagna took about an hour and a half to make—but just minutes to devour.

MEATY LASAGNA

SERVES 8

If you can't find meatloaf mix for the sauce, substitute $\frac{1}{2}$ pound 85 percent lean ground beef and $\frac{1}{2}$ pound sweet Italian sausage, casings removed. This dish benefits from a 15-minute rest before serving.

SAUCE

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 onion, minced
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 pound meatloaf mix (see note above)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup heavy cream
- 1 (28-ounce) can tomato puree
- 1 (28-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained

LAYERS

- 2 cups whole milk or part-skim ricotta cheese
- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups grated Parmesan cheese
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped fresh basil
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper
- 12 no-boil lasagna noodles
- 4 cups shredded whole milk mozzarella cheese

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees.

2. FOR THE SAUCE: Heat the oil in a Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add the onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the meatloaf mix, salt, and pepper and cook, breaking up the meat into small pieces with a wooden spoon, until it is no longer pink but has not browned, about 4 minutes. Add the cream; bring to a simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until the liquid evaporates and only the fat remains, about 4 minutes. Add the tomato puree and diced tomatoes; bring to a slow simmer and cook until the flavors are blended, about 3 minutes. Set the sauce aside.

3. FOR THE LAYERS: Mix the ricotta, 1 cup of the Parmesan, the basil, egg, salt, and pepper together in a medium bowl until well combined; set aside.

4. Spread $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the meat sauce (avoiding large chunks of meat) on the bottom of a 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Place 3 of the noodles on top of the sauce. Drop 3 tablespoons of the ricotta mixture down the center of each noodle and level the mounds by pressing with the back of the measuring spoon. Sprinkle evenly with 1 cup of the mozzarella. Spread $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of the meat sauce evenly over the cheese. Repeat the layering of the noodles, ricotta, mozzarella, and sauce twice more. Place the 3 remaining noodles on top, then spread the remaining sauce over the noodles. Sprinkle with the remaining 1 cup mozzarella and then with the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Parmesan.

5. Lightly spray a large sheet of foil with vegetable oil spray and cover the lasagna. Bake for 15 minutes, remove the foil, and continue to bake until the cheese is spotty brown and the sauce is bubbling, about 25 minutes longer. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 4. Cool slightly, about 30 minutes. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap and proceed with the recipe from step 5, baking the lasagna for 25 minutes before removing the foil.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

No-Boil Noodles: Over the past few years, no-boil (also called oven-ready) lasagna noodles have become a permanent fixture on supermarket shelves. Much like instant rice, no-boil noodles are precooked at the factory. The extruded noodles are run through a water bath and then dehydrated mechanically. During baking, the moisture from the sauce softens, or rehydrates, the noodles, especially when the pan is covered as the lasagna bakes—that's why it's so important to have plenty of sauce in the baking dish.

For our lasagna recipe, we prefer Barilla no-boil noodles for their delicate texture, which resembles that of fresh pasta. Three of these no-boil noodles make one layer in a standard 13 by 9-inch dish.

Chili Mac

Synonymous with simpler times and simpler food, chili mac was once a favorite childhood comfort food whose appeal, for many of us, extends well into adulthood and makes it the ideal casserole contribution at any get-together.

Initial testing prompted reminiscing, and the test kitchen was divided about which version of chili mac was best. For some it was a macaroni-and-cheese-like version with a bit of chili stirred in. For others it was predominantly chili with a little macaroni added for heft. Others insisted (after tasting the previous examples) that there could be only one way to make the best chili mac: spicy chili, with elbows stirred in (no other pasta shape would do), and lots of gooey, melted cheese on top. Our goal was to come up with a recipe that was a combination of the best spicy beef chili and creamy macaroni with cheese.

Our first challenges were finding the correct heat level for the chili and the ideal proportion of chili to macaroni. We focused on the chili first and started with lean ground beef, which we browned, then drained to remove the excess fat. Then we sautéed onion, red bell pepper, and a generous amount of garlic. In lieu of fresh chiles (jalapeños added too much heat), we used chili powder and found that the best way to tame its raw flavor was to sauté it with the aromatics. Cumin was added along with the chili powder. We then added diced tomatoes, simmered the chili for 20 minutes, and had our first taste. Our chili was spicy enough without being overbearing. The thickness was also ideal: spoonable and thick. Satisfied with our chili, we moved on to the macaroni that needed to be stirred in.

We started by cooking the elbows to the al dente stage. We knew that the macaroni would continue to cook in the oven and would absorb liquid as it baked. What we didn't count on was how much liquid it would soak up. Our macaroni turned dry in the oven. We found that if we reserved some of the pasta cooking water and added tomato puree, our macaroni baked up moist and flavorful.

At this point we needed to add the cheese. We tried casseroles made with cheddar and Monterey Jack cheeses separately, then together. Tasters found the cheddar to be grainy and greasy. The creaminess of the Monterey Jack was just what we were striving for, but the flavor was a bit too mild. We found a hybrid cheese called Co-Jack in our supermarket, a blend of mild Colby and Monterey Jack cheeses. The flavor of the Colby combined with the creaminess of the Monterey Jack made these cheeses ideal for topping the chili mac. After just 15 minutes in the oven, the topping turned a bubbly golden brown.

CHILI MAC

SERVES 8

Ground turkey (1½ pounds) can be substituted for the ground beef. If you can't find Colby-Jack cheese, substitute equal amounts of Colby and Monterey Jack cheese.

Salt

- 8 ounces elbow macaroni
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1½ pounds 85 percent lean ground beef (see note above)
- 2 onions, chopped
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and chopped

- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 1 (28-ounce) can tomato puree
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- Pepper
- 2 cups shredded Co-Jack cheese (see note above)

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta and cook, stirring often, until almost tender. Reserve $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of the pasta cooking water and drain the pasta. Transfer to a bowl and set aside.

2. Wipe the pot dry. Heat 1 tablespoon of the oil over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add the beef and cook, breaking up the meat into small pieces with a wooden spoon, until it is no longer pink and is beginning to brown, 5 to 8 minutes. Drain the beef, discarding the drippings, and set it aside.

3. Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons oil over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add the onions, bell pepper, garlic, chili powder, and cumin and cook, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are softened and beginning to brown, about 7 minutes. Add the tomato puree, diced tomatoes, sugar, the reserved pasta cooking water, and the drained beef; bring to a simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until the flavors have melded, about 20 minutes. Stir in the pasta and season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to a 13 by 9-inch baking dish.

4. Sprinkle the pasta with the cheese. Bake until the cheese is melted and browned, about 15 minutes. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 3. Cool slightly, about 30 minutes. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, let the casserole sit at room temperature for 1 hour. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap and sprinkle the casserole evenly with the cheese. Lightly spray a large sheet of foil with vegetable oil spray and cover the dish. Bake until the mixture is hot and bubbling, 40 to 45 minutes. Remove the foil and continue to cook until the cheese begins to brown, 5 to 10 minutes longer.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Chili Powder: Chili powder is typically a blend of ground red chile peppers, cumin, oregano, garlic, and salt; sometimes cloves or allspice or both are included. Watch out for chili powders labeled “pure,” which are solely one kind of ground chile pepper (typically ancho or chipotle) with no added seasonings—they can be assertively hot and smoky. The test kitchen’s favorite brand of chili powder is Spice Islands, praised by tasters for its sweet, smoky flavor that was deemed very potent and for its lingering heat. But no matter what brand you buy, freshness is key. Like most spices, chili powder contains volatile flavor compounds, so it’s important to buy from a store that has steady turnover.

Tex-Mex Enchilada Casserole

Many casserole makers take unfortunate shortcuts, tossing the contents of the larder into their casseroles. Case in point: beef enchilada casserole, a Tex-Mex lasagna of sorts. The model (beef enchiladas) is made with seared, braised, and shredded steak. The meat is wrapped in corn tortillas that have been dipped in a rich, spicy, homemade chile sauce; the stuffed tortillas are then lined up in a baking dish, and the whole thing is sprinkled with cheese. At some point, time-pressed cooks reached for the ground beef and decided to layer rather than roll, and a Tex-Mex standard was born. Judging by the recipes we tested, cooks also reached for canned enchilada sauce and condensed tomato soup. We tested those recipes, and—no surprise—they produced greasy, bland casseroles. We wanted to mimic the straightforward quality of enchiladas but keep the casserole's satisfying ease.

Our tasters frowned upon canned enchilada sauce, which was one-dimensional, so we created our own. We sautéed onion and garlic in oil, then stirred in chili powder and cumin. We poured in canned tomato sauce followed by beef broth for reinforcement. After the sauce had simmered for a few minutes to thicken, we mixed half of it with browned ground beef and turned up the heat by stirring in minced jalapeños and hot sauce.

Everybody agreed that deep corn flavor was key to a successful beef enchilada casserole, but used straight from the plastic bag, the corn tortillas turned slimy in the casserole; baking rendered them tough, chewy, and flavorless. We tried toasting them in a dry skillet. As the tortillas blistered and charred, they filled the test kitchen with an enticing aroma reminiscent of popcorn. Once again, we started building: three layers of toasted tortillas

sandwiching two of beef filling, sauce poured and cheese sprinkled over all. The casserole smelled fantastic, but that middle layer of tortillas tasted papery and unpleasant. When we tried eliminating it, the simplest fix, tasters missed both its corn presence and the cohesiveness it had given the casserole.

One test-kitchen recipe for chili uses corn tortillas as a thickener. We decided to borrow this technique. We put eight of the toasted tortillas in the food processor with a can of green chili-dotted Ro-Tel tomatoes (spicy canned tomatoes from Texas) and some of the beef broth. We processed the mix until it had the consistency of creamy mashed potatoes, then folded it into the browned beef. This time we sandwiched the filling between just two tortilla layers and poured the remaining enchilada sauce over everything. After the casserole had baked for 30 minutes, we sprinkled it with Colby-Jack cheese and more minced jalapeño. We returned the dish to the oven until the casserole was golden brown and bubbling. We resisted a moment so it could cool, then cut ourselves hefty squares. Finally, we had a big casserole with a big payoff.

TEX-MEX ENCHILADA CASSEROLE

SERVES 10

If you can't find Ro-Tel tomatoes, substitute 1¼ cups diced tomatoes plus an additional jalapeño. Monterey Jack cheese may be substituted for the Colby-Jack. Serve with sour cream, chopped scallions, and lime wedges. This dish benefits from a 15-minute rest before serving and is best served the day it is made (see page 4 for reheating guidelines).

- 20 (6-inch) corn tortillas
- 1½ cups low-sodium beef broth
- 1 (10-ounce) can Ro-Tel tomatoes
(see note above)
- 2 pounds 85 percent lean ground beef
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil



- 2 onions, minced
- 8 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 3 (15-ounce) cans tomato sauce
- 4 cups shredded Co-Jack cheese
(see note above)
- 3 jalapeño chiles, seeded and chopped fine
- ½ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 tablespoon hot sauce
- Salt and pepper

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Grease a 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Toast 3 of the tortillas in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until they bubble and turn spotty brown, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Transfer to a plate and repeat with the remaining tortillas.

2. Tear 8 of the toasted tortillas into rough pieces and transfer to a food processor. Add ¾ cup of the broth and the tomatoes and process until smooth; transfer the tortilla mixture to a large bowl. Cook the beef in the now-empty skillet over medium-high heat, breaking up the meat into small pieces with a wooden spoon, until it is no longer pink, about 5 minutes. Drain the beef, discarding the drippings, then add to the tortilla mixture.

3. Add the oil and onions to the now-empty skillet and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the garlic, chili powder, and cumin and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the tomato sauce and the remaining ¾ cup broth and simmer until slightly thickened, 5 to 7 minutes. Add half of the tomato sauce mixture, 1½ cups of the cheese, 1 minced jalapeño, the cilantro, and hot sauce to the tortilla-beef mixture. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Arrange 6 of the toasted tortillas on the bottom of the prepared baking dish. Spread the tortilla-beef mixture evenly over the tortillas. Arrange the remaining 6 tortillas over the tortilla-beef mixture and top with the remaining tomato sauce mixture. Bake until the filling is bubbling around the edges, about 30 minutes. Sprinkle the remaining 2½ cups cheese and the remaining 2 minced jalapeños evenly over the top. Bake until the cheese is browned, 15 to 20 minutes. Serve.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Ro-Tel Tomatoes: Carl Roettele opened a small canning plant in Elsa, Texas, in the early 1940s. By the 1950s, his blend of tomatoes, green chiles, and spices had become popular throughout the state and beyond. His spicy tomatoes are used in countless Lone Star State dishes, from King Ranch Casserole and enchiladas to party dips like Ro-Tel Queso, a mixture of Velveeta cheese and Ro-Tel tomatoes.

King Ranch Casserole

With a beefy enchilada casserole under our belt, we wanted to try our hand at another Tex-Mex casserole, King Ranch Casserole, which swaps the beef for chicken. Favored by home cooks and Junior Leaguers, this subtly spicy casserole from Texas dates back to the 1950s. Although owners of the King Ranch, the state's largest cattle operation, deny any hand in its creation, this dish became popular for its mildly spicy Southwestern flavors as well as its convenience (most recipes start with one can each of cream of chicken and cream of mushroom soup).

After a disappointing round of tests, we wondered if our Texan friends had been telling us tall tales about this dish. The tortillas were soggy, the chicken

was overcooked, and the sauce was made gloppy and bland by the undiluted canned soup. Given the outsized reputation of this dish, we had to do better. We found a few modern recipes that called for a freshly poached chicken and homemade cheese sauce, but their instructions seemed overly fussy for a casserole. Could we find a middle road that lost the canned soup but kept the amount of work reasonable?

Starting with the sauce, we cooked onions and jalapeños in butter, then added ground cumin and Ro-Tel tomatoes, the Texas brand of spicy canned tomatoes that are the hallmark of this recipe. Instead of draining the tomatoes and discarding the flavorful juice (as most recipes instructed), we reduced the liquid to intensify the tomato flavor. Then we stirred in flour for thickening, cream for richness, and chicken broth for flavor. Twenty minutes of kitchen work yielded a silky, flavorful sauce that put canned soup to shame.

To assemble the casserole, we layered the sauce with corn tortillas and cooked chicken, then topped everything with cheese before baking. After testing various cheeses such as cheddar, Monterey Jack, and Colby, we finally settled on Co-Jack, a blend of the latter two. This cheese gave our casserole creamy flavor without turning it greasy. Our casserole smelled fantastic coming out of the oven, but the chicken was leathery and the tortillas had disintegrated into corn mush. To solve the chicken problem, we tried layering raw chicken between the tortillas, but it failed to cook through. The solution was to partially poach the chicken in the sauce before assembling the casserole, which guaranteed perfectly cooked, well-seasoned meat.

We tried replacing the soggy tortillas with store-bought tortilla chips, but tasters complained about the extra grease in the middle of the casserole. Crisping the tortillas in the oven (in effect, making homemade chips) kept them from turning to mush in the casserole and cut out the greasiness.

All our casserole needed now was a crisp topping. Having abandoned store-bought tortilla chips inside our casserole, we decided to give them a shot as a crushed-up crunchy topping. After trying different brands to find the perfect fit, we finally hit on one that everyone loved: Fritos corn chips. They crowned this Texas classic with just the right amount of saltiness, corn flavor, and crunch.

KING RANCH CASSEROLE

SERVES 8

If you can't find Ro-Tel tomatoes, substitute one 14.5-ounce can diced tomatoes and one 4-ounce can chopped green chiles. Monterey Jack cheese may be substituted for the Colby-Jack. This dish benefits from a 15-minute rest before serving.

- 12 (6-inch) corn tortillas
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 2 onions, minced
- 2 jalapeño chiles, seeded and chopped fine
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 2 (10-ounce) cans Ro-Tel tomatoes (see note above)
- 5 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 3 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 4 (6-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed, halved lengthwise, and cut crosswise into ½-inch slices
- 4 cups shredded Co-Jack cheese (see note above)
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
- Salt and pepper
- 2¼ cups Fritos corn chips, crushed

1. Adjust the oven racks to the upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Lay the tortillas on two baking

sheets, lightly coat both sides with vegetable oil spray, and bake until slightly crisp and browned, about 12 minutes. Cool slightly, then break into bite-sized pieces. Using potholders, adjust the top oven rack to the middle position.

2. Heat the butter in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Cook the onions, jalapeños, and cumin until lightly browned, about 8 minutes. Add the tomatoes and cook until most of the liquid has evaporated, about 10 minutes. Stir in the flour and cook for 1 minute. Add the broth and cream, bring to a simmer, and cook until thickened, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in the chicken and cook until no longer pink, about 4 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the cheese and cilantro until the cheese is melted. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

3. Sprinkle half of the tortilla pieces in a 13 by 9-inch baking dish set on a rimmed baking sheet. Spread half of the filling evenly over the tortillas. Repeat with the remaining tortillas and filling.

4. Bake until the filling is bubbling, about 15 minutes. Sprinkle the Fritos evenly over the top and bake until they are lightly browned, about 10 minutes. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 3. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap, lightly spray a large sheet of foil with vegetable oil spray, and cover the baking dish tightly. Bake until the filling is bubbling, about 30 minutes. Remove the foil, sprinkle the Fritos evenly over the top, and bake until they are lightly browned, about 10 minutes.

Ultra-Creamy Baked Macaroni and Cheese

Casserole-style macaroni and cheese can be found at every fish fry and covered-dish supper all over the South. Why? Because it feeds a crowd and can go straight from the oven to the buffet table. Unlike stovetop versions that puddle on the plate, baked mac and cheese absorbs the cheesy sauce as it bubbles away in the oven, evolving into a dense mixture that sets up in hearty scoops, topped with buttery bread crumbs that develop a toasty crunch during baking. We set out to develop the ultimate version of this cheesy treat.

Our research turned up plenty of recipes for baked mac and cheese, but we quickly realized that the majority were misnamed—they weren't baked at all. Most of the real cooking (making an egg-based custard or a white sauce) was done on top of the stove, and the casseroles were then finished under the broiler for a few minutes.

After making a handful of recipes that actually called for baking the dish, we saw why so many others had abandoned the oven. Time after time the custard-based versions came out of the oven broken and curdled. They were failing because they contained eggs, milk, and half-and-half, all ingredients that separate and clump when baked. Versions based on a white sauce—known as a béchamel, made by cooking butter, flour, and milk—also separated when baked but were more promising, because at least they didn't contain eggs.

To avoid the problem of broken béchamel sauce, other casserole recipes call for canned condensed soup to replace the milk, but we weren't about to go that route. We did try another canned product, evaporated milk, which contains stabilizers that prevent it from breaking when heated.

When we used evaporated milk in the béchamel, the casserole baked up satiny smooth.

Up until this point we had been adding Monterey Jack, a creamy but very mild cheese. Tasters loved the full flavor of extra-sharp cheddar, but its relatively dry texture meant it didn't melt as well, and it became greasy and separated when baked. A batch made with equal parts cheddar and Monterey Jack was better but still not right.

Since the stabilizers in the evaporated milk had helped with the sauce, we wondered if we could rely on a cheese that contained similar stabilizers to fix the separating cheese. We made a batch with American cheese (for stability), Monterey Jack (for creaminess), and cheddar (for flavor) and had great results. Homemade bread crumbs, enriched with melted butter and Parmesan cheese, created a flavorful, crunchy topping that provided a nice contrast to the soft casserole.

We finally had a baked mac and cheese that was creamy, sturdy, and rich—a worthy potluck addition.

ULTRA-CREAMY BAKED MACARONI AND CHEESE

SERVES 10

Block American cheese from the deli counter is best here; prewrapped singles result in a drier dish. This dish benefits from a 10-minute rest before serving.

- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter
- 4 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- Salt
- 1 pound elbow macaroni
- 5 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 3 (12-ounce) cans evaporated milk
- 2 teaspoons hot sauce
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard

- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 2 cups shredded extra-sharp cheddar cheese
- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups shredded American cheese (see note above)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup shredded Monterey Jack cheese

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Melt 4 tablespoons of the butter. Pulse the bread, melted butter, and Parmesan together in a food processor until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs, about 10 pulses. Transfer to a bowl; set aside.

2. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta and cook, stirring often, until almost tender. Reserve $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the pasta cooking water. Drain the pasta and rinse with cold water until cool, then drain well. Set aside.

3. Melt the remaining 4 tablespoons butter in the now-empty pot over medium-high heat. Stir in the flour and cook, stirring constantly, until the mixture turns light brown, about 1 minute. Slowly whisk in the evaporated milk, hot sauce, mustard, nutmeg, and 2 teaspoons salt and cook until slightly thickened, about 4 minutes. Off the heat, whisk in the cheeses and the reserved pasta cooking water until the cheeses melt. Add the pasta; stir to coat.

4. Transfer the pasta to a 13 by 9-inch baking dish and top evenly with the reserved bread-crumble mixture. Bake until the casserole is bubbling around the edges and the top is golden brown, 20 to 25 minutes. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 3, increasing the amount of reserved pasta cooking water to 1 cup. Transfer the pasta and



cheese mixture to a 13 by 9-inch baking dish and cool slightly, about 30 minutes. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 1 day. Refrigerate the bread-crumb mixture separately in an airtight container for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap, cover the dish tightly with foil, and bake for 30 minutes. Remove the foil, sprinkle the bread crumbs over the top, and bake until the topping is golden brown, about 20 minutes longer.

Eggplant Parmesan

Traditional recipes for eggplant Parmesan instruct you to fry breaded eggplant in a ton of oil, which usually results in greasy eggplant with a sodden, unappealing bread-crumb crust. We wanted a fresher, lighter take on this classic Italian dish. We wanted to eliminate the frying, streamline the dish, and make it taste better than the original.

We started by salting the eggplant to expel bitter juice and prevent the flesh from soaking up excess oil. For efficiency's sake, we chose good-sized eggplants; we didn't want to multiply the number of slices we'd have to prepare.

We then tested coatings for the eggplant. Flour alone wasn't substantial enough. Eggplant swathed in mayonnaise and then bread crumbs turned slimy. Eggplant coated in a flour-and-egg batter and then bread crumbs was thick and tough. A standard single breading (dipping the eggplant first in egg, then bread crumbs) was too messy—the egg slid off, leaving the crumbs with nothing to which they could adhere.

A double, or bound, breading proved superior. Dipping the eggplant first in seasoned flour,

then egg, then bread crumbs (seasoned with Parmesan cheese) created a substantial (but not heavy) and crisp coating that brought the mild flavor and tender, creamy texture of the eggplant to the fore.

We found that the best way to achieve a crisp coating is to bake the breaded slices on preheated baking sheets, each coated with a modest amount of vegetable oil (olive oil tasted sour). At 425 degrees, the slices sizzled during cooking and became fully tender in 30 minutes. Using this technique, we turned out crisp, golden brown disks of eggplant, expending a minimum of effort (and using very little oil). And now, seeing that we weren't busy frying up numerous batches of eggplant in hot oil, we had time to grate cheese and whip up a quick tomato sauce while the eggplant baked.

We'd already used some Parmesan for breading the eggplant, and a little extra browned nicely on top of the casserole. Mozzarella is another standard addition that gives the casserole its gooey appeal. A quick tomato sauce started off with a few cloves of minced garlic, a sprinkling of red pepper flakes, and some olive oil, followed by three cans of diced tomatoes, two of them pureed in the food processor for a chunky texture. Fresh basil was the final flourish.

Because breading softens beneath the layers of sauce and cheese, we left most of the top layer of eggplant exposed. This left us with about 1 cup of extra sauce, just enough to set on the buffet table next to the finished casserole, much as we would do with turkey and gravy, so diners can add extra as they wish. Another benefit of this technique was that without excess moisture, the casserole was easy to cut into tidy pieces. With the eggplant fully cooked, the dish needed only a brief stay in a hot oven to melt the cheese.



EGGPLANT PARMESAN

SERVES 8

Use kosher salt when salting the eggplant. The coarse grains don't dissolve as readily as the fine grains of regular table salt, so any excess can be easily wiped away. It's necessary to divide the eggplant into two batches when tossing it with the salt. Part-skim mozzarella can be substituted for the whole milk mozzarella. This dish is best served the day it is made (see page 4 for reheating guidelines).

EGGPLANT

- 2 medium globe eggplants (about 2 pounds), sliced into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch rounds (see note above)
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt (see note above)
- 8 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons pepper
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 4 large eggs
- 6 tablespoons vegetable oil

SAUCE

- 3 (14.5-ounce) cans diced tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped fresh basil
- Salt and pepper

LAYERS

- 2 cups shredded whole milk mozzarella cheese (see note above)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 10 fresh basil leaves, torn, for garnish

1. FOR THE EGGPLANT: Toss half of the eggplant slices and $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons of the kosher salt in

a large bowl; transfer the salted eggplant to a large colander set in a bowl. Repeat with the remaining eggplant and kosher salt, placing the second batch on top of the first. Let stand until the eggplant releases about 2 tablespoons liquid, 30 to 45 minutes. Spread the eggplant slices on three layers of paper towels; cover with three more layers of paper towels. Press firmly on each slice to remove as much liquid as possible, then wipe off the excess salt.

2. Meanwhile, adjust the oven racks to the upper-middle and lower-middle positions, place a rimmed baking sheet on each rack, and heat the oven to 425 degrees. Pulse the bread in a food processor to fine crumbs, about 15 pulses (you should have about 4 cups). Transfer the crumbs to a pie plate and stir in the Parmesan, salt, and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of the pepper; set aside. Wipe out the bowl (do not wash) and set aside.

3. Combine the flour and the remaining 1 teaspoon pepper in a large zipper-lock bag; shake to combine. Beat the eggs in a second pie plate. Place 8 to 10 eggplant slices in the bag with the flour; seal the bag and shake to coat the slices. Remove the slices, shaking off the excess flour, dip them in the eggs, letting the excess run off, then coat evenly with the bread-crumbs mixture. Transfer the breaded eggplant slices to a wire rack set over a baking sheet. Repeat with the remaining eggplant.

4. Remove the preheated baking sheets from the oven; add 3 tablespoons of the vegetable oil to each sheet, tilting to coat evenly. Place half of the breaded eggplant slices on each sheet in a single layer. Bake until the eggplant is well browned and crisp, about 30 minutes, rotating and switching the baking sheets after 10 minutes, and flipping the eggplant slices after 20 minutes. Do not turn off the oven.

5. FOR THE SAUCE: Meanwhile, process 2 cans of the diced tomatoes in the food processor until almost smooth, about 5 seconds. Heat the olive oil, garlic, and red pepper flakes in a large saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until fragrant and the garlic is light golden, about 3 minutes; stir in the processed tomatoes and the remaining 1 can diced tomatoes. Bring the sauce to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until slightly thickened, about 15 minutes (you should have about 4 cups). Stir in the basil and season with salt and pepper to taste.

6. FOR THE LAYERS: Spread 1 cup of the tomato sauce in the bottom of a 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Arrange half of the eggplant slices over the tomato sauce, overlapping them to fit. Spread 1 cup more sauce over the eggplant and sprinkle with 1 cup of the mozzarella. Arrange the remaining eggplant on top and dot with 1 cup more sauce, leaving most of the eggplant exposed. Sprinkle with the Parmesan and the remaining 1 cup mozzarella. Bake until the surface is bubbling and the cheese is browned, 13 to 15 minutes. Cool for 10 minutes before sprinkling with the basil. Serve, with the remaining 1 cup sauce in a bowl on the side.

Southwestern Tamale Pie

Not surprisingly, tamale pie has its roots in Southwestern cooking. A good pie contains a juicy, spicy mixture of meat, beans, and vegetables encased in or topped with a cornmeal crust that is neither too stiff nor too loose. We liked the idea of tamale pie as a potluck dish—it's a boldly flavored one-dish entrée and a satisfying alternative to pasta-based casseroles.

Getting started, we had a number of questions about how to prepare the cornmeal topping. We began by testing fine-ground cornmeal (such as Quaker, which is sold in most supermarkets) against coarser meals. As expected, the crust made with fine-ground cornmeal was slightly smoother, but it was also bland in comparison with the toothsome crust made with coarse-ground cornmeal. We made the mush, as it's called, with water and stock as well as with and without butter. Tasters preferred the clean, simple flavor of mush made with just water, salt, and cornmeal. The stock and butter added more flavor and fat to the crust than was necessary. We found that 4 cups of water to 1½ cups of cornmeal, combined over medium-high heat using a strong whisk, yielded a spoonable texture with enough structure to contain the hearty filling.

With the cornmeal topping in place, we moved on to the filling. Most recipes use either ground beef or ground pork as the base, but we liked the flavor of both mixed together. This filling was rich, meaty, and flavorful and had a nice texture.

Most tamale pie fillings call for tomatoes, corn, and black beans. We found that this simple recipe easily accommodates canned and frozen vegetables with no ill effects on the final flavor. Seasoned with onion, garlic, jalapeño, and a little fresh oregano, the tamale filling tasted fresh and spicy.

Putting together filling and topping was simple. We piled the meat filling into a large baking dish and topped it with cheese and the cornmeal mixture, which, as loose as it was, was easy to spread in an even layer to the edges of the dish. A moderately high oven temperature did the best job of setting the crust and heating the filling. The cheese, trapped beneath the cornmeal and above the filling, melted into an appealingly smooth layer.

SOUTHWESTERN TAMALES

SERVES 8

We like coarse-ground cornmeal (about the texture of kosher salt) for the topping. We had good results with Goya Coarse Yellow Corn Meal. If the cornmeal mush gets too dry before you can spread it, simply loosen it with a little hot water.

FILLING

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound 90 percent lean ground beef
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound ground pork
- 1 large onion, minced
- 1 jalapeño chile, seeded and chopped fine
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 (15.5-ounce) can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 cup frozen corn
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh oregano
- Pepper
- 1 cup shredded Monterey Jack cheese

TOPPING

- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- 1½ cups coarse cornmeal (see note above)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper

1. FOR THE FILLING: Grease a 13 by 9-inch baking dish and set aside. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees.

2. Heat the oil in a large skillet over high heat until shimmering. Add the ground beef and pork and cook, breaking up the meat into small pieces with a wooden spoon, until it is no longer pink

and is beginning to brown, about 4 minutes. Add the onion and jalapeño and cook until just softened, about 3 minutes. Add the garlic, chili powder, cumin, salt, and cayenne and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the beans, tomatoes, and corn. Simmer until most of the liquid has evaporated, about 3 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the oregano and season with pepper to taste. Set aside.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: Bring 4 cups water to a boil in a large saucepan over high heat. Add the salt and slowly pour in the cornmeal while whisking vigorously. Cook over medium-high heat, whisking constantly, until the cornmeal begins to soften and the mixture thickens, about 3 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the pepper.

4. Transfer the beef mixture to the prepared dish and sprinkle evenly with the cheese. Gently spread the cornmeal mixture over the cheese using a rubber spatula, pushing the mixture to the edges of the baking dish. Cover tightly with foil and bake for 30 minutes. Remove the foil and continue to bake until the crust is beginning to brown and the filling is bubbly, 15 to 20 minutes longer. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 2. Refrigerate the cooled filling in an airtight container for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, grease a 13 by 9-inch baking dish and set aside; adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees. Bring the filling to a simmer in a large saucepan over medium-high heat, then proceed with step 3.

Stuffed Cabbage Rolls

We remember our grandmothers' stuffed cabbage recipes as sublime dishes of savory ground meat, spices, rice, and tomato sauce. But our attempts produced only pots of blown-out rolls filled with chewy, flavorless meat and bland rice. We wanted to instill our fellow potluckers with a sense of nostalgia and come up with a version of stuffed cabbage rolls that tasted as good as Grandma's and stayed intact.

Most recipes follow the basic procedure of boiling a head of cabbage and wrapping the softened leaves around a filling of seasoned ground meat and white rice, then simmering the rolls in a smooth tomato sauce flavored with warm spices, sugar, and vinegar. We decided to start with the easiest fix—the tomatoes.

Crushed tomatoes were too watery, and diced tomatoes were too chunky. Canned tomato sauce had a smooth texture but was thin enough to properly coat the rolls without becoming pasty. Sautéed onions and garlic provided a savory foundation, and ground ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg added the requisite warm spice flavor. Brown sugar was preferred to granulated for its more complex flavor, and red wine vinegar was chosen over white for its bite.

Tasters found the traditional filling of ground beef and white rice bland and tough. Since we were already sautéing onions and garlic for the sauce, we upped the amounts and added some to the filling for more flavor. In search of more meatiness, we tried other options. Kielbasa was too smoky, but bratwurst, a mild German sausage, boosted the meaty flavor perfectly. Our tasters had never been fans of the rice in the filling—they found it distracting and bland. Since the rice's main function is as a filler, we decided to omit it. In its place, we used a parade of milk and bread to help keep the filling soft and moist.

We then faced our biggest challenge: figuring out how to cook the stuffed rolls so they wouldn't end up mushy. The traditional method, cooking them in the oven, allowed the rolls to cook gently and evenly, but they came out slightly mushy. Cooking them on the stovetop, even over low heat, caused the cabbage to blow apart. We had been precooking the cabbage in the traditional way (the same as Grandma did): blanching the head in boiling water and peeling off the hot leaves. But the inner leaves were overcooked and soggy by then. We looked around the test kitchen, trying to come

STUFFING CABBAGE ROLLS



1. Remove the thick rib from the base of the cabbage leaf by cutting along both sides of the rib to form a narrow triangle. Continue cutting up the center to about 1 inch above the triangle.



2. Overlap the cut ends of the cabbage to prevent any filling from spilling out. Then place 2 heaping tablespoons of the meat mixture $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the bottom of the leaf where the cut ends overlap.



3. Fold the bottom of the leaf over the filling and then fold in the sides. Roll the leaf tightly around the filling to create a tidy roll.

up with a different method of cooking the cabbage that would preserve its texture, and noticed the microwave. After a quick turn (in a bowl covered with plastic wrap), all of the leaves were easily removed from the cabbage head and, best of all, were soft enough for filling and rolling—and not waterlogged whatsoever.

STUFFED CABBAGE ROLLS

SERVES 8

If the tops of the cabbage rolls appear dry after the foil is removed in step 5, spoon some of the sauce over them before returning the dish to the oven. This dish benefits from a 15-minute rest before serving.

- 1 medium head green cabbage, cored
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 onion, minced
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 (28-ounce) can tomato sauce
- ¼ cup packed light brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 2 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- ½ cup whole or low-fat milk
- ¾ pound 85 percent lean ground beef
- ¾ pound uncooked bratwurst, casings removed

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees. Place the cabbage in a large bowl, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and microwave on high until the outer leaves are pliable and translucent, 3 to 6 minutes. Using tongs, carefully remove the wilted outer leaves; set aside.

Replace the plastic wrap and repeat until you have 15 to 17 large, intact leaves.

2. Heat the oil in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Cook the onion until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic, ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer half of the onion mixture to a small bowl and set aside. Off the heat, stir the tomato sauce, sugar, vinegar, ½ teaspoon of the salt, and ¼ teaspoon of the pepper into the remaining onion mixture until the sugar dissolves.

3. Pulse the bread and milk together in a food processor until a smooth paste forms, about 6 pulses. Add the reserved onion mixture, the beef, bratwurst, the remaining ½ teaspoon salt, and the remaining ¼ teaspoon pepper and pulse until well combined, about 10 pulses.

4. Following the photos on page 135, trim the tough ribs from the cabbage leaves, overlap the cut ends of a cabbage leaf, place 2 heaping tablespoons of the meat mixture in each leaf, and arrange the rolls, seam-side down, in a 13 by 9-inch baking dish.

5. Pour the sauce over the cabbage rolls, cover with foil, and bake until the sauce is bubbling and the rolls are heated through, about 45 minutes. Remove the foil and bake, uncovered, until the sauce is slightly thickened and the cabbage is tender, about 15 minutes. Serve.

To Make Ahead: Prepare the recipe through step 4. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap; refrigerate for up to 1 day. Refrigerate the sauce separately in an airtight container for up to 1 day. When ready to bake, remove the plastic wrap, adjust an oven rack to the middle position, heat the oven to 375 degrees, and proceed with the recipe from step 5.





BATTER-FRIED CHICKEN

Game Day Favorites

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Fully Loaded Stromboli

Stuffed with salty, spicy layers of meat and cheese, stromboli, a close cousin to the calzone, seems to have been created for the sole purpose of being eaten in a parking lot while waiting for the big game to start. Less breadly than a calzone, a stromboli often relies on a sturdy filling of layered deli meats and mozzarella and provolone cheeses. Some stromboli, however, can be greasy, underbaked, or soggy. We set out to fix these issues and come up with the perfect hand-held meal to eat while getting ready to root for the hometown team.

The first step was the dough. Since we wanted an easy recipe, we hoped that store-bought pizza dough would suffice. Readily available in most grocery stores and some pizzerias, store-bought dough was a great timesaving option (although homemade pizza dough works too). Typically sold in 1-pound balls, store-bought dough gave us the option of making a couple of big stromboli, perfect for serving a crowd.

Stromboli is basically a sandwich, so it seemed natural to include deli meats and cheese. We settled on a combination of salami, capocollo, and provolone cheese. To boost the flavor of the meats and cheese, we included jarred roasted red peppers, which we thoroughly dried with paper towels before slicing and adding them to the filling.

Next we turned to developing flavor variations. First we tried pesto, but it was too oily; then we tried fresh basil, but the herb turned army green and lifeless. Chopped sun-dried tomatoes were a disappointment, overpowering the stromboli's other flavors. We decided to keep things simple. Tasters gave the thumbs up to a ham and cheddar stromboli and to one with pepperoni and mozzarella.

Switching gears now to the actual baking, we started at 450 degrees. We assumed that a high temperature would be the key to a crispy crust. The crust certainly got crispy, but the inside remained undercooked and doughy. We next decided to lower the temperature and cover the stromboli with foil for the first half of the baking. This gave the interior a sufficient head start, and after 20 minutes we removed the foil to allow for proper browning on the outside. After pulling the stromboli from the oven, we allowed them to cool for at least 5 minutes before slicing. This allowed the cheese enough time to set up and kept it from oozing out or becoming greasy when sliced. Tasters could hardly keep their hands off the slices as we served our stromboli in the test kitchen—a good indication of how quickly this recipe will disappear at any tailgate party.

FULLY LOADED STROMBOLI

MAKES 2 STROMBOLI, SERVING 12

Use 2 pounds of pizza dough from your favorite recipe, dough from your local pizzeria, supermarket dough, or two 13.8-ounce pop-open canisters of pizza dough (Pillsbury brand). This recipe can easily be halved; still use one lightly beaten egg to brush the dough.

- 2 pounds pizza dough (see note above)
- 8 ounces thinly sliced deli salami
- 8 ounces thinly sliced deli capocollo
- 8 ounces thinly sliced deli provolone cheese
- 8 ounces jarred roasted red peppers, rinsed, patted dry, and sliced thin (about 1 cup)
- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- 2 teaspoons sesame seeds
- Kosher salt (optional)

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Brush a rimmed baking sheet lightly with oil. On a lightly floured counter, roll 1 pound of the dough into a 12 by 10-inch rectangle, about ¼ inch thick. Arrange half of the meat and half of the provolone slices over the dough, leaving a 1-inch border along the edges. Top with half of the roasted peppers and half of the Parmesan.

2. Brush the edges of the dough with water. Starting from a long side, roll the dough tightly into a long cylinder, pressing the edges to seal. Transfer the stromboli to the prepared baking sheet, seam-side down, leaving room for the second stromboli. Repeat with the remaining dough, meat, provolone, red peppers, and Parmesan; transfer to the prepared baking sheet.

3. Brush the stromboli with the egg and sprinkle with the sesame seeds and kosher salt (if using). Cover loosely with foil that has been sprayed with vegetable oil spray and bake for 20 minutes.

4. Remove the foil and continue to bake until the crust is golden, about 25 minutes longer. Transfer the stromboli to a wire rack and cool for 5 minutes. Transfer to a carving board, slice each into 2-inch pieces, and serve.

Variations

CHEESY HAM STROMBOLI

Swiss cheese also works well in this variation.

Follow the recipe for Fully Loaded Stromboli, omitting the roasted red peppers and Parmesan and substituting 1 pound thinly sliced deli ham for the salami and capocollo and 8 ounces thinly sliced deli cheddar cheese for the provolone.

PEPPERONI PIZZA STROMBOLI

Follow the recipe for Fully Loaded Stromboli, omitting the roasted red peppers and substituting 8 ounces thinly sliced pepperoni for the salami and capocollo and 3 cups shredded mozzarella cheese for the provolone.

Wisconsin Grilled Brats and Beer

Burgers and dogs may be tailgating staples in the rest of the country, but in the Midwest the pregame ritual is not complete without grilled bratwurst and beer. Typically, a disposable aluminum pan filled with cheap lager and sliced onions is placed on one half of the grill and the sausages on the other half. Some people cook the sausages in the beer first before finishing them on the grill; others grill and then simmer. The idea is that the beer and onions flavor the bratwurst, which is then nestled into a bun, smothered with the beer-soaked onions, and doused with plenty of mustard.

After trying both techniques, we decided that simmering the sausages in the beer and then grilling them was the best approach; it ensured that the sausages picked up plenty of beer and onion flavor but retained a nice crispy exterior.

The bratwurst tasted great, but the pale onions didn't. In most recipes raw onions are simply added to the beer, but we saw the hot grill as a tool for adding serious flavor. So we sliced the onions into rounds and threw them onto the grill to acquire a nice char before adding them to their beer bath; the seared flavor of the onions enhanced the beer and, by extension, the sausages. Looking to add even more flavor, we tried dark



ales and expensive lagers, but we quickly discovered that their big flavors become overly harsh and bitter when reduced. Cheap, mild lagers remained mellow when simmered for half an hour.

Once the bratwurst and onions have been cooked, the braising liquid is normally discarded. But because the grilled onions and brats had infused the beer with so much flavor, we couldn't bear to see it go to waste. We tried adding the mustard to this liquid instead of saving it for the bun. When reduced in the beer and onion mixture, the mustard lent brightness and body to the liquid, which was now more like a sauce. A little bit

THE AMERICAN TABLE A CITY BUILT ON BRATS

In the city of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, bratwurst has stood for more than 150 years as not just a dietary staple, but a source of both cultural pride and economic importance. Sheboyganites proudly refer to their hometown as "The Wurst City in the World." Here, literally tons of the links are sold on the Fourth of July alone. Similar to many other Midwestern areas, Sheboygan became home to numerous German immigrants in the 1830s and 1840s, so it makes sense that a love for sausage followed. Today, bratwurst are enjoyed (usually two at a time) on a hard roll or old-fashioned semmel roll with a beer at summer barbecues and winter fry-outs. It shouldn't be much of a surprise that the brats industry flourishes in Wisconsin, and Sheboygan in particular. In addition to local butchers, you can also find large factories like Johnsonville Meats and Old Wisconsin Sausage there,

of sugar, pepper, and some caraway seeds added richness and complexity.

Now our recipe had it all: crisp, charred, and flavorful bratwurst nestled into a bun and slathered with our beer-onion-mustard sauce.

WISCONSIN GRILLED BRATS AND BEER

SERVES 8

Note that these sausages are bigger than your average hot dog and require rolls that are larger than standard-sized hot dog buns.

- 2 pounds onions (about 4), cut into ½-inch rings
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- Pepper
- 2 (12-ounce) cans or bottles beer
- ¾ cup Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon caraway seeds
- 1 (13 by 9-inch) disposable aluminum roasting pan
- 2 pounds bratwurst (8 to 12 links)

1. Brush the onions with the oil and season with pepper; set aside. Combine the beer, mustard, sugar, caraway seeds, and 1 teaspoon pepper in the roasting pan, then add the sausages in a single layer.

2A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open the bottom grill vents completely. Light a large chimney starter filled with charcoal briquettes (100 briquettes; 6 quarts). When the coals are hot, pour them in an even layer over the grill. Set the cooking grate in place, cover, and open the lid vents completely. Heat the grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

2a. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all the burners to high, cover, and heat the grill until hot, about 15 minutes. (Adjust the burners as needed to maintain a hot fire.)

3. Clean and oil the cooking grate. Place the onions on the grill and cook until lightly charred on both sides, 6 to 10 minutes, turning as needed. Transfer

the onions to the roasting pan with the sausages. Place the roasting pan in the center of the grill, cover, and cook for 15 minutes.

4. Move the roasting pan to one side of the grill. Transfer the sausages directly to the cooking grate and cook until well browned on all sides, about 5 minutes, turning as needed. Transfer the sausages to a platter and tent loosely with foil. Continue to cook the onions and beer in the roasting pan until the sauce is slightly thickened, about 5 minutes longer. Serve the sausages with the onions and sauce.

HOW HOT IS YOUR FIRE?

You can use a grill thermometer to monitor the temperature of your grill when cooking, but in most cases the thermometer is in the grill's lid and says little about the temperature of the cooking grate. Though not critical for all recipes, the temperature of the cooking grate is important when cooking foods quickly, directly over the coals. We determine the heat level of the cooking grate itself by measuring the amount of time you can comfortably hold your hand above it.



After initially heating up the grill, hold your hand 5 inches above the cooking grate and count how long you can comfortably keep it there (this works with both charcoal and gas grills).

FIRE INTENSITY	TIME YOU CAN HOLD YOUR HAND 5 INCHES ABOVE THE GRATE
Hot fire	2 seconds
Medium-hot fire	3 to 4 seconds
Medium fire	5 to 6 seconds
Medium-low fire	7 seconds

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Beer for Brats: We tested eight lagers in our recipe for Wisconsin Grilled Brats and Beer, and tasters overwhelmingly preferred the mellow sweetness of Budweiser. Miller Genuine Draft was our second choice; tasters praised its mild, malty flavor. Expensive imported beers, such as Heineken and Spaten, were bitter when reduced in the sauce, so keep those beers for drinking.

Classic Barbecued Chicken

A platter full of smoky grilled chicken smothered in a thick, tangy barbecue sauce is one of America's cookout favorites. But this seemingly simple classic causes plenty of headaches. Who hasn't served barbecued chicken that was nearly blackened on the outside and raw near the bone? Adding barbecue sauce just makes things harder. We set out to develop a recipe for barbecued

chicken with perfect, evenly cooked meat, skin that was golden brown, and intense, multidimensional barbecue flavor.

Most recipes call for searing the chicken parts quickly over high heat to render the fat in the skin, then cooking them through over lower heat. But placing raw chicken over a hot fire caused too many flare-ups, which led to burned skin. We had much better luck cooking our chicken over lower heat to slowly render the fat without the danger of flare-ups. This chicken was definitely evenly cooked, but it didn't have much flavor. Seasoning it with a mixture of salt, pepper, and cayenne before cooking helped, but not enough.

We've always been told never to add barbecue sauce until just before the food is ready to be pulled off the grill—otherwise the sugar in the sauce will burn. Since we weren't cooking these chicken parts directly over the heat, we wondered if we could sauce them at the outset. We couldn't; the sauce turned black and bitter. Then it occurred to us that if we wanted layers of flavor, we needed to have layers of barbecue sauce. When the chicken had been on the cooler part of the grill for about 30 minutes, we moved it closer to the hot part and introduced the sauce in several applications. This not only sped up the cooking process but also allowed the sauce to begin caramelizing. We began periodically flipping the chicken, and just as one layer of sauce dried, we added another coat on top of it, creating a thick, complex, multilayered "skin" of barbecue flavor.

Wanting to finish with a bang, we moved the chicken pieces to the hot part of the grill and continued to flip them and slather them with sauce for the final 5 minutes. This created a robust, crusty char that tasters loved. We finally had perfectly cooked chicken with intense barbecue flavor.

CLASSIC BARBECUED CHICKEN

SERVES 6

Don't try to grill more than 10 pieces of chicken at a time; you won't be able to line them up on the grill as directed in step 5. We like the sweet, smoky flavor of Bull's-Eye Original Barbecue Sauce, but feel free to substitute your favorite.

SAUCE

- 3 cups barbecue sauce (see note above)
- ½ cup molasses
- ½ cup ketchup
- ¼ cup cider vinegar
- 3 tablespoons brown mustard
- 2 teaspoons onion powder
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder

CHICKEN

- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 3 pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken pieces (split breasts, whole legs, thighs, and/or drumsticks), trimmed, split breasts halved (see note above)
- 1 (13 by 9-inch) disposable aluminum roasting pan (if using charcoal)

1. FOR THE SAUCE: Whisk all of the sauce ingredients together in a medium saucepan and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to medium and cook until the sauce has thickened and reduced to 3 cups, about 20 minutes. (The sauce can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 1 week.)

2. FOR THE CHICKEN: Combine the salt, pepper, and cayenne in a bowl. Pat the pieces of

chicken dry with paper towels and rub them evenly with the spice mixture. Measure out and reserve 2 cups of the barbecue sauce for cooking; set aside the remaining 1 cup sauce for serving.

3A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open the bottom grill vents completely and place the roasting pan on one side of the grill. Light a large chimney starter filled with charcoal briquettes (100 briquettes; 6 quarts). When the coals are hot, pour them in an even layer over half the grill, opposite the roasting pan. Set the cooking grate in place, cover, and open the lid vents completely. Heat the grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

3B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all the burners to high, cover, and heat the grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave the primary burner on high and turn off the other burner(s). (Adjust the primary burner as needed to maintain the grill temperature around 350 degrees.)

4. Clean and oil the cooking grate. Place the chicken, skin-side down, on the cool part of the grill, away from the coals and flames. Cover (positioning the lid vents over the chicken if using charcoal) and cook until the chicken begins to brown, 30 to 35 minutes.

5. Slide the chicken into a single line between the hotter and cooler parts of the grill and continue to cook, uncovered, flipping the chicken and brushing with some of the 2 cups sauce reserved for cooking every 5 minutes, until sticky, about 20 minutes.

6. Slide the chicken to the hotter part of the grill, directly over the coals and flames, and continue to cook, flipping and brushing the chicken with

the rest of the sauce reserved for cooking, until well glazed and the thickest part of the breasts registers 160 to 165 degrees on an instant-read thermometer and the thickest part of the legs/thighs/drumsticks registers 175 degrees, about 5 minutes longer.

7. Transfer the chicken to a platter, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Serve with the remaining 1 cup sauce in a bowl on the side.

SECRETS TO PERFECT BARBECUED CHICKEN



1. Cook the chicken, skin-side down, on the cool side of the grill for about 30 minutes. Starting over lower heat slowly renders the fat and prevents flare-ups. A disposable pan beneath the chicken will catch any drips.



2. Move the chicken into a single line closer to the coals and flames. Begin basting and turning the pieces. This will cook the chicken through evenly, while building up a thick, complex, multilayered "skin" of barbecue flavor.



3. When the pieces are nicely glazed, move them directly over the coals and flames to caramelize the sauce. This high-heat finish gives the chicken a robust, crusty char.



Picnic Chicken

Cold, oven-roasted barbecued chicken is a picnic classic—it's simple to prepare and a breeze to pack up (no messy sauces to contend with), plus this dish can be made well in advance of the outing itself. But while it may be easy to physically prepare, it's not always easy to get right. The skin on the chicken is usually flabby, and the meat can be so dry it squeaks. We wanted picnic chicken that was worth hauling to a park—it had to be moist and tender, with the robust spicy and slightly sweet flavor of barbecue—and that could be prepared a day in advance for the ultimate in convenience.

Most recipes we found for picnic chicken called for slathering roasted, skin-on chicken with barbecue sauce and letting it sit overnight. Given that the main problem was soggy skin, this approach seemed counterintuitive. The remaining recipes went the dry-rub route, relying on dried spices to provide traditional barbecue flavor. When we tested this method, we found that the skin was noticeably less soggy the next day. Dry rubs were in, sticky sauces were out.

For our rub, we used a simple combination of chili powder, pepper, paprika, cayenne, and a little brown sugar for that trademark barbecue sauce sweetness and rubbed the spice mixture all over the chicken, even under the skin. When tasters sampled the chicken the next day, it drew raves for flavor. Unfortunately, the skin was flabby—we knew we'd have to spend more time trimming the fat before cooking the chicken.

A two-step process improved the situation immensely. First, we quickly trimmed the chicken pieces. Second, we slit the skin with a sharp knife (careful not to cut into the flesh) to provide escape hatches for the melting fat during roasting. To ensure that the breast meat stayed as tender as the dark meat, we also secured the skin on top with

toothpicks; when we didn't do this, the skin shrank in the oven, allowing the meat underneath to become parched.

Now, with a final blast of heat in the oven (we went all the way to 500 degrees) during the last few minutes, the fat in the skin was nicely rendered. The next day we found not tough, flabby skin but a thinner, flavorful coat on each piece of chicken. Although this skin was still less than crisp, we were making progress.

Up until now we had been brining the chicken—soaking it in a solution of water and salt—for better flavor and moister meat. But the added moisture was also contributing to the flabbiness of the skin. We decided to try skipping the brine. In our next test, we added the salt directly to the spice rub instead and placed the chicken pieces right on the rack on which they'd be cooked so they would be oven-ready the next morning.

Now when we cooked our chicken, it was well seasoned, with very moist meat and, best of all, the flavorful, delicate skin we were after. The salting had both seasoned the meat and kept it moist, even during high-heat roasting.

PICNIC CHICKEN

SERVES 8

On the breast pieces, we use toothpicks to secure the skin, which otherwise shrinks considerably in the oven, leaving the meat exposed and prone to drying out. We think the extra effort is justified, but you can omit this step. If you like more heat, use the greater amount of cayenne given.

- 5 pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken pieces (split breasts, drumsticks, and/or thighs), trimmed, split breasts halved
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons chili powder

- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 2 teaspoons pepper
- $\frac{3}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper
(see note above)

1. Pat the pieces of chicken dry with paper towels. Use a sharp knife to make 2 or 3 short slashes in the skin of each piece of chicken, taking care not to cut into the meat. Combine the remaining ingredients in a small bowl. Rub the chicken pieces evenly with the spice mixture. Loosen the skin by sliding your fingers between the skin and the meat, then rub the spice mixture underneath. Transfer the chicken, skin-side up, to a wire rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet, cover loosely with foil, and refrigerate for 6 hours or up to 1 day.

2. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 425 degrees. Secure the skin of each breast piece with 2 or 3 toothpicks placed near the edges of the skin.

3. Cook the chicken until the thickest part of the smallest piece registers 140 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 15 to 20 minutes. Increase the oven temperature to 500 degrees and continue to cook until the chicken is browned and crisp and the thickest part of the breasts registers 160 to 165 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 5 to 8 minutes longer, removing the pieces from the oven and transferring them to a clean wire rack as they finish cooking. Continue to cook the thighs and/or drumsticks, if using, until the thickest part of the thighs registers 175 degrees, about 5 minutes longer. Remove from the oven, transfer to the wire rack, and cool completely before refrigerating or serving. (The chicken can be refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

Batter-Fried Chicken

While some may think that it's OK to pick up a bucket of fried chicken for their next picnic or big game, we do not. A batch of homemade fried chicken simply cannot be beat. There are dozens of ways to fry a chicken, but one unusual, old-fashioned technique recently piqued our interest: batter-frying. In the nineteenth century, recipes for it were common. Chicken parts were dipped in something like a pancake batter and shallow-fried in lard. Recipes promised a delicate, fantastically crunchy coating encasing moist, nicely seasoned chicken. But when we tested a few modern recipes, the coatings, made from flour, salt, eggs, and milk or buttermilk, were not what we expected. They were soft, doughy, and doughnut-like, and just as in some of the old recipes we'd seen, the batter burned before the chicken was cooked through. Could we revive this old-school classic?

Before we solved any of the problems, we wanted to get our technique down. We tried both deep- and shallow-frying separate batches of chicken. Hands down, deep-frying won. With shallow-frying, the batter consistently burned.

Deep-frying method in hand, we turned to textural issues. We had a hunch the egg in the batter was contributing to the soft texture, which was flat-out wrong for fried chicken. Taking out the egg did make the coating less soft, but it still darkened too quickly. We tried batters made with whole milk, skim milk, and buttermilk, all to no avail. We suspected the milk sugars in the dairy were causing the batter to burn, so for our next test, we replaced the dairy with water. Success! By the time the chicken had cooked through, the coating was a lovely golden hue.

Based on lots of test-kitchen experience, we decided to brine the chicken parts to keep them moist and flavorful as they fried. We stirred

together our simple milk-free batter of flour, water, salt, and pepper and got frying. The results were promising—the batter didn't burn and the exterior was a pretty golden brown. But, sadly, the texture was too heavy and thick.

For crispiness, we turned to cornstarch, an ingredient the test kitchen has had luck using in the past. It also occurred to us that baking powder might add lift and lightness without doughiness. Along with this leavener, we stirred in pepper, paprika, and cayenne for simple but not overpowering flavor. We dried the brined chicken parts, dipped them in the batter, and slipped them into the oil. Some 15 minutes later, we marveled at our own handiwork. The chicken looked amazing, and a single bite confirmed we'd hit the mark. The meat was juicy yet cooked through. The picture-perfect, golden brown crust crackled, and tasters loved its pleasant peppery bite. But the best part was yet to come. Two days later, we reheated a few pieces we had hidden from our colleagues in the kitchen. After 10 minutes in a 450-degree oven, this fried chicken was as good as the day we'd made it.

BATTER-FRIED CHICKEN

SERVES 6

To prevent the chicken pieces from sticking together in the oil, fry the chicken in two batches.

- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup plus 1 teaspoon salt
- 4 pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken pieces (split breasts, drumsticks, and/or thighs), trimmed, split breasts halved
- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups cold water
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup cornstarch
- 5 teaspoons pepper
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 3 quarts peanut oil or vegetable oil

1. In a very large bowl, whisk the sugar, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the salt, and 1 quart cold water together until the sugar and salt dissolve. Submerge the chicken pieces, cover, and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes, or up to 1 hour.

THE AMERICAN TABLE FRIED CHICKEN JUNCTION

Looking for a way to make a living after the Civil War, newly freed slaves in Gordonsville, Virginia, hit on the idea of feeding hungry train passengers passing through town. Back then, trains had no dining cars, which was just one of the reasons train travel was grueling. As John T. Edge describes in *Fried Chicken: An American Story* (2004), a group of enterprising African American women began selling batter-fried chicken (brined, dunked in a plain flour-water batter, and fried in lard), coffee, and pie to passengers through the windows of idling trains. They carried trays laden with food from their homes to the tracks. Edge quotes essayist George Bagby, who in 1869 dubbed the town "the chicken-leg centre of the universe." The informal concession continued for some 60 years. Today a historical marker honors the women as "Gordonsville's Legendary Chicken Vendors" and the town itself as the "Fried Chicken Capital of the World."

2. Meanwhile, whisk the water, flour, cornstarch, pepper, baking powder, paprika, cayenne, and the remaining 1 teaspoon salt together in a large bowl until smooth. Refrigerate the batter until ready to fry.

3. Heat the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat to 350 degrees. Remove the chicken from the brine and pat dry with paper towels. Whisk the batter to remix and transfer half of the chicken pieces to the batter. One piece at a time, remove the chicken from the batter, allowing the excess to drip back into the bowl, and transfer to the oil. Fry the chicken, adjusting the burner as necessary to maintain an oil temperature between 300 and 325 degrees, until deep golden brown and the thickest part of the breasts registers 160 to 165 degrees on an instant-read thermometer and the thickest part of the drumsticks/thighs registers 175 degrees, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer the chicken to a wire rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet. Bring the oil back to 350 degrees and repeat with the remaining chicken. Serve. (The chicken can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days. To reheat, place on a wire rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet and heat in a 450-degree oven for 10 minutes.)

Chicago-Style Barbecued Ribs

Tailgating and ribs go hand in hand, like macaroni and cheese. What could be better to nosh on while watching a football game or soccer match than juicy meat still on the bone? Here in the test kitchen, we've seen ribs done different ways all over the country. One of our favorite styles hails from Chicago, where baby back ribs are slow-smoked to fall-apart tenderness and slathered with a spicy sauce.

Looking to create our own recipe, we researched formulas from the Windy City's finest rib joints.

We learned that Chicago ribs are typically smoked at about 200 degrees for at least 8 hours (and sometimes for up to a day). This slow-and-low cooking method ensures the moist, tender meat that helps define Chicago ribs.

We hoped to shorten the cooking time by using a slightly hotter fire, but the resulting ribs were tough and chewy. We had better luck starting the ribs on the grill (so they picked up good color and smoke flavor) and finishing them in a 250-degree oven for another 1½ hours or so, which kept the process simple. Ribs made this way weren't tough, but they weren't really tender or moist, either.

Some recipes suggested precooking the ribs by poaching them in simmering water, but this made them bloated and bland. Other recipes called for mopping or spraying water on the ribs to ensure moistness. The extra humidity helped, but every time we opened the grill lid to apply water, we also allowed heat to escape. Placing a pan of water in the grill during cooking moistened the ribs without lengthening the cooking time. To create really moist ribs, we took this method one step further and steamed the ribs when finishing them in the oven as well. After just a few hours, these smoky ribs were so tender that we had trouble picking them up.

We purchased several bottles of Chicago-style barbecue sauce, and their labels revealed a couple of unusual ingredients, namely, celery salt and all-spice. The other thing that makes this sauce stand out is the heat, which comes from plenty of cayenne. Since Chicago sauce is supposed to be brash and assertive, no simmering was necessary—we made an easy spice rub (which we rubbed on the ribs before they hit the grate), then reserved some of the rub, mixed it with ketchup, molasses, and vinegar to make a potent sauce, and brushed the

sauce on the ribs at the end. These moist, tender, and spicy ribs were just as good as any we've had in Chicago—the perfect thing to fuel the fire at any heavily debated sporting event.

CHICAGO-STYLE BARBECUED RIBS

SERVES 6

If you can't find baby back ribs, two 2½- to 3-pound racks St. Louis-style spareribs (see page 154) will work fine; the cooking time will remain the same. When removing the ribs from the oven, be careful not to spill the hot water in the bottom of the baking sheet. The ribs can be reheated in a 350-degree oven, uncovered, until hot, 10 to 15 minutes; brush with some of the remaining sauce if they begin to look dry.

SPICE RUB AND RIBS

- 1½ tablespoons dry mustard
- 1½ tablespoons brown sugar
- 1½ tablespoons paprika
- 2 teaspoons garlic powder
- 2 teaspoons onion powder
- 2 teaspoons celery salt
- 1½ teaspoons cayenne pepper
- ¾ teaspoon ground allspice
- 3 (1½-pound) racks baby back ribs (see note above), membrane removed (see page 155)
- 1 (16 by 12-inch) disposable aluminum roasting pan
- 1½ cups wood chips, soaked, drained, and sealed in a foil packet (see page 159)

SAUCE

- 2¾ cups ketchup
- 6 tablespoons molasses
- 6 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 6 tablespoons water
- ¾ teaspoon liquid smoke

1. FOR THE SPICE RUB AND RIBS: Combine the dry mustard, sugar, paprika, garlic powder, onion powder, celery salt, cayenne, and allspice in a bowl. Measure out and reserve 3 tablespoons of the spice mixture for the sauce. Pat the ribs dry with paper towels and rub them evenly with the remaining spice mixture. Wrap the meat in plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature for at least 1 hour, or refrigerate for up to 1 day. (If refrigerated, let sit at room temperature for 1 hour before grilling.)

2. FOR THE SAUCE: Whisk all of the sauce ingredients and the reserved 3 tablespoons spice rub together in a bowl.

3A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open the bottom grill vents halfway. Light a large chimney starter three-quarters full with charcoal briquettes

SECRETS TO CHICAGO RIBS



1. Place a disposable aluminum roasting pan on the bottom of the grill and add 3 cups of water. The water creates steam during grilling and makes the ribs tender and juicy.



2. When finishing the ribs in the oven, place them on a wire rack inside a rimmed baking sheet filled with water and cover with foil. This steamy oven finish ensures that the ribs are incredibly tender.



(75 briquettes; 4½ quarts). Add 3 cups water to the roasting pan and place it on one side of the grill. When the coals are hot, pour them into a steeply banked pile against the other side of the grill, opposite the pan of water. Place the wood chip packet on top of the coals. Set the cooking grate in place, cover, and open the lid vents halfway. Heat the grill until hot and the wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 5 minutes.

3. FOR A GAS GRILL: Place the wood chip packet directly on the primary burner. Add 3 cups water to the roasting pan and place it on a secondary burner. Turn all the burners to high, cover, and heat the grill until hot and the wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 15 minutes. Turn the primary burner to medium-high and turn off the other burner(s). (Adjust the primary burner as needed to maintain the grill temperature around 325 degrees.)

4. Clean and oil the cooking grate. Place the ribs, meat-side down, on the grill over the water-filled pan; the ribs may overlap slightly. Cover (positioning the lid vents over the meat if using charcoal) and cook until the ribs are deep red and smoky, about 2 hours, flipping and rotating the racks halfway through. During the final 20 minutes of grilling, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 250 degrees.

5. Set a wire rack inside a rimmed baking sheet and add just enough water to cover the bottom of the baking sheet. Remove the ribs from the grill, lay them on the wire rack, and cover tightly with foil. Continue to cook the ribs in the oven until

tender and a fork inserted into the ribs meets no resistance, 1½ to 2½ hours longer.

6. Remove the ribs from the oven, loosen the foil to release steam, and let rest for 30 minutes. Unwrap the ribs and brush them evenly with half of the sauce. Slice the ribs between the bones and serve with the remaining sauce in a bowl on the side.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Pork Ribs: We love pork ribs, but not all ribs are created equal, and we call for different types of ribs for different recipes, depending on which style works best. Here are the key differences between the varieties available.



SPARERIBS

Ribs from near the pig's fatty belly. They need a fair amount of home trimming.



ST. LOUIS-STYLE

Spareribs that have been trimmed of skirt meat and excess cartilage. Minimal fuss.



BABY BACK

Smaller, leaner ribs from the (adult) pig's back. Tender, though the meat dries out too quickly for some recipes.

Memphis-Style Barbecued Spareribs

In Memphis, ribs get their flavor not from barbecue sauce, but from both a dry spice rub and a thin, vinegary liquid—called a mop—that is basted on the ribs throughout cooking. Pit masters in Memphis also sprinkle some of the rub over the ribs just before they come off the grill, giving these ribs their hallmark flavor and crisp, crusty exterior.

We experimented with almost everything on our spice rack, and along the way we discovered three essential rules for this spice rub. First, salt is a must. Second, sugar is essential to mellow the flavor of the more potent spices and to balance the salt. It's common to see salt and sugar in equal amounts, but this formula was too salty for us. We think 3 parts brown sugar (which we like for its light molasses flavor) to 1 part salt is just about right. Third, because some of the rub is sprinkled over the ribs just before they come off the grill, it's best to avoid spices that taste harsh straight from the jar. Cumin, which appears in many recipes, falls into this category.

The spice rub is key, but do the rubbed ribs really need to “cure” overnight, as many recipes suggest? We found that ribs absorb plenty of flavor in just 1 hour—basically, the time it takes to soak wood chips and fire up the grill. However, if you have the time, allowing the ribs to “cure” with the rub for as long as possible (up to 1 day) will yield more deeply flavored ribs. We also discovered that overnight soaks in salty brines, another step recommended by several sources, gave the meat a firm, spongy texture that we didn't care for. Parboiling was the most puzzling approach taken in some older recipes. This messy technique robbed the ribs of their meaty flavor and toughened them as well. But as with many other rib

recipes, we found no harm in finishing them in the oven, which speeds up the cooking time and is more foolproof than having to add more coals and finishing them on the grill.

Memphis ribs are never shellacked with a sticky sauce, but they are typically brushed with a thin liquid, called a mop, as they cook. What goes into the mop is open to debate, although vinegar is pretty much a constant. Other common choices include beer, juice, and water. Our favorite mop is a mixture of apple cider and cider vinegar. Brushed onto the ribs about every 30 minutes, this simple mop adds a pleasing balance of sweetness and acidity.

We thought it a shame to throw out the leftover mop, so we simmered it down to make a dipping sauce to serve with the ribs. We added a pinch of our spice rub, along with hot sauce, for an extra hit of flavor.

No doubt about it: these ribs take a good piece of time. But the combination of smoke, spice, and pork is unbeatable.

REMOVING THE RIB MEMBRANE



1. At one end of the rack, loosen the edge of the membrane with the tip of a paring knife or your finger.



2. Grab the membrane with a paper towel and pull slowly—it should come off in one piece. The membrane itself is very thin, so removing it should not expose the rib bones.



MEMPHIS-STYLE BARBECUED SPARERIBS

SERVES 6

If you can't find St. Louis-style racks, three 1 1/2-pound racks baby back ribs will work fine; the cooking time will remain the same. These ribs are moderately spicy, but you can adjust the amounts of cayenne and hot sauce as desired.

- 1/4 cup paprika
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- Pepper
- Salt
- 2 teaspoons garlic powder
- 2 teaspoons onion powder
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper (see note above)
- 2 (2 1/2- to 3-pound) full racks pork spareribs, preferably St. Louis cut (see note above), trimmed of any large pieces of fat and membrane removed (see page 155)
- 3 cups apple cider
- 1 cup cider vinegar
- 2 cups wood chips, soaked, drained, and sealed in a foil packet (see page 159)
- 2 teaspoons hot sauce (see note above)

1. Combine the paprika, sugar, chili powder, 2 tablespoons pepper, 1 tablespoon salt, garlic powder, onion powder, and cayenne in a bowl. Measure out and reserve 7 teaspoons of the spice mixture for finishing the ribs and sauce. Pat the ribs dry with paper towels and rub them evenly with the remaining spice mixture. Wrap the meat in plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature for at least 1 hour, or refrigerate for up to 1 day. (If refrigerated, let sit at room temperature for 1 hour before grilling.)

2. Bring the cider and vinegar to a simmer in a small saucepan over medium heat. Remove the mop from the heat and cover to keep warm.

3A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open the bottom grill vents halfway. Light a large chimney starter three-quarters full with charcoal briquettes (75 briquettes; 4 1/2 quarts). When the coals are hot, pour them into a steeply banked pile against one side of the grill. Place the wood chip packet on top of the coals. Set the cooking grate in place, cover, and open the lid vents halfway. Heat the grill until hot and the wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 5 minutes.

3B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Place the wood chip packet directly on the primary burner. Turn all the burners to high, cover, and heat the grill until hot and the wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 15 minutes. Turn the primary burner to medium-high and turn off the other burner(s). (Adjust the primary burner as needed to maintain the grill temperature around 325 degrees.)

4. Clean and oil the cooking grate. Place the ribs, meat-side down, on the cool part of the grill, away from the coals and flames; the ribs may overlap slightly. Cover (positioning the lid vents over the meat if using charcoal) and cook until the ribs are deep red and smoky, about 2 hours, flipping, rotating, and switching the ribs and basting with the warm mop every 30 minutes. During the final 20 minutes of grilling, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 250 degrees.

5. Remove the ribs from the grill, lay them meat-side up on a rimmed baking sheet, and cover tightly with foil. Continue to cook the ribs in the oven

until tender and a fork inserted into the ribs meets no resistance, 1½ to 2½ hours longer, basting with the warm mop every 30 minutes.

6. Remove the ribs from the oven and unwrap. Position an oven rack 6 inches from the broiler element and heat the broiler. Sprinkle the ribs evenly with 2 tablespoons of the reserved spice mixture and broil until browned and dry on the surface and the spices are fragrant, about 2 minutes, flipping the ribs halfway through.

7. Remove the ribs from the oven, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 30 minutes. While the ribs rest, add the remaining 1 teaspoon spice mixture to the remaining mop and simmer, uncovered, until thickened and saucy, 10 to 15 minutes. Stir in the hot sauce and season with salt and pepper to taste. Slice the ribs between the bones and serve with the sauce in a bowl on the side. (To reheat, place the ribs in a baking dish and heat in a 350-degree oven, uncovered, until hot, 10 to 15 minutes; brush with some of the sauce if they begin to look dry.)

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Grill Tongs: We usually steer away from trends, but recently we picked up a few of the latest grill tongs on the market. Unfortunately, most looked and performed like medieval torture devices, with sharp, serrated edges that nicked the surface of steaks and flaked our fish. Our overall winner was a plain pair of OXO Good Grips 16-Inch Locking Tongs (\$13.95). Not only do they grip, turn, and move food around the grill easily, but they are also long enough to keep hands a safe distance from the grill.

Lexington-Style Pulled Pork

Piled atop a soft bun or white bread with bread-and-butter pickles as garnish, pulled pork is a true superstar. Different regions of the country have their own versions, but almost all of them require at least a day of effort (if not more) and tedious hours of grill tending from the chef. We set out to see if there was a less labor-intensive way to produce authentic-tasting pulled pork. We picked the traditional Lexington-style (named after Lexington, North Carolina) pulled pork as our goal, with its tender, sweet, and smoky meat coated in a spicy, tart vinegary sauce.

To reduce the cooking time while still maintaining true barbecue flavor, some recipes rely on indoor smokers or even braising the pork shoulder with liquid smoke, but these methods seemed disingenuous. In previous tests, we had been successful with starting large pieces of meat on the grill before finishing them in the oven. Theoretically, this allows the meat to take on a smoky, barbecued flavor without having it sit over a live fire all day.

We opted to use flavorful pork butt, cut from the shoulder, since it has enough fat to stay moist and succulent during long, slow cooking. Our first tests using this technique resulted in fork-tender meat in just 4 to 5 hours (2 hours on the grill, the rest in the oven), but the smoke flavor that the grill provided dissipated during the pork's time in the oven, leaving it tasting as if it had been simply roasted. To bump up the flavor, we coated the pork with a basic barbecue rub (many recipes use just salt and pepper) before placing it on the grill. To make sure the smoke got down into the meat,

we doubled the amount of wood chips called for in most recipes, burning through 4 cups of chips in just 2 hours of grilling. With this treatment, the pork developed a deep red crust (called “bark” in barbecue circles) and a rich, thick smoke ring that stayed with the pork even after a couple of hours in the oven.

The beauty of the sauce for this style of pulled pork is its simplicity—after all, it’s nothing more than vinegar, sugar, pepper, and ketchup. But even with so few ingredients, it still took some testing to get the balance of flavors just right. As a base, cider vinegar was the clear favorite for its fruity taste. We balanced the vinegar’s edge by adding an equal amount of water. For a touch of sweetness, we added granulated sugar and just enough ketchup to give the sauce body and a rosy color. Although hot sauce was a common theme found in our research, we felt its flavor was distracting here. Pepper added a nice earthy bite, and a pinch of red pepper flakes gave the sauce a kick that matched the pungency of the vinegar. Finally, we were ready to put it all together. After just one bite, we knew we’d found pulled pork heaven.

MAKING A FOIL PACKET



After soaking the wood chips in water for 15 minutes, drain and spread them in the center of a 15 by 12-inch piece of heavy-duty foil. Fold to seal the edges, then cut three or four slits to allow smoke to escape.

LEXINGTON-STYLE PULLED PORK

SERVES 8

Boneless pork butt (also labeled Boston butt) is often wrapped in elastic netting; be sure to remove this netting. To test the meat for tenderness in step 4, stick a fork into the top of the roast, then remove it. If the fork comes out with little or no resistance, the roast is ready; if the fork is difficult to remove or picks up the roast, the roast isn't ready.

PORK

- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 2 tablespoons pepper
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1½ tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 (4- to 5-pound) boneless pork butt (see note above)
- 4 cups wood chips, soaked, drained, and sealed in a foil packet
- 1 (13 by 9-inch) disposable aluminum roasting pan

SAUCE

- 1 cup water
- 1 cup cider vinegar
- ½ cup ketchup
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes

1. FOR THE PORK: Combine the paprika, pepper, brown sugar, and salt in a bowl. Pat the meat dry with paper towels and rub it evenly with the spice mixture. Wrap the meat in plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature for at least 1 hour, or



refrigerate for up to 1 day. (If refrigerated, let sit at room temperature for 1 hour before grilling.)

2a. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open the bottom grill vents halfway. Light a large chimney starter three-quarters full with charcoal briquettes (75 briquettes; 4½ quarts). When the coals are hot, pour them into a steeply banked pile against one side of the grill. Place the wood chip packet on top of the coals. Set the cooking grate in place, cover, and open the lid vents halfway. Heat the grill until hot and the wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 5 minutes.

2b. FOR A GAS GRILL: Place the wood chip packet directly on the primary burner. Turn all the burners to high, cover, and heat the grill until hot and the wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 15 minutes. Turn the primary burner to medium-high and turn off the other burner(s). (Adjust the primary burner as needed to maintain the grill temperature around 325 degrees.)

3. Clean and oil the cooking grate. Place the meat on the cool part of the grill, away from the coals and flames. Cover (positioning the lid vents over the meat if using charcoal) and cook until the pork has a dark, rosy crust, about 2 hours. During the final 20 minutes of grilling, adjust an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees.

4. Transfer the pork to a roasting pan, cover the pan tightly with foil, and roast the pork in the oven until a fork inserted into the center meets no resistance, 2 to 3 hours.

5. FOR THE SAUCE: Meanwhile, whisk all of the sauce ingredients together in a bowl until the sugar and salt are dissolved; set aside. (The sauce can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 4 days.)

6. Remove the pork from the oven and let rest, still covered with foil, for 30 minutes. When cool enough to handle, unwrap the pork and pull the meat into thin shreds, discarding the excess fat and gristle. Toss the pork with ½ cup of the sauce and serve with the remaining sauce in a bowl on the side.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Grill Brushes: We set out to find a grill brush that could make the tedious task of cleaning a gunked-up cooking grate more efficient. What did we find? Brushes with stiffer bristles fared better than their softer counterparts, but none of them worked very well. The bristles on most bent after a few strokes and trapped large quantities of residue, thereby decreasing their efficiency.

Our favorite—the Tool Wizard BBQ Brush (\$12.99)—has no brass bristles to bend, break, or clog with unwanted grease and grime. Instead, this brush has one large woven-mesh stainless steel scrubbing pad, which conforms to any cooking grate's spacing, size, and material. Best of all, the pad is detachable, washable, and replaceable (a spare is included).



SWEDISH COCKTAIL MEATBALLS

CHAPTER SEVEN

Have Slow Cooker, Will Travel

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Swedish Cocktail Meatballs

Swedish meatballs have long been standard cocktail party fare, and for good reason. They're easy to eat off a toothpick in a crowd, and they look appetizing set out in a chafing dish. These meatballs are typically made with ground beef and pork, bound with egg, seasoned with allspice, nutmeg, and dill, and served in a thick sauce enriched with sour cream. The problem with Swedish meatballs is making them. Rolling and browning dozens of meatballs and then building a sauce leaves little time to get everything ready before company arrives.

Enter the slow cooker. Our research turned up several slow-cooker Swedish meatball recipes that promised perfectly cooked meatballs made in and served right out of the slow cooker; all the cook has to do is form the meatballs, drop them raw into the cooker with some broth and flour, and walk away while everything cooks together. But when we tried a few of these recipes, the results were horrible. The meatballs were gray and hard as marbles, and the sauce was bland, watery, and greasy.

But we didn't want to give up on the slow-cooker method yet. To start, we took another look at the meatballs themselves. We began by mixing the ground beef and pork with egg, spices, and sautéed onion. Since greasy sauce was a big problem in our early tests, we knew we needed to precook the meatballs to render some of their fat before they went into the slow cooker. Browning 60 little meatballs in a skillet was messy and time-consuming, so we decided to shift gears. We arranged the raw meatballs on a rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet and popped them into a hot oven. After about 15 minutes, the meatballs were nicely browned and had left most of their fat on the bottom of the pan. But they were still tough.

Many Italian meatball recipes incorporate a panade (bread or bread crumbs soaked in milk) to help keep the meatballs tender. Since these were Swedish meatballs, we saw this as an opportunity to add more Swedish flavors by using rye bread flavored with caraway, a spice popular throughout Scandinavia. Our tasters loved how the rye panade, which we made with sour cream for additional tang, made the meatballs both tender and more Swedish in flavor.

The sauce came together quickly. We started with a base of a flour-and-butter roux (for thickening) and beef broth. For a meatier flavor, we turned to an ingredient the test kitchen often uses to enrich soups, stews, and sauces: soy sauce. Just 2 tablespoons gave the sauce much more backbone without overpowering the other flavors. After mixing in the sour cream at the end of cooking—any earlier and it separated and became clumpy—we had tender, full-flavored meatballs in a rich, well-seasoned sauce, all prepared in the convenience of our slow cooker.

THE TRAVELING SLOW COOKER

It goes without saying that a slow cooker can be your best friend when you're hosting a potluck, but the convenience doesn't end there. Slow cookers can travel, too. And what better way to make sure your dish is piping hot when it's served? Simply make sure the cover is secure. The best way to do that, considering that the insert will already be ripping hot because it's been cooking away and so can't be taped shut, is to set the slow cooker in a deep cardboard box and surround it with kitchen towels to keep it secure. Place an extra set of potholders on the lid to remind yourself that the handles and insert may still be hot when you arrive at the party. And be sure to check with your host ahead of time to make sure there's an outlet at your destination so you can plug in the slow cooker when you arrive.

SWEDISH COCKTAIL MEATBALLS

MAKES ABOUT 60 MEATBALLS

A 1¼-inch ice cream scoop makes it easy to form these cocktail-sized meatballs. If you are keeping the meatballs warm in step 4, do not fully cover the slow cooker or the sauce will break. To turn this recipe into a main course (that would serve 8), in step 2 simply roll the meat mixture into 2-inch meatballs (you should have about 35 meatballs) and proceed with the recipe as directed; serve with buttered egg noodles or steamed white rice on the side.

- 6 tablespoons (¾ stick) unsalted butter
- 2 onions, minced
- 3½ cups beef broth
- 1 cup sour cream
- 4 slices caraway-rye bread, crusts removed, torn into small pieces
- 2 large egg yolks
- ½ teaspoon ground allspice
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 pound 90 percent lean ground beef
- 1 pound ground pork
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh dill

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 475 degrees. Melt 1 tablespoon of the butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the onions and cook until softened, 5 to 7 minutes; transfer to a large bowl. Add ¼ cup of the broth, ¼ cup of the sour cream, bread, egg yolks, allspice, salt, pepper, and nutmeg to the onions and mash with a fork until smooth. Add the beef and pork and knead until well combined.

2. Form the mixture into 1¼-inch meatballs (you should have about 60 meatballs) and transfer to a wire rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet. Bake until lightly browned, about 15 minutes, rotating the baking sheet halfway through. Transfer to the slow-cooker insert.

3. Melt the remaining 5 tablespoons butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Whisk in the flour and cook until beginning to brown, about 3 minutes. Slowly whisk in the remaining 3¼ cups broth, bring to a boil, and transfer to the slow-cooker insert. Cover and cook on low until the meatballs are tender and the sauce is slightly thickened, 4 to 5 hours.

4. Transfer ½ cup of the sauce from the slow-cooker insert to a small bowl. Whisk in the remaining ¾ cup sour cream, soy sauce, and dill; gently stir the sour cream mixture into the slow-cooker insert. Serve. (The meatballs can be kept warm in the slow cooker on low, partially covered, for 1 to 2 hours. Stir occasionally, adding up to 2 tablespoons water as needed to thin the sauce.)

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Slow Cookers: As slow cookers have gained popularity, manufacturers have added new features—and larger price tags. Does more money buy a better slow cooker? To find out, we tested seven models. All the slow cookers did a good job on the cooking tests, but more important were the features we deemed essential: timers that automatically shift to a “keep warm” setting at the end of cooking, a clear lid, an “on” indicator light, and handles on the insert. Our favorite is the All-Clad Stainless Steel Slow Cooker with Ceramic Insert (\$179.95). This cooker aced all of the tests, and it has every feature we want, including insert handles and a clear lid.



Barbecued Shredded Beef Sandwiches

When you want to serve a crowd the flavor of meaty barbecue but don't want to hover over the grill, turn to the slow cooker to do the work for you. Barbecued shredded beef sounds like an ideal recipe for the slow cooker, as both outdoor barbecues and slow cookers use the combination of plenty of time and low heat to tenderize tough cuts of meat. But most of the slow-cooker recipes we found had us simply dumping a few bottles of barbecue sauce over a piece of brisket, turning on the slow cooker, and calling it a day. Eight hours later, the beef was dry, stringy, and chewy. Even worse, the meat tasted more like sour pot roast than barbecue, as the moist heat of the slow cooker washed away the flavor of the sauce.

With smoky, moist, and tender beef cloaked in a tangy sauce as our goal, we started with the meat. Our testing proved brisket to be unreliable—too often it was tough and impossible to shred, even after hours of cooking. Flank steak, round steak, and chuck-eye roast worked better; tasters preferred the chuck for its big, beefy flavor and silky, pull-apart texture.

Although bottled barbecue sauce can be pretty good, we thought the time saved by using the slow cooker afforded us the opportunity to make our own sauce. To create a smoky flavor base, we rendered bacon and cooked onion, chili powder, and paprika in the drippings. Ketchup, brown sugar, and mustard are a must for any barbecue sauce, but tasters wanted deeper, more complex flavor. Neither beef nor chicken broth added the necessary richness, but a surprise ingredient—coffee—gave the sauce a noticeable depth.

We poured this sauce over the beef, and after 10 hours of cooking we had tender meat swimming in a watery sauce; as it cooked, the chuck

exuded juice into the sauce, dulling its flavor and thinning its texture. Using only half the sauce for cooking and reserving half for dressing the cooked meat worked well, especially when we reduced the cooking liquid before adding it back to the beef. Splashes of cider vinegar and hot sauce brightened things up, and a teaspoon of liquid smoke gave the dish a nice smoky flavor.

After pulling the tender meat into shreds, tossing it with the sauce, and piling it high on a bun, we knew we'd hit the mark. We'd finally made slow-cooker barbecued beef that looked and tasted like it had come off the grill.

BARBECUED SHREDDED BEEF SANDWICHES

SERVES 10

Don't shred the meat too finely in step 3; it will break up more as it is combined with the sauce.

- 5 pounds boneless beef chuck-eye roast, trimmed and cut into 4 pieces (see page 168)
- 4 slices bacon, chopped fine
- 1 onion, minced
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1½ cups brewed coffee
- 1½ cups ketchup
- ¼ cup packed dark brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons spicy brown mustard
- 1 tablespoon hot sauce
- 1 tablespoon cider vinegar
- 1 teaspoon liquid smoke
- Salt and pepper
- 10 sandwich rolls, split

1. Place the beef in the slow-cooker insert. Cook the bacon in a large skillet over medium-high heat until crisp, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted

spoon, transfer the bacon to the slow-cooker insert. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons of the bacon fat. Add the onion to the pan and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the chili powder and paprika and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in the coffee, ketchup, sugar, and 1 tablespoon of the mustard and simmer until reduced slightly, about 10 minutes. Add half of the sauce to the slow-cooker insert; allow the remaining sauce to cool and refrigerate in an airtight container. Cover the slow cooker and cook on low until the meat is tender, 9 to 10 hours (or cook on high for 5 to 6 hours).

2. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the meat to a large bowl; cover with foil. Transfer the remaining liquid to a large skillet, skim off the fat, and simmer over medium-high heat until reduced to 1 cup, about 10 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the reserved sauce, the remaining 1 tablespoon mustard, hot sauce, vinegar, and liquid smoke. Return the sauce to the slow-cooker insert.

3. Meanwhile, pull the meat into large chunks, discarding the excess fat and gristle. Return the meat to the slow-cooker insert and toss with the sauce. Let sit, covered, until the meat has absorbed most of the sauce, about 10 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve on the rolls.

PREPARING CHUCK FOR THE SLOW COOKER



After trimming and discarding any exterior fat, cut the roast in half and then cut each piece in half again.

Guinness Beef Stew

Slow cookers and beef stews are a match made in heaven—their shared mantra of “slow and low” produces succulent meat, fork-tender vegetables, and a rich, beefy broth. So why do so many recipes result in desiccated meat, pale, pasty broth, and vegetables from mush city? We set out to develop a robust and flavorful slow-cooker beef stew that would be perfect for sharing with friends in front of a toasty fireplace come January.

We began our testing with the goal of developing a hearty beef stew in the Irish tradition: that is, with Guinness. Guinness, we thought, would add complexity to a fairly straightforward combination of ingredients. After making a few preliminary recipes for Guinness beef stew that used way too much of the stout, giving the stew a harsh, bitter flavor, we decided to scrap them all and start from scratch.

When it comes to braising beef, the test kitchen has always been partial to the chuck cut, from the shoulder of the cow; it's well marbled and has great beefy flavor. We found that searing the meat before adding it to the slow cooker gave it a nice crust and more flavor and helped to balance the strong taste of the stout. To keep with the Irish theme, we included carrots, parsnips, and potatoes (waxy, red-skinned potatoes held their shape nicely during cooking) as our vegetables of choice; we cut the carrots and parsnips into large, rustic pieces so they would absorb lots of flavor without falling apart or becoming mushy during the long cooking.

When it came to the liquid, tasters preferred the mild, neutral meatiness of chicken broth to beef broth. As for the beer, some recipes called for the better part of a six-pack, but we found these versions so harsh and bitter that they were nearly inedible. Starting with two bottles, we



gradually reduced the amount of beer in each test. But by the time the bitterness was subdued, so was most of the beer flavor. Adding the Guinness in two stages (at the beginning for a base flavor and at the end for a fresh kick) helped, but it wasn't until we used a little culinary trickery that we made real progress.

Since stout drinkers often extol the beer's complex coffee/chocolate aroma, we wondered if enhancing these flavors might bolster the perceived stout character of the stew without adding any harshness. We first tested coffee (both instant and fresh-brewed) in the stew, but tasters instantly rejected its distinctive taste. For our next test, we added cocoa to the slow cooker, and tasters raved about the improved stout flavor and lack of bitterness.

The only downside to the cocoa was its slightly acidic nature, but a quick switch to bittersweet chocolate left us with a beefy stew that was long on flavor and short on bitterness—just the dish to share with family and friends on a chilly night.

GUINNESS BEEF STEW

SERVES 8

Be gentle when stirring in the flour in step 3 because the fork-tender beef will fall apart if stirred too aggressively.

- 4 pounds boneless beef chuck-eye roast, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch cubes**
Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil**
- 2 onions, minced**
- 4 cups low-sodium chicken broth**
- 1½ cups Guinness Draught (see page 171)**
- 1 ounce bittersweet chocolate, chopped**
- 1 tablespoon light brown sugar**
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme**

- 2 bay leaves**
- 1½ pounds small red potatoes (about 9), scrubbed**
- 1 pound parsnips, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks**
- 5 carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks**
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour**
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley**

1. Pat the beef dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat 2 teaspoons of the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add half of the beef and cook, stirring occasionally, until browned on all sides, about 8 minutes. Transfer to the slow-cooker insert; repeat with 2 teaspoons more oil and the remaining beef.

2. Add the remaining 2 teaspoons oil, the onions, and ¼ teaspoon salt to the now-empty skillet and cook until the onions are softened and lightly browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the broth, 1¼ cups of the Guinness, chocolate, sugar, thyme, and bay leaves and bring to a boil, using a wooden spoon to scrape up the browned bits on the bottom of the pan. Transfer to the slow-cooker insert.

3. Add the potatoes, parsnips, and carrots to the slow-cooker insert. Cover and cook on low until the meat is tender, 9 to 10 hours (or cook on high for 6 to 7 hours). Set the slow cooker to high. Whisk the flour and remaining ¼ cup Guinness together in a small bowl until smooth, then stir into the slow-cooker insert. Cook, covered, until the sauce thickens, about 15 minutes. Discard the bay leaves, stir in the parsley, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Guinness for Stew: While shopping for our Guinness Beef Stew recipe, we were surprised to find two options in the beer aisle: Guinness Extra Stout and Guinness Draught. Straight from the bottle, both beers have their merits. But after nine hours in the slow cooker, Guinness Draught was the clear winner. Tasters noticed the “clean, roasted taste” of the stew made with Guinness Draught, whereas the stew made with Guinness Extra Stout, although still acceptable, was noted for having a slightly “tannic, bitter” aftertaste.

Texas Chili con Carne

Since at least the mid-1800s, chili has been relied upon to feed the masses while also keeping them happy. Here at the test kitchen, we’re big fans of chili, and one of our favorite styles features big chunks of tender beef in a thick, fiery red sauce. In Texas this chili is called a “bowl of red.” We wondered if we could adapt this Lone Star classic to the slow cooker, for a hearty main dish that would satisfy friends and family.

Your typical Texas chili-head believes there is one and only one true recipe for chili, and that is one in which large pieces of cubed beef are browned and then simmered with dried chiles in broth or water. Many authentic chili recipes demand a mix of dried chiles—which must be toasted, seeded, and ground—in place of all-purpose supermarket chili powder. Tomatoes and onions are a matter of local preference, although the former are not accepted in true Texas chili circles. And beans are strictly for amateurs. Let’s get this straight: this dish is about meat.

In the test kitchen we’ve found that ready-cut stew meat usually makes dry, dull chili. These scraps

often come from pretty lean parts of the cow, and for chili you want something with fat and flavor. A chuck-eye roast is our top choice for chili, and it takes just 10 minutes to cut up the meat.

For most slow-cooker chili recipes you just dump the meat and other ingredients into the pot, throw on the lid, and hope for the best. You would never make Texas chili this way on the stovetop; the beef is always browned. Just to make sure this extra step was worth the mess and time, we made two batches of chili—one with raw beef, the other with beef browned in a hot skillet filmed with oil. There was no comparison. The chili made with browned beef tasted much, much beefier. It was also less watery.

With our beef browned and waiting in the slow cooker, we sautéed onions and jalapeño chiles. Instead of taking the trouble to toast and grind dried chiles, we were hoping to use commercial chili powder and cumin, but they tasted bland. Cooking these spices with the onions and some fresh chiles brought out their flavor. Canned chipotle chiles (dried, smoked jalapeños) added more complexity, and tasters preferred chili made with—that’s right—tomatoes. For an herbal note, we added some oregano at the end of cooking so its flavor would stay bold and potent.

At this point we were more than happy with the taste of the chili, but the sauce was still on the thin side. Pureed corn tortillas turned out to be part of the solution, but we still needed help. We got that help quite by accident one morning when we were rushed for time and used unevenly cut pieces of beef, some large and some quite small. By the end of the day, the smaller chunks had cooked to the point of falling apart, but the larger chunks held their own. Now we had a meaty chili with a varied texture and a sauce that had just the right beefy thickness.



While chili con carne purists don't favor beans in their chili, we found that their starch helped balance the heat, and adding three cans also extended the pot. We found that it's best to stir in the beans during the last minutes of cooking so they'll retain their shape and texture.

THE AMERICAN TABLE CHILI CON CARNE

Nobody knows exactly when chili con carne was invented, but by the mid-1800s it was a staple in Texas. The rest of the country discovered this iconic dish in 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair. Called the World's Columbian Exposition (in honor of the 400th anniversary of Columbus discovering the New World), the fair drew more than 25 million visitors. The Texas exhibit contained an authentic San Antonio chili stand selling bowls of its signature dish. The chili was a huge hit, and soon enterprising restaurateurs were opening chili joints in every major American city.

Chili wasn't the only culinary icon to get its start at the fair. Juicy Fruit gum, Cracker Jack, Shredded Wheat cereal, and the hamburger were introduced to America at the 1893 fair. And the architecture at the fairgrounds was impressive enough to have served as the inspiration for two of America's better-known fantasy lands: Disneyland (Walt Disney's father was a builder on the project) and Oz, whose creator, L. Frank Baum, visited the fair on several occasions before writing *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900.

TEXAS CHILI CON CARNE

SERVES 12 TO 14

Eight jalapeños can be substituted for the chipotles. This chili is spicy; for milder chili, reduce the amounts of chipotles and jalapeños by half. Serve with shredded cheddar cheese and chopped red onion.

- 6 (6-inch) corn tortillas
- 3 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 (28-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon minced canned chipotle chiles in adobo (see note above)
- 1½ tablespoons dark brown sugar
- 7–8 pounds boneless beef chuck-eye roast, trimmed, half cut into ¾-inch cubes, half cut into 1½-inch cubes
- Salt and pepper
- 5 tablespoons vegetable oil
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons water
- 3 onions, chopped medium
- 4 jalapeño chiles, seeded and chopped fine (see note above)
- 6 tablespoons chili powder
- 2 tablespoons ground cumin
- 8 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 (15.5-ounce) cans pinto or kidney beans (optional), drained and rinsed
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano

1. Toast 3 of the tortillas in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until they bubble and turn spotty brown, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Transfer to a plate and repeat with the remaining 3 tortillas. Tear the tortillas into rough pieces and combine with 2 cups of the chicken broth in a microwave-safe bowl. Microwave on high until the tortillas are mushy, about 2 minutes. Process in a food processor until smooth, about 30 seconds, then

transfer to the slow-cooker insert. Add the tomatoes and chipotles to the food processor and process until smooth, about 20 seconds. Transfer to the slow-cooker insert, along with the remaining 1 cup chicken broth and sugar.

2. Pat the beef dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat 2 teaspoons of the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add one-third of the beef and cook, stirring occasionally, until browned on all sides, about 8 minutes. Transfer the browned beef to the slow-cooker insert. Repeat twice more with 4 more teaspoons oil and the remaining beef. Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the water to the skillet, scrape up any browned bits with a wooden spoon, and return the skillet to medium-high heat. Cook until almost all the water has evaporated, about 3 minutes. Transfer the skillet contents to the slow-cooker insert and wipe the skillet dry with paper towels.

3. Heat the remaining 3 tablespoons oil over medium heat until shimmering. Add the onions, jalapeños, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt and cook until the onions are softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the chili powder and cumin and cook, stirring occasionally, until the spices are deeply fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer the vegetables to the slow-cooker insert. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons water to the skillet, scrape up any browned bits, and transfer the contents to the slow-cooker insert. Stir until well combined.

4. Cover and cook on low until the meat is tender, 9 to 10 hours (or cook on high for 6 to 7 hours). Stir in the beans (if using) and cook for 15 minutes. Stir in the oregano and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

TRIMMING MEAT FOR TEXAS CHILI



For chili with a hearty texture, cut half of the meat into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch pieces that will break down during cooking and thicken the chili. Cut the other half into $1\frac{1}{4}$ -inch pieces to give the chili its chunky heft.

Sweet-and-Sour Ribs

Sticky, sweet, and tender, ribs have long been a favorite dish to share in Chinese restaurants. We thought we could use the low, constant heat of our slow cooker to make super-tender sweet-and-sour ribs ourselves—just the thing for sharing at a potluck.

We were happy to find a multitude of slow-cooker recipes. They were all fairly similar: two racks of baby back ribs were cut into 3-bone segments (so they'd better fit in the cooker), placed in the insert, and covered with chopped onions, peppers, garlic, ginger, and canned pineapple chunks (all of which were strained out at the end). The sauce ingredients were added next; ketchup, duck sauce, honey, and water (or broth) were the most common ingredients in the recipes that we found. Sadly, the results were also fairly similar: bland and bloated ribs floating in a thin, washed-out sauce. The problem was that the ribs release a lot of liquid when they cook, and in the closed environment of the slow cooker there was no way for any liquid to evaporate.

Starting from scratch, we knew we'd have to build a sauce that was concentrated in flavor and texture, and that meant precooking on

the stovetop. We started by sautéing onion, red pepper, garlic, and ginger to cook off excess moisture and intensify their flavor. Our next step was to replace the liquid-y sauce ingredients with more potent, thicker counterparts. As an alternative to ketchup, we added tomato paste for color and richness. Apricot jelly worked well in place of duck sauce (which is also apricot-based), and brown sugar replaced the honey. Soy sauce and red pepper flakes lent seasoning, rice vinegar provided the sour element, and frozen pineapple concentrate packed substantial fruit flavor (way more than the canned chunks). We let this sauce cook down in the skillet with the sautéed vegetables and poured it over the ribs.

But submerging a stack of rib segments in the sauce meant that the ones in the very center of the pile were insulated and cooked at a slower rate. As we were wondering if we would ever get this recipe to work, it occurred to us to try partially elevating the ribs out of the liquid so they could cook more evenly. By simply halving each rack of ribs, we could stand the pieces up in a ring around the outside of the insert, where the heating coils are. This technique resulted in evenly cooked ribs with concentrated meaty flavor and even allowed them to brown a little right against the heat source.

Although we were starting with a thicker sauce, the liquid released during cooking was still making it too thin to properly glaze the ribs. To solve the problem, we strained and defatted the sauce, reduced it again on the stovetop, and added a bit of cornstarch to thicken it further. When the tender ribs were tossed in this thick sauce, they took on a glossy, sticky sheen and were as good as any sweet-and-sour ribs we'd ever eaten at a restaurant.

SWEET-AND-SOUR RIBS

SERVES 6

Racks of ribs larger than 2 pounds will not properly fit in most slow cookers; ribs larger than 1½ pounds may require an extra 30 to 60 minutes of cooking time.

- 1 onion, chopped coarse
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and chopped coarse
- 1 (6-inch) piece fresh ginger, peeled and chopped coarse
- 6 garlic cloves, peeled
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 (12-ounce) jar apricot jelly
- 1 (6-ounce) can frozen pineapple juice concentrate
- ¼ cup packed dark brown sugar
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- ¼ cup plus 1 tablespoon rice vinegar
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 (1½-pound) racks baby back ribs, halved (see note above)
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch

1. Pulse the onion and bell pepper together in a food processor until finely chopped, about 6 pulses; transfer to a bowl. Add the ginger, garlic, and tomato paste to the now-empty food processor and pulse until coarsely ground, about 10 pulses. Heat the oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Cook the onion mixture until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the ginger mixture and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in the jelly, pineapple juice concentrate, sugar, ¼ cup of the soy sauce, ¼ cup of the vinegar, and the red pepper flakes and cook until slightly thickened, about

5 minutes. (The sauce can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days.)

2. Pat the ribs dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Following the photos, arrange the ribs with the wide ends facing down and the meaty side against the interior wall of the slow-cooker insert; pour the sauce over the ribs. Cover and cook on low until the ribs are tender, 4 to 5 hours (or cook on high for 2½ to 3½ hours). Transfer the ribs to a carving board and tent with foil.

3. Strain and defat the cooking liquid, discard the solids, and transfer the liquid to a large skillet. Simmer over medium heat until reduced by half, about 5 minutes. Whisk the cornstarch and the remaining 2 tablespoons soy sauce together in a small bowl, then stir into the skillet. Cook until the sauce is glossy and thickened, about 2 minutes. Return the sauce to the slow-cooker insert and stir in the remaining 1 tablespoon vinegar and season with salt and pepper to taste. Slice the ribs between the bones, add to the slow-cooker insert, and toss until well coated. Serve.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Fat Separators: Although you can also use a wide, shallow spoon, a fat separator is an easier way to remove the fat from the surface of the sauce for our Sweet-and-Sour Ribs. Once the fat settles to the top of the separator, the remaining liquid can be poured off easily. Our favorite fat separator is the 4-cup Trudeau Gravy Separator, which costs about \$10. We like this separator's wide mouth and built-in strainer, which is especially helpful when you're defatting pan drippings that are still mixed with chunks of aromatic vegetables, herb sprigs, or other flavorings.

ARRANGING THE RIBS



1. Stand the rack halves up along the perimeter of the slow-cooker insert with the wide ends facing down and the meatier side of the ribs snug against the insert wall.



2. Spoon the sauce over the ribs, allowing it to coat the front and back of each piece.

White Chicken Chili

White chili is a simple yet flavorful stew of shredded chicken and white beans. It's spiked with spicy green chiles and earthy cumin and coriander, then finished with fresh cilantro. We figured it would make a good candidate for the slow cooker: the chicken would cook gradually and flavor the broth, the beans would turn creamy, and the chiles would lace the dish with heat.

Many slow-cooker recipes have you dump chicken, beans, canned green chiles, onions, garlic, spices, and chicken broth into the slow cooker and let it go for hours. This hands-off approach had ease in its favor but not much else. We found the results to be more like soup than stew, and by the end of cooking, the dish had no chile flavor—or any flavor at all, no matter how potent the spices had been at the start. We resigned ourselves to doing a little work up front, with the hope that the results would justify the effort.



We identified the best features of the recipes we'd tested and set out to combine them. First, we sautéed the onions, garlic, chiles, and spices before putting them into the slow cooker, a classic cooking technique that builds a foundation of flavor and did indeed give the chili some backbone. Canned green chiles were squishy, rubbery, and had zero heat—and that was before they had cooked for hours. Fresh jalapeños improved the stew considerably. To build another layer of flavor, we reserved some of the sauté to stir in at the end of cooking.

We'd been adding boneless, skinless chicken breasts directly to the slow cooker but suspected that bone-in, skin-on thighs would add deeper flavor. We browned them first, then removed and discarded the skin and used the rendered fat to sauté the onion mixture. The chili was notably better—the dark meat held up better to the long cooking time and wasn't in as much danger of drying out.

The flavor was much improved, but the texture remained problematic. In the test kitchen, we know from experience that slow cookers don't allow for evaporation, and so we cut back the amount of chicken broth. We also upped the amount of beans, from the two cans used in many recipes to three cans. The chili was now significantly less soupy and became even better when we pureed one can of beans with some of the broth. The texture was good, but the flavor needed reinforcing.

The idea of corn came up next. If you didn't grow up in the South or Southwest, you may not know about hominy, a dried corn from which the hull and germ have been removed. We emptied a can into the food processor with the beans, and it made for a velvety-smooth chili base with a hearty note of toasted corn.

To finish, we stirred in the usual cilantro and were about to add a squeeze of lime when we spied a jar of pickled jalapeños. We chopped a few and stirred them in for a kick and some sweetness.

WHITE CHICKEN CHILI

SERVES 8

Four bone-in, skin-on split chicken breasts will work in place of the thighs. Serve this chili with diced avocado and lime wedges.

- 3 (15.5-ounce) cans cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 (16-ounce) can white hominy, drained and rinsed
- 3 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- Salt and pepper
- 3 pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs (see note above), trimmed
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 onions, minced
- 4 jalapeño chiles, seeded and chopped fine
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1½ tablespoons ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons ground coriander
- ¼ cup finely chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 tablespoons jarred pickled jalapeños, drained and minced

1. Puree 1 can of the beans, the hominy, broth, and $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt in a blender until completely smooth. Pour into the slow-cooker insert.

2. Pat the chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook the thighs, skin-side down, until the skin is well browned, about 5 minutes. Remove and discard the skin, then transfer the thighs to the slow-cooker insert.

3. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons of the fat from the skillet. Add the onions, chiles, and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt and cook until golden brown, stirring occasionally, about 8 minutes. Add the garlic, cumin, and

coriander and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer half of the onion mixture to the slow-cooker insert; allow the remaining onion mixture to cool and refrigerate in an airtight container.

4. Add the remaining 2 cans beans to the slow-cooker insert. Cover and cook on low until the chicken is tender, about 4 hours. Transfer the chicken to a bowl. When cool enough to handle, discard the bones and shred the chicken into bite-sized pieces. Stir the cilantro, pickled jalapeños, shredded chicken, and reserved onion mixture into the slow-cooker insert and let sit for about 5 minutes to warm through. Serve.

Country Captain Chicken

With our White Chicken Chili (page 178) under our belts, we knew we could make a chicken dish in the slow cooker that would boast tender meat and be robustly flavored. So we decided to forge ahead and try the fragrant stew known as country captain. Rich with mango, raisins, tomatoes, and curry, this stew has flavors that are bold enough to withstand hours in a slow cooker.

We started by browning bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs, which we knew from our White Chicken Chili would cook up moist and tender. To avoid a mouthful of rubbery chicken skin, we removed it after browning without sacrificing any flavor.

Unlike tough cuts of meat, chicken will overcook easily—even in a slow cooker. Many recipes called for 8 hours of cooking on the low setting, but this left us with chicken so soft it literally fell off the bone. We found that 6 hours, for 4 pounds of chicken thighs, was a much better option, making this recipe more suitable to a day when you're around the house—and heading out that night—as opposed to a workday.

Although the chicken tasted great, the long, slow cooking was taking a toll on the seasonings; the curry flavor had faded, and not a hint of sweetness remained in the raisins and mango. Bumping up the amount of curry to a whopping 2 tablespoons helped, but swapping the mango and raisins for a jar of mango chutney really made a difference, adding just the right amount of sweet-tart flavor.

With the full array of country captain garnishes (nuts, coconut, fruit) on the buffet table, tasters lined up to enjoy a slow-cooked feast.

THE AMERICAN TABLE COUNTRY CAPTAIN CHICKEN

Although some sources claim this recipe was invented in the American South, most food historians believe this vibrant stew was introduced to the residents of Savannah by British sea captains who had traveled along the spice route during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. In any case, the dish has its roots in India. The first printed recipe we found appeared in a cookbook from 1857, and from the twentieth century onward, country captain became a staple in many Southern and all-purpose cookbooks, including the original *Joy of Cooking* (1931). President Franklin D. Roosevelt is said to have been a fan of this dish, having enjoyed it on his visits to Warm Springs, Georgia, for rest and recuperation.



COUNTRY CAPTAIN CHICKEN

SERVES 6

Basic curry powder turns bitter after 6 hours in a slow cooker, so stick with Madras curry powder. By tradition, this dish can be garnished with any or all of the following: sliced toasted almonds, shredded coconut, diced Granny Smith apples, and diced banana. Steamed long-grain rice is a must. Unlike beef, which can be browned and chilled the night before it goes into the slow cooker, once the chicken is browned it should be cooked right away.

- 8 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs
(about 4 pounds), trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 onions, chopped coarse
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded,
and chopped coarse
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 5 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 (9-ounce) jar mango chutney, such as
Major Grey's
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons Madras curry powder
(see note above)
- 1½ teaspoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper

1. Pat the chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add the chicken and brown on both sides,

about 10 minutes. Cool the chicken slightly on a plate, remove and discard the skin, and transfer the chicken to the slow-cooker insert.

2. Discard all but 1 tablespoon of the fat from the skillet and return the pan to medium-high heat. Add the onions, bell pepper, and ½ teaspoon salt and cook until the vegetables soften, about 5 minutes. Add the tomatoes, broth, and tomato paste and, using a wooden spoon, scrape up the browned bits from the pan bottom. Simmer until thick and smooth, about 2 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the chutney, garlic, curry powder, paprika, thyme, and cayenne. Pour the mixture into the slow-cooker insert, submerging the chicken in the sauce.

3. Cover and cook on low until the chicken is tender, about 6 hours. Turn off the slow cooker, remove the lid, and gently stir the sauce to recombine. Replace the lid and let sit for about 15 minutes to thicken the sauce before serving.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Madras Curry Powder: Sweeter and hotter than regular curry powder, whose flavor fades and turns bitter after hours of cooking, Madras curry powder can stay the distance in the slow cooker when you're making Country Captain Chicken. But that doesn't mean you have to travel along the old spice route to find it. Madras curry powder is widely available in supermarkets. In the test kitchen we like Sun Brand Madras Curry Powder, which has a more complex flavor than the other brands we tried.



OLD-FASHIONED CIDER-BAKED HAM

CHAPTER EIGHT

Potluck Centerpieces

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Grilled Mustard-Glazed Pork Loin

Two surefire ways to dress up a pork roast are to give it a flavorful, deeply caramelized crust on the grill and to serve it with a savory-sweet mustard glaze. So why not the best of both worlds: a grilled pork roast cloaked in a sharp and sweet mustard glaze?

Identifying the right roast was easy. Boneless pork loin roasts are large, tender, widely available, relatively quick to cook, and easy to carve. This cut is very lean and can easily dry out if overcooked, so we'd have to be careful not to mishandle it. Loin roasts come with a thin layer of fat on the surface, and our tasters much preferred the added moisture and flavor that resulted from leaving it untrimmed, especially when we scored it.

The test kitchen's method for grilling large cuts of meat is to use indirect heat—the fire is on one part of the grill and the meat on the cooler part, opposite the coals and flames—which allows the meat to cook through without the exterior burning. We did find, however, that a better crust developed when we browned the roast over the hot part of the grill before moving it to the cool side.

Next, we turned our attention to the mustard glaze. We bought a dozen types of mustard, slathered them onto as many roasts, and gathered tasters to evaluate. None of the mustards were total failures, but the clear winner was grainy mustard, which tasters loved for its spicy crunch. As for the glaze's other elements, we rejected honey as too distinct and jam as too chunky and sweet. But our last test turned up the ideal base for the mustard glaze: apple jelly was smooth and not too sweet, and its flavor married perfectly with the main attractions. A little brown sugar (for improved browning), garlic, and fresh thyme added extra flavor.

In most recipes the glaze is brushed onto the roast in the last few moments of cooking, but this resulted in little flavor. We made some extra glaze and rubbed it into the meat prior to grilling, then brushed the roast with the remainder early and often once it hit the grill. The initial wet rub improved the crust, and frequent applications helped develop a thick, attractive, and flavorful shellac of glaze on the roast. For a final punch of mustard flavor, we reserved some glaze to drizzle on the slices of meat just before serving.

GRILLED MUSTARD-GLAZED PORK LOIN

SERVES 8

Dijon and yellow mustards also work well in the glaze, but make certain to use apple jelly, not apple butter. The length and diameter of boneless pork roasts can vary dramatically; note that short, wide roasts will take longer to cook through than long, thin roasts.

- ½ cup whole grain mustard (see note above)
- 6 tablespoons apple jelly (see note above)
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¾ teaspoon pepper
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 (2½- to 3-pound) boneless pork loin roast (see note above), scored and tied (see page 186)

1. Whisk the mustard, jelly, sugar, oil, thyme, garlic, pepper, and salt together in a bowl. Measure out and reserve ¾ cup of the sauce for cooking; set aside the remaining sauce for serving. Pat the pork loin dry with paper towels and coat it evenly with ½ cup of the sauce reserved for cooking.



2A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open the bottom grill vents halfway. Light a large chimney starter filled with charcoal briquettes (100 briquettes; 6 quarts). When the coals are hot, pour them in an even layer over half the grill. Set the cooking grate in place, cover, and open the lid vents halfway. Heat the grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

2B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all the burners to high, cover, and heat the grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave the primary burner on high and turn off the other burner(s). (Adjust the primary burner as needed to maintain the grill temperature around 350 degrees.)

3. Clean and oil the cooking grate. Place the pork loin on the hotter part of the grill, directly over the coals and flames. Cook (covered if using gas) until well browned on all sides, 12 to 20 minutes, turning as needed.

4. Flip the pork loin fat-side up and slide to the cooler part of the grill, away from the coals and flames. Brush the pork with 2 tablespoons more sauce reserved for cooking. Cover (positioning the lid vents over the pork if using charcoal) and continue to cook until the center registers 140 to 145 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 30 to 50 minutes longer, brushing every 10 minutes with the remaining sauce reserved for cooking.

5. Transfer the pork loin to a carving board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 20 minutes. Remove the twine, cut the meat into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick slices, and transfer to a serving platter. Whisk any accumulated juice into the sauce set aside for serving, spoon it over the meat, and serve.

SCORING AND TYING PORK LOIN



1. Use a sharp knife to cut a shallow crosshatch pattern into the fat layer. This will encourage the fat to render.

2. Then tie the roast tightly at 1-inch intervals to give it an even shape and promote even cooking on the grill.

Old-Fashioned Cider-Baked Ham

A big, smoky ham glazed with sweet apple cider and studded with cloves certainly sounds ideal as a potluck centerpiece. But the reality is that although most cider-baked hams taste good enough, they really don't sport much spicy apple flavor. Could we develop a technique that would infuse the ham with big apple flavor through and through?

We decided to base our recipe on an uncut cured ham, as uncut ham has a fat layer that can be trimmed and scored to give the glaze something to hang onto and seep into. We also wanted to have an old-fashioned ham that we could slice ourselves.

We tried the test kitchen's method for cooking cured ham in an oven bag along with cider, baking it in a relatively cool oven until the interior reached 100 degrees. We then took off the

bag, cranked up the heat, and repeatedly basted the ham until a thick, glossy coating formed. This gave us a nice-looking ham but little apple flavor. Looking for more cider punch, we tried marinating the ham in cider overnight. After several tests, we determined that just 4 hours in the cider was enough time to add significant apple flavor.

But we still needed to work on the glaze. The cider rolled right off the ham and required constant reapplication. Thicker apple jelly and apple butter coated the ham better than the cider, but they didn't provide the same fresh apple flavor. Reducing the cider to a syrupy state on the stovetop proved to be a much better solution; the reduced cider was sticky enough to cling to the ham in just one application, meaning that we didn't have to continually baste our ham, and it provided superior apple flavor. A little mustard added to the glaze supplied a spicy contrast to the sweet cider. For a final touch, we concocted a simple brown sugar and pepper rub to pat on the ham after the glaze was applied; this mixture caramelized into a crunchy, flavorful crust that contrasted nicely with the tender meat.

Cider-baked hams are traditionally studded with potent cloves. But both powdered and whole cloves proved to be too harsh. Wondering if we could take the edge off of whole cloves by adding them to the cider marinade, we tossed some cloves and a stick of cinnamon (which always pairs well with apple) into the mix. This worked great, especially when we dry-toasted the cloves and cinnamon in a skillet to release their flavor before adding the cider. Now this ham not only looked amazing but had deep cider flavor and a spicy crust as well.

OLD-FASHIONED CIDER-BAKED HAM

SERVES 20

We prefer a bone-in, uncut cured ham for this recipe, because the exterior layer of fat can be scored, which helps to create a nice crust. A spiral-sliced ham can be used instead, but there won't be much exterior fat, so skip the trimming and scoring in step 2. This recipe requires nearly a gallon of cider and a plastic oven bag. In step 4, be sure to stir the reduced cider mixture frequently to prevent scorching.

- 1 cinnamon stick, broken into rough pieces**
- ¼ teaspoon whole cloves**
- 13 cups apple cider**
- 8 cups ice cubes**
- 1 (7- to 10-pound) bone-in cured half ham, preferably shank end (see note above)**
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard**
- 1 cup packed dark brown sugar**
- 1 teaspoon pepper**

1. Toast the cinnamon and cloves in a large saucepan over medium heat until fragrant, about 3 minutes. Add 4 cups of the cider and bring to a boil. Pour the spiced cider into a large stockpot or a clean bucket, add 4 cups more cider and the ice, and stir until the ice is melted.

2. Meanwhile, remove the skin from the exterior of the ham and trim the fat to a ¼-inch thickness. Score the remaining fat at 1-inch intervals in a cross-hatch pattern. Transfer the ham to the chilled cider mixture (the liquid should nearly cover the ham) and refrigerate for at least 4 hours, or up to 12 hours.

3. Discard the cider mixture and transfer the ham to a plastic oven bag. Add 1 cup more cider to the bag and tie securely. Transfer to a large roasting

pan and cut 4 slits in the top of the bag. Let sit at room temperature for 1½ hours.

4. Adjust an oven rack to the lowest position and heat the oven to 300 degrees. Bake the ham until the center registers 100 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 1½ to 2½ hours. Meanwhile, bring the remaining 4 cups cider and the mustard to a boil in a saucepan over medium heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring often, until the mixture is very thick and reduced to ¼ cup, about 1 hour.

5. Combine the brown sugar and pepper in a small bowl. Remove the ham from the oven and let rest for 5 minutes. Increase the oven temperature to 400 degrees. Following the photos, roll back the oven bag and brush the ham with the reduced cider mixture. Using your hands, carefully press the brown sugar mixture onto the exterior of the ham. Return the ham to the oven and bake until dark brown and caramelized, about 20 minutes. Transfer the ham to a carving board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 15 minutes. Carve and serve.

ADDING FLAVOR TO CIDER-BAKED HAM



1. Brush the ham with the cider reduction for big apple flavor and a base for the crust.



2. Then press a mixture of brown sugar and pepper onto the ham for a spicy-sweet, crackly crust.

Dr Pepper–Glazed Ham

A cured ham without a shiny, sweet glaze is like a hug without a squeeze: incomplete. Traditional glazes provide a welcome counterpoint to the otherwise rich, salty meat, and in addition they lend an attractive luster. We've lacquered hams with everything from apple cider and brown sugar to honey, molasses, and even Coca-Cola. Sure, this last version sounds odd, but it's a tradition that's been in the culinary stratosphere for a long time, probably because the soda's peppery bite perfectly enhances the earthy pork. In fact, the Coke glaze tastes so good that we decided to consider other soda-based glazes. Out of the handful we tested by tasting alongside ham, one came out above the rest: Dr Pepper. We're not sure what the soda's "23 flavors" are, but the unique flavor tasted perfect with the meat. So how do you turn Dr Pepper into a thick, glossy glaze?

First things first—we needed a ham. From previous testing, we knew that a cured (brined) ham was the best option, as it requires little effort beyond reheating and preparing the glaze separately. For the sake of convenience, we selected a spiral-cut ham.

Using what we learned from our cider-baked ham (page 187), we knew that we had to bring the ham to room temperature before baking it, so that its temperature would be more even going into the oven, cutting down on the overall oven time. We also knew to cook the ham in an oven-safe plastic cooking bag, which would heat the meat slowly in a moist environment and protect it from drying out. And last, the ham would have to rest for at least 15 minutes before serving so that the temperature—and juice—would even out through the meat.

For the Dr Pepper glaze, we initially assumed that it was simply a matter of reducing the sweet

soda to a consistency thick enough to stick to the meat, but this approach bombed. The glaze took an hour of steady simmering, and the soda lost all its characteristic flavors (23 down to zilch). Clearly we had to find a way to preserve its flavor, yet make it sticky enough to cling to the meat.

After trying a variety of different approaches, we opted to add a moderate amount of brown sugar. The sugar still flattened out the soda's flavor a bit, but we brought it back up with the addition of fruity orange juice and tangy Dijon mustard. Two applications of the glaze to the meat—once in the oven and then again while the meat rested—created a thick, lacquer-like glaze that tasters loved: complex and satisfying—and decidedly Dr Pepper-flavored.

DR PEPPER-GLAZED HAM

SERVES 20

This recipe requires a plastic oven bag. Grey Poupon Dijon Mustard is the test kitchen's favorite brand of Dijon mustard.

- ¾ cup packed light brown sugar**
- ½ cup Dr Pepper**
- 2 tablespoons orange juice**
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard (see note above)**
- 1 (7- to 10-pound) spiral-sliced, bone-in half ham, preferably shank end**

1. Bring the sugar, Dr Pepper, orange juice, and mustard to a boil in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until the mixture is thickened and reduced to ¾ cup, about 8 minutes. (The glaze can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days; when ready to use, microwave on high until warmed through, 1 to 3 minutes.)

2. Unwrap the ham; remove and discard the plastic disk that covers the bone. Place the ham in a plastic

oven bag and tie securely. Transfer the ham, cut-side down, to a large roasting pan and cut 4 slits in the top of the bag. Let sit at room temperature for 1½ hours.

3. Adjust an oven rack to the lowest position and heat the oven to 250 degrees. Bake the ham until the center registers 100 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 1½ to 2½ hours.

4. Remove the ham from the oven and roll back the oven bag. Brush the ham with the glaze and return to the oven until the glaze becomes sticky, about 10 minutes. Remove from the oven and transfer to a carving board. Brush the ham again with the glaze, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 15 minutes. Carve and serve.

THE AMERICAN TABLE SODA-GLAZED HAM

Although cooking with Dr Pepper might seem a bit odd, using soda as the base for a glaze has become an American tradition, especially in the South, where Coca-Cola and Dr Pepper were born (Atlanta, Georgia, and Waco, Texas, respectively) and cola-glazed ham is a common centerpiece on holiday tables. Search online and you'll find dozens upon dozens of recipes for hams that use a variety of sodas for flavor, from lemon-lime soda to Coca-Cola and Dr Pepper. So what is it that makes soda and ham such a perfect match? The acidity in Dr Pepper, Coke, and their cousins is balanced by a hefty amount of sugar; together, the sweetness and acidity help to tenderize and flavor the meat.

Herb-Crusted Beef Tenderloin

For special occasions, few dishes impress as much as a beef tenderloin. But this cut of meat runs about \$75, so you want to make sure it turns out the best it can be. And while beef tenderloin is very tender, it's often short on flavor. We wanted a beef tenderloin that cooked up both juicy and flavorful.

In the test kitchen we think a crusty, browned exterior is one step toward that goal. And if a thick seared crust is good, we figured that an additional herb crust would be even better. But this opened up another set of cooking problems: the herbs burn easily or just lose their flavor, and they aren't easily glued to the meat. We had our work cut out for us.

A hot oven can put a decent crust on the meat. We found that 400 degrees offered the best balance of nice browning and even cooking. (At higher temperatures the interior overcooked very easily and the kitchen often filled with smoke.) Tucking the thinner, tapered end of the meat under itself and tying the roast at 1½-inch intervals created a regularly shaped roast that also promoted even cooking. Elevating the roast on a wire rack kept the bottom of the tenderloin from steaming in its own juice.

Our roast was better, but could we make the crust thicker? Knowing that salting raw meat helps to draw out moisture, which results in a drier and crustier exterior, we tried rubbing the meat with salt while it was sitting on the counter to lose its chill. The salting did result in a firmer exterior, but the roast still lacked that deeply browned crust we were looking for. Adding sugar to the salt rub was a key discovery: a mere 2 teaspoons (along with

1 tablespoon of salt) was all that was needed to create a golden brown, perfectly caramelized crust about halfway through the cooking time.

Now we could introduce the herbs. After doing several tests, we found that tasters preferred the combination of parsley and thyme to the aggressive flavors of sage and rosemary. We worked out the right proportions and boosted the herb flavor with minced garlic, but we were having trouble keeping the herb paste on the roast. After some trial and error, we found a flavorful way to glue the herbs to the meat: grated Parmesan cheese.

Our herb crust was flavorful, but could we make it crispier? We tried adding herbed bread crumbs and more Parmesan cheese (a topping that creates a nice crunchy crust on many foods) on top of the herb and cheese paste. This extra crust was perfect, except for one small detail: when we removed the twine prior to carving, the bread crumbs came right off with it. Because we were already removing the half-cooked tenderloin from the oven to smear on the herb paste, we tried removing the twine and adding the bread crumbs at the same juncture. This method worked perfectly, as the shape of the tied meat had been set during the initial cooking. And the bread crumbs turned crisp and golden just as the tenderloin came up to temperature.

Our roast was now truly special, but we thought it could use a finishing touch, something that would provide a counterpoint to the richness of the meat. We decided to make a creamy sauce, punctuated with horseradish, to serve with the slices of tenderloin. We mixed horseradish with heavy cream, sour cream, mustard, and garlic. Now we had it all—tender meat with a nice crust, a crispy layer of flavor from the herbs, and a creamy horseradish sauce that provided a tangy kick.



HERB-CRUSTED BEEF TENDERLOIN WITH HORSERADISH SAUCE

SERVES 16

Begin this recipe 2 hours before you plan to put the roast in the oven. A warehouse club is a great place to find a good-quality beef tenderloin at a reasonable price, but expect to do some trimming at home. We prefer this roast cooked to medium-rare, but you can vary the cooking time if you prefer it more or less done.

BEEF

- 1 (5- to 6-pound) whole beef tenderloin, trimmed
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon crushed peppercorns
- 2 teaspoons sugar

SAUCE

- ½ cup sour cream
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup prepared horseradish, drained
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¼ teaspoon sugar
- Salt and pepper

HERB CRUST

- 2 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
- 1 ¼ cups grated Parmesan cheese
- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 6 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme
- 4 garlic cloves, minced

1. FOR THE BEEF: Pat the tenderloin dry with paper towels. Following the photos, tuck the tail under and tie the roast. Combine the salt, pepper, and sugar in a small bowl and rub the tenderloin evenly with the spice mixture. (The spice-rubbed tenderloin can be wrapped with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day.) Transfer the tenderloin to a wire rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet and let sit at room temperature for 2 hours.

TRIMMING AND TYING THE TENDERLOIN



1. Trim off and discard the fatty strip (or chain) that runs along the length of the tenderloin.



2. Remove the silvery skin (and any other large pieces of fat) by inserting the tip of a knife under it and slicing outward at a slight angle.



3. Tuck the tail of the tenderloin under and tie the roast with kitchen twine every 1 ½ inches.

2. FOR THE SAUCE: Mix all of the sauce ingredients and salt and pepper to taste in a bowl. Cover and let sit at room temperature for 1 to 1½ hours to thicken. (The sauce can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days.)

3. FOR THE HERB CRUST: Meanwhile, pulse the bread in a food processor to coarse crumbs, about 6 pulses. Toss the bread crumbs, ½ cup of the Parmesan, 2 tablespoons of the parsley, 2 tablespoons of the oil, and 2 teaspoons of the thyme in a medium bowl until evenly combined. Process the remaining ¾ cup Parmesan, 6 tablespoons parsley, 4 tablespoons oil, 2 tablespoons thyme, and garlic in the food processor until a smooth paste forms, about 1 minute. Transfer the herb paste to a small bowl.

4. Adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Cook the tenderloin for 20 minutes; remove from the oven. Using scissors, cut and remove the twine. Coat the tenderloin evenly with the herb paste followed by the bread-crumbs topping. Cook until the center registers about 125 degrees (for medium-rare) on an instant-read thermometer and the topping is golden brown, 20 to 25 minutes. (If the topping browns before the meat is ready, cover the roast loosely with foil for the remaining cooking time.) Transfer the roast to a wire rack and let rest, uncovered, for 30 minutes. Transfer to a carving board and carve. Serve with the sauce in a bowl on the side.

Sunday-Best Garlic Roast Beef

You don't always need to have a fat wallet to pull off a great beef roast. Take the inexpensive, widely available top sirloin. This hefty cut is an all-around crowd-pleaser—tender, juicy, and beefy-tasting. We set out to come up with a recipe that could turn this bargain cut into a starring attraction.

The test kitchen has found that large beef roasts cook more evenly at low temperatures. In a hot oven, the outer portions of the roast tend to overcook by the time the middle is done. However, roasting at a low temperature allows for little flavor development on the exterior of the roast. To ensure a nicely browned exterior, the roast must first be seared.

To simplify matters, we chose not to sear the meat on the stovetop but in a hot oven, turning down the heat once the outside browned. Our first try didn't produce enough browning, though, and we thought it might be the stainless steel pan we were using. Taking a hint from baking—where darker nonstick surfaces produce darker cakes because of better heat absorption—we tried a nonstick roasting pan, and it did a much better job. (You can use a broiler pan in a pinch.)

To punch up the flavor of our roast, we turned to garlic. Tests with slivers of raw garlic inserted into the meat were unsuccessful, as the garlic was harsh-tasting. Toasting unpeeled garlic cloves in a skillet took the nasty bite out of them. For another layer of garlic flavor, we rubbed the meat with a garlic-salt mixture and then refrigerated it. The flavor improved after 4 hours, but we got the best results when we let the roast rest overnight. To prevent the rub from burning during the high initial heat of searing, we simply wiped it off first.



Things were going well, but for more flavor, we applied a cooked garlic paste to the meat after searing it. For a final touch, we made a simple jus to accompany the meat by simmering chicken broth and beef broth and stirring in meat juice released when the roast was resting.

We think this roast can compete with fancy, high-priced prime rib any day of the year.

SUNDAY-BEST GARLIC ROAST BEEF

SERVES 8

Look for a top sirloin roast that has a thick, substantial fat cap still attached. The rendered fat will help to keep the roast moist. When making the jus, taste the reduced broth before adding any of the accumulated meat juice from the roast. The meat juice is well seasoned and may make the jus too salty. We prefer this roast cooked to medium-rare, but you can vary the cooking time if you prefer it more or less done. A heavy-duty roasting pan with a dark or nonstick finish or a broiler pan is a must for this recipe.

BEEF

- 8 garlic cloves, unpeeled
- 1 (4-pound) top sirloin roast, with some top fat intact (see note above)
- Pepper

RUB

- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

GARLIC PASTE

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup olive oil
- 12 garlic cloves, peeled and cut in half lengthwise

- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2 bay leaves
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

JUS

- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups beef broth
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups low-sodium chicken broth

1. FOR THE BEEF: Toast the garlic in a small skillet over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until spotty brown, about 8 minutes; set aside. When cool enough to handle, peel the cloves and cut them into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch slivers. Using a paring knife, make 1-inch-deep slits all over the roast and insert the garlic slivers.

2. FOR THE RUB: Mix all of the rub ingredients together in a small bowl. Coat the meat evenly with the rub. Transfer the roast to a large plate and refrigerate, uncovered, for at least 4 hours or preferably overnight.

ENSURING BIG GARLIC FLAVOR



1. Insert toasted slivers of garlic into slits cut into the roast. Coat the roast with a garlic, herb, and salt rub and refrigerate for at least 4 hours.

2. After the meat has been browned, flip the roast fat-side up and spread evenly with the garlic paste.

3. FOR THE GARLIC PASTE: Heat all of the paste ingredients in a small saucepan over medium-high heat until bubbles start to rise to the surface. Reduce the heat to low and cook until the garlic is soft, about 30 minutes. Cool completely. Strain, reserving the oil. Discard the herbs and transfer the garlic to a small bowl. Mash the garlic with 1 tablespoon of the garlic oil until a paste forms. Cover and refrigerate the paste until ready to use. Cover and reserve the garlic oil.

4. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position, place a nonstick roasting pan or broiler pan bottom on the rack, and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Using paper towels, wipe the rub off the beef. Coat the beef evenly with 2 tablespoons of the reserved garlic oil and season with pepper. Transfer the meat, fat-side down, to the preheated pan and cook, turning occasionally, to brown on all sides, 10 to 15 minutes.

5. Reduce the oven temperature to 300 degrees. Carefully remove the pan from the oven. Flip the roast fat-side up and coat the top evenly with the garlic paste. Return to the oven and cook until the center registers 125 degrees (for medium-rare) on an instant-read thermometer, 50 to 70 minutes. Transfer the roast to a carving board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 20 minutes.

6. FOR THE JUS: Discard the fat in the pan and set the pan over high heat. Add the broths and bring to a boil, using a wooden spoon to scrape the browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Simmer, stirring occasionally, about 5 minutes (you should have 2 cups). Add the accumulated juice from the roast and cook for 1 minute, then strain the jus. Cut the roast into ¼-inch slices, against the grain, and serve with the jus in a bowl on the side.

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Instant-Read Thermometers: We rely on instant-read thermometers to determine when meat and poultry are optimally cooked. Our favorite is the ThermoWorks Super-Fast Thermapen, a workhorse that quickly provides accurate readings across a broad range of temperatures. But at \$89, it isn't cheap. We wondered if there was an inexpensive model that could keep up, so we tested 11 digital instant-read thermometers under \$30 to find out. None could match the Thermapen, but we did find a worthy stand-in in the Maverick Redi-Chek Professional Chef's Digital Thermometer DT-01 (\$12.99).

Lone Star Beef Brisket

Among all the ways brisket can be prepared, we especially love it Texas-style—super-smoky and incredibly tender. You'll discover some of the best examples of this classic sold from "markets" scattered throughout the state's barbecue belt near Austin; these butcher shops boast massive smokers that cook the meat—sliced to order and served up on butcher paper—slow and low. Tender, intensely flavored, and with a signature dark crust, this brisket is in a league of its own. We set out to re-create this Lone Star classic, the perfect anchor dish for any summer party.

Brisket is a tough cut, so unless it is fully cooked, the meat is so chewy it's practically inedible. And getting a large brisket "fully cooked" by grill-roasting can take hours upon hours, even when butchers separate the brisket into smaller pieces, as is often the case. Our goal was to make the meat as tender as possible, as quickly as possible.

Breaking down the collagen, the waxy-looking connective tissue that makes the meat chewy

and tough, is the priority. This process occurs most quickly at temperatures above 180 degrees, which is why the meat should be cooked as fully as possible—to an internal temperature of 210 degrees. We wanted to rely on the grill for the trademark smoky flavor, but we were well aware that moist-heat cooking methods (such as braising) are ideal for cooking meats to high internal temperatures: meats cooked in a moist environment heat up faster and can be held at high internal temperatures without burning or drying out. Grill-roasting relies on dry heat, so we knew that to be successful, we'd need to create a moist-heat environment at some point during the cooking process.

We began by coating our brisket with a spice rub, then we put the meat on the grill. As the cooking time went on, we realized we needed to figure out a way around tending the fire all day. So we moved our brisket to the oven after a stint on the grill. We found that 2 hours on the grill was enough time for the brisket to absorb plenty of smoke flavor and create a dark brown, crusty exterior. Barbecuing the brisket fat-side up ensured that the fat slowly melted, lubricating the meat below.

Many experts recommend basting a brisket on the grill regularly to ensure moistness, but taking the lid off the grill wreaked havoc by releasing too much heat, and the meat didn't taste any different. We scrubbed this move and stuck with the spice rub alone.

Instead, we created a moist-heat environment when we moved the brisket to the oven by wrapping the meat with foil. After about 3 hours in the oven, our foil-wrapped brisket was perfectly cooked and fork-tender. With just a bit of barbecue sauce on the side, this brisket had all the bold flavor one would expect from big Texas barbecue.

LONE STAR BARBECUED BEEF BRISKET

SERVES 18

You can substitute a half brisket (about 5 pounds) if desired. For a half brisket, simply cut the amount of the spice mixture in half, grill for just 1½ hours in step 3, and roast for just 2 hours in step 5. We like the sweet, smoky flavor of Bull's-Eye Original Barbecue Sauce, but feel free to substitute your favorite. For extra flavor, consider reserving any accumulated meat juice after the meat has rested and stirring it into the sauce. If the fork comes out with little or no resistance in step 5, the brisket is ready; if the fork is difficult to remove or picks up the brisket, the brisket isn't ready.

- ¼ cup paprika
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 2 tablespoons ground cumin
- 2 tablespoons salt
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon dried oregano
- 1 tablespoon black pepper
- 1 tablespoon white pepper
- 2 teaspoons cayenne pepper
- 1 (9- to 11-pound) whole beef brisket, fat trimmed to ¼-inch thickness (see note above)
- 2 cups wood chips, soaked, drained, and sealed in a foil packet (see page 159)
- Barbecue sauce, for serving (see note above)

1. Combine the paprika, chili powder, cumin, salt, brown sugar, granulated sugar, oregano, black pepper, white pepper, and cayenne in a bowl. Pat the meat dry with paper towels and rub it evenly with the spice mixture. Wrap the meat with plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature for at least 1 hour, or refrigerate for up to 1 day.

(If refrigerated, let sit at room temperature for 1 hour before grilling.)

2A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open the bottom grill vents halfway. Light a large chimney starter half full with charcoal briquettes (50 briquettes; 3 quarts). When the coals are hot, pour them into a steeply banked pile against one side of the grill. Place the wood chip packet on top of the coals. Set the cooking grate in place, cover, and open the lid vents halfway. Heat the grill until hot and the wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 5 minutes.

2B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Place the wood chip packet directly on the primary burner. Turn all the burners to high, cover, and heat the grill until hot and the wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 15 minutes. Turn the primary burner to medium and turn off the other burner(s). (Adjust the primary burner as needed to maintain the grill temperature between 250 and 300 degrees.)

3. Clean and oil the cooking grate. Place the brisket, fat-side up, on the cool part of the grill, away from the coals and flames. Cover (positioning the lid vents over the meat if using charcoal) and cook for 2 hours.

4. During the final 20 minutes of grilling, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 300 degrees. Make a 4 by 3-foot rectangle of heavy-duty foil by overlapping and crimping two smaller foil sheets together securely.

5. Place the brisket in the center of the foil and wrap the foil tightly around the meat to seal. Transfer the wrapped brisket to a rimmed baking sheet and roast in the oven until a fork inserted into the center meets no resistance, 3 to 3½ hours.

6. Remove the brisket from the oven, loosen the foil to release steam, and let rest for 30 minutes. Unwrap the brisket, transfer to a carving board, and separate the meat into two sections. Slice the meat thinly, against the grain and on the bias, and serve with the barbecue sauce in a bowl on the side.

MAKING FORK-TENDER BEEF BRISKET



1. After grilling, place the brisket in the middle of a 4 by 3-foot rectangle of heavy-duty foil. To make the piece of foil wide enough, fold and crimp together two smaller pieces of foil.



2. Fold up the sides of the foil tightly around the brisket, place the brisket on a rimmed baking sheet, and roast in a 300-degree oven until the meat is tender, 3 to 3½ hours.



3. After roasting, remove the meat from the oven, loosen the foil just enough to release the steam, and let the meat rest for 30 minutes.



4. The grain on the two sections of the brisket runs in opposite directions. Separate the two cuts from each other, then slice each piece, against the grain and on the bias, into long, thin slices.

Stuffed Turkey Breast

A golden, 20-pound stuffed bird is sure to impress family and friends, but it can be unwieldy to carry and incredibly difficult to carve, especially when you have an audience, not to mention the time and effort that goes into it. Boneless, skinless turkey breast, now widely available in supermarkets, makes a great alternative. It's also easily stuffed and goes well with any number of side dishes (plus it looks elegant on the table). Being without skin, bones, or dark meat, however, this ultra-lean cut often ends up flavorless, overcooked, and utterly dry.

When it comes to flavor, most recipes go wrong by depending on a bland bread stuffing. This type of stuffing is fine for a whole bird, in which the drippings from the turkey carcass help season the stuffing, but for a boneless breast the opposite is true: the stuffing, not the turkey, must provide the flavor.

We took a more aggressive route by substituting potent vegetable- and cheese-based fillings for the plain bread stuffing. Our best attempts relied on relatively moist vegetables—mushrooms and spinach—and assertively flavored ingredients such as garlic, hard cheeses, and fresh herbs. When paired with the turkey, these concentrated stuffings seasoned the typically bland white meat from the inside out.

The stuffings remedied the lack of flavor but not the lack of moisture in the meat. The solution, we hoped, could be found in the cooking method.

Most recipes call for searing the turkey breast in a hot skillet before transferring it to the oven. This method produced a bronzed bird in record time, but searing really dried out the exterior. High-temperature roasting also produced an even brown color, but by the time the turkey was cooked to its core, the outside was, yet again, dry and stringy. In the end, we found that the only way to guarantee

juicy turkey was to keep the oven temperature at 325 degrees. The problem? Tasters were now turned off by the turkey's pallid and flavorless exterior; some wondered if it had been poached rather than roasted.

Then one test cook suggested coating the turkey with a light sprinkling of sugar, thinking that the sugar would encourage browning. We doubted this would work in such a cool oven, but we were wrong. The sugared turkey displayed a golden exterior, but, even better, it was the tastiest bird yet! Similarly to salt, the sugar had enhanced the natural flavor of the turkey. For yet more flavor, we also sprinkled the roast with salt and a generous amount of freshly ground pepper. Our stuffed turkey breast was now as moist and flavorful as a bone-in bird—and it garnered the same amount of oohs and ahhs from tasters.

STUFFED TURKEY BREAST

SERVES 8

Before stuffing the turkey, make sure the stuffing is completely chilled. Some stores only sell boneless turkey breasts with the skin still attached; the skin can be removed easily with a paring knife. This recipe calls for one turkey breast half. Don't buy an entire breast with two lobes of meat—it's too large for this recipe.

- 1 (3- to 4-pound) boneless, skinless turkey breast (see note above)
- 2 cups stuffing (recipes follow; see note above)
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons pepper
- 1 teaspoon salt

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Pat the turkey dry with paper towels. Butterfly the turkey by



placing it smooth-side down and slicing through it horizontally to open it up like a book, stopping $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the edge of the breast. Pound lightly with a meat pounder to an even $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thickness. Spread the stuffing in an even layer over the turkey, stopping $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the sides. Starting with the short side, roll up the turkey and tie at 1-inch intervals. Tuck in the ends and loop a piece of twine around the ends to keep the stuffing from falling out. (The stuffed and tied turkey breast can be wrapped with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days. Let the turkey breast sit at room temperature for 1 hour before proceeding.)

2. Rub the turkey with the oil and sprinkle evenly with the sugar, pepper, and salt. Place on a wire rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet and cook, flipping every 30 minutes, until the thickest part of the breast registers 160 to 165 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, about 2 hours.

3. Transfer the turkey to a carving board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 15 minutes. Remove the twine and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch slices. Serve.

MUSHROOM-MARSALA STUFFING

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

To avoid flare-ups, be sure to remove the pan from the heat before adding the Marsala.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 onion, minced
- 1 pound white mushrooms, chopped fine
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Marsala
- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- Salt and pepper

Melt the butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Reduce the heat to medium, add the mushrooms, and cook until the mushrooms are dry, 10 to 15 minutes. Add the garlic and thyme and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Off the heat, stir in the Marsala. Return to the heat and cook until the mushrooms are dry and golden brown, about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and cool for 10 minutes. Stir in the Parmesan, parsley, and salt and pepper to taste. Refrigerate until ready to use. (The stuffing can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 3 days.)

SPINACH AND FONTINA STUFFING

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

Soggy spinach can make for a watery filling, so be sure to squeeze out the extra moisture.

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, minced
- 1 (10-ounce) box frozen spinach, thawed, squeezed dry, and chopped (see note above)
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest
- 2 cups shredded fontina cheese
- Salt and pepper

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add the onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the spinach, garlic, and zest and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Remove from the heat and cool for 10 minutes. Stir in the cheese and salt and pepper to taste. Refrigerate until ready to use. (The stuffing can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 3 days.)



RASPBERRY CREAM CHEESE BROWNIES

Always Room for Dessert

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Best Easy Chocolate Cake

When ingredients such as butter and fresh eggs were scarce during World War II, cooks came up with cakes that worked without them. Homemakers found these wartime recipes so convenient (the cakes could be whipped up with ingredients on hand) that they continued to bake them long after rationing was over. We recently came across a chocolate cake from this era. The recipe called for water and ingredients straight from the pantry: flour, sugar, cocoa powder, baking soda, vanilla, and the real kicker—mayonnaise, a stand-in for butter and eggs. We thought this kind of cake might be just perfect for those last-minute party invites, so we headed into the kitchen to try it out.

We followed the instructions, mixing water with the mayonnaise, combining this liquid with the dry ingredients, and baking the batter in a 13 by 9-inch pan. The dark, shiny cakes that came out of the oven were moist and tender, with no trace of a mayonnaise taste, but the chocolate flavor was decent, not decadent. We set out to ramp up the chocolate flavor enough to take this cake from good to great.

Increasing the amount of cocoa powder was an obvious first step; we doubled it to 1 cup and “bloomed” it in hot water first—a strategy we frequently employ with spices to amplify their flavor. For even more chocolaty flavor, we added 4 ounces of melted bittersweet chocolate.

These measures helped, but could we take things further? Instead of blooming the cocoa in hot water, we used hot coffee. Now the chocolate flavor was richer. And to shave off some prep time, we used the hot coffee to melt the chocolate while the cocoa was blooming—no need to melt it separately in the microwave or double boiler.

Now it was time to think about the oddball ingredient in the mix: mayonnaise. We wondered if we could make the cake richer by replacing the mayo with eggs and butter or oil. After several tests in which we switched out the mayo for butter or oil and added eggs, we found that these cakes weren't quite as moist and velvety as the mayonnaise version. But the eggs, unlike the oil and butter, were a keeper, as they made a cake with richer flavor and a springier texture.

With only a little more work, we now had a super-easy cake with such velvety texture and deep chocolate flavor, it was good enough for any special occasion.

BEST EASY CHOCOLATE CAKE

MAKES ONE 13 BY 9-INCH CAKE, SERVING 12

We recommend using one of the test kitchen's favorite baking chocolates, Callebaut Intense Dark L-60-40NV or Ghirardelli Bittersweet Chocolate Baking Bar, for this recipe, but any high-quality dark, bittersweet, or semisweet chocolate will work.

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup Dutch-processed cocoa powder
- 4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine (see note above)
- 2 cups hot coffee
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups mayonnaise
- 2 large eggs, room temperature
- 4 teaspoons vanilla extract
- Confectioners' sugar, for serving

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Grease a 13 by 9-inch baking pan.

2. Whisk the flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together in a large bowl. In a separate bowl, combine the cocoa and chocolate. Pour the hot coffee over the cocoa mixture and whisk until smooth; cool slightly. Whisk in the mayonnaise, eggs, and vanilla. Stir the mayonnaise mixture into the flour mixture until combined.

3. Give the batter a final stir with a rubber spatula to make sure it is thoroughly combined. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan, smooth the top, and gently tap the pan on the counter to settle the batter. Bake the cake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with a few moist crumbs attached, 55 to 60 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through.

4. Cool the cake in the pan on a wire rack, about 2 hours. Dust with confectioners' sugar, cut into squares, and serve. (The cake can be covered with plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

Texas Sheet Cake

Texas sheet cake—the official state cake of Texas—is a huge, pecan-topped chocolate cake with three distinct layers of chocolaty goodness. A diverse range of textures is created when a sweet chocolate icing is poured over a cake that's still hot out of the oven; when the cake cools, you're left with an icing layer, a fudgy layer where the icing and hot cake have mixed together, and a bottom layer of moist cake. The cake is easy to make (no mixer is required) and great to take to potlucks and barbecues because, as its name implies, it's baked in a sheet pan and serves a crowd. But the cakes we baked from the recipes we had found

all had one big problem: they didn't pack much chocolate wallop.

Most Texas sheet cake recipes start with blooming cocoa powder in water with margarine, oil, butter, vegetable shortening, or a combination thereof. The cocoa mixture is then combined with flour, sugar, baking soda, eggs, dairy (milk, buttermilk, or sour cream), and vanilla in a single bowl. We baked up cakes with different combinations of margarine, oil, butter, and shortening, and tasters agreed that margarine imparted an unpleasant artificial flavor. The cake made with all butter tasted great, but the texture was too light and cakey. The cake made with a combination of butter (for flavor) and vegetable oil (to keep the cake moist) was the best overall, producing a cake with a dense, brownie-like texture.

All of the recipes we found had a skimpy $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of cocoa, which accounted for the measly chocolate flavor. Doubling the amount of cocoa helped, but adding 8 ounces of melted semisweet chocolate gave us the strong chocolate flavor tasters were craving. The semisweet chocolate also contributed moisture and fat, which made for a fudgier cake. As for the dairy, tasters preferred rich, tangy sour cream to buttermilk and milk.

Standard recipes for the icing call for a stick of butter, milk, another $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of cocoa, and 4 cups of confectioners' sugar. Tasters deemed this formula too sweet, so we took the amount of sugar down to 3 cups and doubled the amount of cocoa (as we had done in the cake) to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup. To give the icing more body, we replaced the milk with heavy cream, and we added a tablespoon of corn syrup to give the frosting a lustrous finish.

Since the cake was already pretty moist, we were curious as to whether the icing absolutely had to be poured over the cake while it was hot. We baked two sheet cakes, icing one directly out of the oven



and the other after it had cooled. The results were clear: the cake iced while hot had that characteristic moist, gooey, fudgy layer under the frosting, but the other cake was simply an ordinary frosted cake. This sheet cake may be a regular at Texas potlucks, but we think the rest of the country deserves to share its big chocolate flavor.

TEXAS SHEET CAKE

MAKES ONE 18 BY 13-INCH SHEET CAKE, SERVING 24

You will need an 18 by 13-inch rimmed baking sheet for this cake. To ensure that the frosting will sink into the cake, making a fudgy layer, be sure to pour the icing over the cake while the cake is still hot.

CAKE

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sour cream, room temperature
- 2 large eggs plus 2 egg yolks, room temperature
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 8 ounces semisweet chocolate, chopped
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup vegetable oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup water
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Dutch-processed cocoa powder
- 4 tablespoons ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick) unsalted butter

ICING

- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Dutch-processed cocoa powder
- 1 tablespoon light corn syrup
- 3 cups confectioners' sugar
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup pecans, toasted (see page 39) and chopped

1. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 18 by 13-inch rimmed baking sheet. Whisk the flour, granulated sugar, baking soda, and salt together in a medium bowl. In another medium bowl, whisk the sour cream, eggs, egg yolks, and vanilla together.

2. Cook the chocolate, oil, water, cocoa, and butter together in a large saucepan over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until smooth, about 5 minutes. Off the heat, slowly whisk in the flour mixture until just incorporated. Whisk in the egg mixture until combined.

3. Give the batter a final stir with a rubber spatula to make sure it is thoroughly combined. Scrape the batter into the prepared baking sheet, smooth the top, and gently tap the sheet on the counter to settle the batter. Bake the cake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with a few moist crumbs attached, 18 to 20 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through.

4. FOR THE ICING: During the cake's last few minutes of baking, cook the butter, cream, cocoa, and corn syrup together in a saucepan over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until smooth. Off the heat, whisk in the confectioners' sugar and vanilla until combined.

5. Spread the warm icing evenly over the hot cake and sprinkle with the pecans. Cool the cake in the pan to room temperature, about 1 hour, then refrigerate until the icing is set, 1 hour longer. Serve. (The cake can be wrapped with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days. Bring to room temperature before serving.)

Tipsy Squire

Trifle, that familiar tower of cake, cream, custard, and fruit, is quite the looker on the holiday buffet table (or any other occasion requiring a dessert to feed a crowd), but beneath that fragile facade there is often little more than soggy cake, grainy custard, and fruit strewn about helter-skelter. So when we read about a different sort of trifle called Tipsy Squire, we were intrigued. The cake was described as soft but sturdy, and the custard as light and fluffy. The trifle also boasted plenty of sweet sherry. Even better, save for the top, this was a trifle without any forlorn pieces of fruit, just a layer of jam sandwiched inside the pieces of cake. We needed to develop our own version.

We began our research by scouring cookbooks from Great Britain, home of the trifle. Books from the nineteenth century were packed with concoctions from the straightforward Topsy Cake (a sherry-soaked sponge cake filled with cream) to the more whimsical Topsy Hedgehog (a booze-laden sponge cake covered with cream and studded with sliced

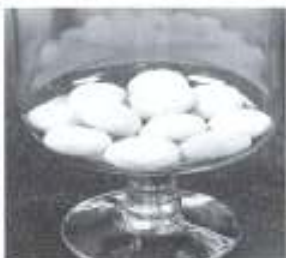
almond “spikes”). Next we turned to American cookbooks and unearthed Tipsy Charlotte, a large, hollowed-out sponge cake stuffed with sherry and vanilla cream. Tipsy Pudding—sherry-spiked custard poured over sponge cake—appeared in a number of American cookbooks, including *Fannie Farmer’s Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* (1896).

But we finally found a recipe for Tipsy Squire (the name refers to the effect this dessert might have on a teetotaling man of importance) in a classic American cookbook by Mrs. S. R. Dull called *Southern Cooking*. (First published in 1928, this popular book was updated and released again in 1941 and 1968.) This Southern specialty was well known in Georgia, and it was definitely a trifle. It carried all of the tipsy traits: lots of sherry, layers of custard, and sponge cake. The dessert made from this recipe tasted good, but it was still soggy—until we incorporated a technique from the other tipsy recipes we had found: stale sponge cake. This recipe, prepared with stale cake, produced a tidy trifle with distinct components; the modern trifles made with fresh cake all turned into a gloppy mess.

ASSEMBLING TIPSY SQUIRE



1. For the jam sandwiches, make 5 long slices into the filled cake rounds, then make five more slices crosswise.



2. Arrange one layer of soaked macaroons in the bottom of a trifle bowl.



3. Using the back of a serving spoon, spread 2 cups of the custard mixture over the macaroons in an even layer.



4. Place the jam cakes on the custard. Then spread with 2 cups more custard. Repeat the layers once more.

Stale sponge cake may have been commonplace a century ago (there were plenty of leftovers), but today few home cooks make sponge cake (never mind having any leftover pieces). Luckily, most good bakeries offer high-quality sponge cake. After some serious cake staling, which requires an overnight sit (unwrapped) on the counter or 3 hours in a 200-degree oven, it was time to build the trifle.

No matter how soaked with sherry (very soaked) or buried beneath layers of custard (deeply), the cake retained some of its texture, and the custard was fresh and fluffy. A winner on all fronts, this trifle is a beauty inside and out.

TIPSY SQUIRE

SERVES 12

The beauty of this trifle is that most of the components can (if not should) be made in advance. Once assembled, Topsy Squire actually improves after an overnight stay in the fridge. You'll need a 3-quart trifle dish to make this dessert. Bake shops sell sponge cake in various sizes; just trim larger cakes to suit this recipe. To stale cake rounds, leave them uncovered on the counter overnight or place them on a wire rack set on a baking sheet in a 200-degree oven for 3 hours.

CUSTARD

- 2 cups heavy cream
- ½ cup sugar
- Pinch salt
- 5 large egg yolks, room temperature
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces and chilled
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla extract

TRIFLE

- 2 (8-inch) round stale sponge cakes (each about 1½ inches thick), homemade or store-bought (see note above)

- 1½ cups cream sherry
- 1 cup seedless raspberry jam
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 40 small almond macaroons or amaretti cookies, homemade or store-bought
- 1 cup fresh raspberries

1. FOR THE CUSTARD: Heat the cream, 6 tablespoons of the sugar, and the salt in a medium saucepan over medium heat until simmering, stirring occasionally to dissolve the sugar. Meanwhile, whisk the egg yolks in a medium bowl until thoroughly combined. Whisk in the remaining 2 tablespoons sugar until the sugar begins to dissolve. Whisk in the cornstarch until the mixture is pale yellow and thick, about 30 seconds.

2. When the cream mixture reaches a full simmer, gradually whisk half into the yolk mixture to temper. Return the mixture to the saucepan, scraping the bowl with a rubber spatula; return to a simmer over medium heat, whisking constantly, until 3 or 4 bubbles burst on the surface and the mixture is thickened, about 1 minute. Strain the custard through a fine-mesh strainer into a bowl, scraping the inside of the strainer with a rubber spatula to push the custard through. Whisk in the butter and vanilla. Transfer the custard to a bowl, place plastic wrap directly on the surface, and refrigerate until set, at least 3 hours, or up to 2 days.

3. FOR THE TRIFLE: Slice each cake round in half horizontally. Brush each cut side of one cake with ¼ cup of the sherry, then spread with ¼ cup of the jam. Stack 2 cut sides together (resulting in a jam sandwich). Repeat with the second cake to make a second jam sandwich. Cut each cake into 5 long slices, then cut 5 more slices crosswise. (Reserve the smaller jam cakes for nibbling; you will need 30 to 40 of the larger jam cakes for step 5.)

4. Beat the cream and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup more sherry with an electric mixer on medium-high speed to soft peaks. Reduce the mixer speed to low, gradually add the custard, and mix well, about 1 minute. Toss the macaroons with the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sherry in a large bowl.

5. Following the photos on page 208, arrange 12 to 14 (depending on size) macaroons in a single layer to cover the bottom of a 3-quart trifle bowl. Spoon 2 cups of the custard mixture evenly over the macaroons. Arrange 15 to 20 jam cakes in a single layer on the custard. Top with 2 cups more custard mixture. Repeat the layering of the macaroons, custard mixture, jam cakes, and custard mixture once more. Arrange the remaining 12 to 16 macaroons in a circle midway between the rim of the bowl and the center of the trifle, so that they stick up slightly like a crown. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 12 hours, or up to 2 days. When ready to serve, pile the raspberries inside the circle of macaroons.

Strawberry Poke Cake

Strawberry poke cake, a tender white cake streaked with strawberry gelatin, was invented by Kraft Kitchens in 1969 to increase strawberry *Jell-O* sales. Most corporate recipes are quickly forgotten, but strawberry poke cake became extremely popular, thanks to its festive look and ease of assembly. The original recipe has only three ingredients: strawberry *Jell-O*, white cake mix, and whipped cream. Strawberries, cake, and cream sounded pretty good to us—we were already picturing how great this cake would go over at our next cookout.

But when we made the cake, our optimism quickly faded. The boxed-mix cake was so tender and fine that the hot gelatin made it soggy, especially around the edges, where the domed shape of the cake had channeled most of the liquid. And the strawberry gelatin was bright in color but dim in flavor. We headed into the test kitchen to see if we could make a sturdier cake with fresh strawberry flavor.

We eschewed a boxed cake in favor of the test kitchen's recipe for white cake (white cakes use only egg whites, whereas yellow cakes use whole eggs). It worked perfectly, giving us a sturdy crumb and little doming, which meant the gelatin mixture didn't pool at the edges of the pan.

Using strawberry gelatin as the streaking agent gave the cake beautiful red stripes. We now needed some berry flavor. Strawberry soda and syrup both tasted artificial, and strawberry jams and jellies looked and tasted washed out. Pureed fresh strawberries produced inconsistent results, as sometimes the berries were soft and sweet and other times they were hard and sour. We turned to frozen strawberries, which are reliably sweet. Blending and straining the frozen berries gave us the best flavor, but the texture was too thick.

A colleague suggested cooking the frozen strawberries with orange juice and sugar. This released strawberry juice, which, when strained out of the solids and mixed with the strawberry gelatin, was thin enough to pour and potent with rich strawberry flavor. Our cake now tasted as good as it looked.

We made a homemade "jam" from the leftover berry solids and spread the mixture on top of the cake for an extra layer of flavor. When it was topped with sweetened whipped cream and served cold, we could finally see—and taste—why strawberry poke cake has remained so popular.



STRAWBERRY POKE CAKE

MAKES ONE 13 BY 9-INCH CAKE, SERVING 12

The top of the cake will look very dark and slightly overbaked—this helps keep the cake from becoming too soggy after the gelatin is poured over the top.

CAKE

- 2¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 4 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup whole milk, room temperature
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 6 large egg whites, room temperature
- 12 tablespoons (1½ sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- 1¾ cups sugar

SYRUP AND TOPPING

- 4 cups frozen sliced strawberries
- 6 tablespoons sugar
- ½ cup water
- 2 tablespoons orange juice
- 2 tablespoons strawberry-flavored gelatin
- 2 cups heavy cream, chilled

1. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour a 13 by 9-inch baking pan. Whisk the flour, baking powder, and salt together in a medium bowl. In another medium bowl, whisk the milk, vanilla, and egg whites together.

2. In a large bowl, beat the butter and sugar together with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, 3 to 6 minutes. Reduce the mixer speed to low and beat in one-third of the flour mixture, followed by half of the milk mixture. Repeat with half of the remaining flour mixture and the remaining milk mixture. Beat in the remaining flour mixture until just incorporated.

3. Give the batter a final stir with a rubber spatula to make sure it is thoroughly combined. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan, smooth the top, and gently tap the pan on the counter to settle the batter. Bake the cake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean and the top is very brown, about 35 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through. Cool the cake completely in the pan on a wire rack, about 2 hours.

4. FOR THE SYRUP AND TOPPING: Combine 3 cups of the strawberries, 2 tablespoons of the sugar, water, and orange juice in a medium saucepan, cover, and cook over medium-low heat until the strawberries are softened, about 10 minutes. Strain the mixture into a medium bowl, reserving the strained solids. Whisk the gelatin into the liquid and cool to room temperature, about 20 minutes.

5. Use a wooden skewer to poke 50 large holes in the cooled cake. Don't poke the cake through to the bottom, but twist the skewer when poking to enlarge the holes. Pour the cooled gelatin mixture evenly over the top of the cake, making sure to cover the holes. Cover the cake with plastic wrap and refrigerate until the gelatin is set, about 3 hours.

6. Pulse the reserved strained strawberries, 2 more tablespoons sugar, and the remaining 1 cup frozen strawberries together in a food processor until the mixture resembles strawberry jam, 5 to 7 pulses. Spread the mixture evenly over the cake. (The cake can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

7. Before serving, with an electric mixer on medium-high speed, whip the cream and the remaining 2 tablespoons sugar together to soft peaks and spread evenly over the cake. Serve.

Lazy Daisy Cake

All kinds of simple snack cakes, baked in square or rectangular baking pans, proliferated during the mid-century war years as rationing encouraged homemakers to make the most of modest ingredients and limited cooking fuel. Most of them have fallen by the wayside, but a few have withstood the test of time and remain popular today, like the colorfully named Lazy Daisy Cake. Supposedly an offshoot of the well-known Busy Day Cake, a simple, moist, and buttery unfrosted snack cake, lazy daisy cake was designed to be made last-minute when housewives realized they had no dessert to offer dinner guests that evening. But this cake takes it a step further—it's topped with a coconut and brown sugar icing. Simple, with a fancy but fast finishing touch: the iced cake is broiled to caramelize the frosting. While it sounds like a standout, many of the cakes we've tried have been flawed by bland flavor or poor texture. We wanted to find out what it takes to make a great one, which, as its name suggests, is a snap to put together at the last minute.

The cake itself is a basic affair of flour, milk, eggs, butter, sugar, baking powder, and salt. Most of the recipes we found used the "hot milk" method of preparing the cake: the butter and milk are heated together and whisked with the dry ingredients. It's a quick and easy approach, but it made for a dense cake unless we added a lot of baking powder, which in turn made the cake taste bitter. Ultimately, we found that a combination method worked perfectly. We first whipped together the eggs and sugar until creamy and thick, then we added the dry ingredients and the hot milk-butter mixture. This method produced a well-leavened cake that had more than enough structure to support the thick icing.

The icing is nothing more than butter, brown sugar, evaporated milk, and coconut, but the

proportions of those ingredients is critical. When we added too much butter or evaporated milk, the icing oozed off the hot cake. With too much sugar, it crackled when cooked and took on a toffee-like texture. We tested a dozen batches before we found the perfect amounts.

Broiling the iced cake proved interesting. When we set the iced cake too close to the element, it burned before it caramelized. Set too far away, the icing cooked too long and oozed off the cake without a hint of caramelization. In the end, we decided that the middle rack delivered the best results and was the safest, too—no risk of ignited cake or flaming coconut. We finally had a perfect cake in minutes with minimal effort.

LAZY DAISY CAKE

MAKES ONE 13 BY 9-INCH CAKE, SERVING 12

You will need a 13 by 9-inch metal pan for this recipe; a Pyrex baking dish is not broilersafe. Do not be tempted to move this cake closer to the broiler element during the last few minutes in the oven; keeping the cake on the middle rack allows the topping to crisp and bubble at a safe distance.

CAKE

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup milk
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 4 large eggs, room temperature

TOPPING

- 9 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- ¾ cup packed light brown sugar
- 6 tablespoons evaporated milk
- 1½ cups sweetened shredded coconut

1. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour a 13 by 9-inch broilersafe baking pan. Whisk the flour, baking powder, and salt together in a large bowl. Heat the milk and butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat until the butter melts. Stir in the vanilla.

2. In a large bowl, beat together the granulated sugar and eggs with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until pale and thick, about 6 minutes. Using a rubber spatula, fold in half of the flour mixture, followed by half of the milk mixture. Repeat with the remaining flour mixture and the remaining milk mixture, folding until just incorporated. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan, smooth the top, and gently tap the pan on the counter to settle the batter. Bake the cake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, 30 to 35 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through. Cool the cake slightly in the pan, about 10 minutes. Heat the broiler.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: Meanwhile, combine the topping ingredients in a medium bowl. Spread the topping evenly over the cake. Broil until the topping bubbles and just begins to brown, about 2 minutes. Serve the cake warm or at room temperature. (The cake can be covered with plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 3 days.)

SHOPPING WITH THE TEST KITCHEN

Offset Spatulas: Unlike a regular spatula, the blade of an offset spatula dips down at the handle, keeping your fingers and knuckles out of the way. We recommend the 8½-inch Ateco Offset Spatula, \$5, for spreading cake batter and frosting cakes, and the 4½-inch Wilton Angled Comfort Grip Spatula, \$4.50, for frosting cupcakes.

Carrot Cupcakes

Cupcakes are the ideal bake-and-take dessert: they're hand-held, they come in their own wrapper, and they're already portioned. Yellow cupcakes are a dime a dozen, so we set out to create a more interesting offering that would please both young and old alike—richly spiced carrot cupcakes with a sweet cream cheese frosting.

We started by preparing some published recipes, but these were panned as excessively oily and overpoweringly spiced. Even the test kitchen's own carrot cake recipe wasn't working when downsized. The very ingredients that give carrot cake its moist, dense texture—high amounts of carrots and oil—were making our cupcakes seem more like muffins.

For a less greasy texture, we turned to the obvious culprit and cut the amount of oil. This worked, but not completely; there was still an oily residue left behind, and the texture was still dense. For a lighter, cakier texture, we tried swapping out the oil for butter, and the results were dramatic: the cupcakes were significantly more cakey and fluffy. There were two issues at play. First, butter contains water, and oil does not; when cooked, the water evaporates, releasing some of the excess moisture. Second, once the cupcakes return to room temperature, the butter solidifies, whereas the oil stays liquid; that difference translates into a cakey, rather than dense, texture. Also, cutting back from a pound of carrots to a half pound helped to lighten the texture of the cupcakes, while still keeping a significant amount of the namesake ingredient.

Next, we played around with the spice amounts until we had just the right combination of cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. Now our cakes were lightly spiced with a cakey texture.

Once we had the perfect cupcake, we turned to the frosting. Tasters wanted something light

and fluffy to match the delicate texture of the cupcake. We tried beating the cream cheese and butter in hopes of incorporating air, but this created a soft, almost runny frosting. Instead we combined the butter and confectioners' sugar, then added the cream cheese one piece at a time, and finished with the vanilla. The light hand worked, and we had a fluffy frosting that was a perfect match for the cupcakes.

CARROT CUPCAKES

MAKES 12 CUPCAKES

If you prefer, you can grind the carrots in a food processor rather than grate them by hand. If you add the optional currants and walnuts, the cupcakes will need to bake an additional 7 to 10 minutes. This recipe is easily doubled. See page 3 for tips on transporting cupcakes.

CUPCAKES

- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup packed dark brown sugar
- 2 large eggs, room temperature
- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups all-purpose flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon nutmeg
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon cloves
- 8 ounces carrots, peeled and grated on the small holes of a box grater (see note above)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup currants or chopped raisins (optional; see note above)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped walnuts (optional; see note above), toasted (see page 39)

FROSTING

- 4 tablespoons ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 4 ounces cream cheese, cut into 4 pieces and softened
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon vanilla extract

1. FOR THE CUPCAKES: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Line a 12-cup muffin tin with cupcake liners.

2. Whisk the melted butter, granulated sugar, brown sugar, and eggs together in a large bowl. Mix in the remaining ingredients until thoroughly combined.

3. Using a greased $\frac{3}{4}$ -cup measure, portion the batter into each muffin cup. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, 15 to 18 minutes (about 25 minutes if using currants and walnuts), rotating the tin halfway through. Cool the cupcakes in the tin for 5 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

4. FOR THE FROSTING: In a large bowl, beat the butter and confectioners' sugar together with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Add the cream cheese one piece at a time, beating thoroughly after each addition. Add the vanilla and beat until no lumps remain. (The frosting can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 5 days; let sit at room temperature for 30 minutes before using.)

5. Spread the frosting evenly over the cupcakes; serve. (Unfrosted cupcakes can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for up to

3 days. The frosted cupcakes are best eaten the same day but leftovers can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days. Bring to room temperature before serving.)

Boston Cream Cupcakes

Boston cream pie is composed of two layers of sponge cake, a custard filling, and a rich chocolate glaze. This popular dessert (which, of course, is not a pie but a cake) was invented in 1855 at Boston's Parker House Hotel and is the official dessert of Massachusetts. Tradition is all well and good, but we wondered if this old-fashioned cake could use a modern makeover—and thus we set our sights on transforming this venerable cake into an easy-to-serve (and -eat) cupcake.

We found more recipes for the cupcake version of this dessert than you might expect; unfortunately, most of them called for just three ingredients: a box of cake mix, a packet of pudding, and a can of frosting. What we had in mind was something with more homemade flavor. We thought of cream-filled cupcakes—especially the popular Hostess cupcakes many kids favor. Soft and moist, those cupcakes have a very fine texture and are incredibly tender.

We started with a basic yellow cake, which was a bit too coarse-textured. We then switched from the traditional creaming method (which calls for beating the butter and sugar first) to the reverse creaming method, which calls for cutting the butter into the dry ingredients, as is done with biscuit dough. These cupcakes were soft, moist, and tender. The reason? The traditional creaming method, which relies on aerating the butter with the sugar, creates large air pockets that result in a

coarser crumb. In the reverse creaming method, the butter coats the flour before the batter is aerated, keeping the cake tender and fine-crumbed.

Coming up with recipes for the filling and the glaze was easy enough. We wanted a rich, creamy custard that was stiff enough to hold its shape inside the cupcake but still gooey enough to ooze slightly when we bit into it. Heavy cream (rather than milk or half-and-half), three egg yolks, and a good amount of cornstarch gave our pastry cream the perfect consistency. For the glaze, tasters preferred the strong flavor of bittersweet chocolate to semisweet or milk chocolate, and they loved the sheen that corn syrup provided.

Now that we had assembled all of the components, the real challenge began. How were we to get the pastry cream inside the cupcake? Again looking to Hostess for guidance, we found it in the form of a small hole in the bottom of the cupcake, where the filling was piped in. We didn't have an expensive cream injector, but we did have a pastry bag, so we filled it with pastry cream, stuck the tip into the cupcake, and squeezed. It seemed as if we had put a good bit of pastry cream inside, but tasters demanded more filling. It was clear that some of the cake would have to go to make room.

Though surgery was unavoidable, we were loath to hack up our cupcakes too much. One option was to simply cut off the top, scoop out a bit of the cake, fill the hole, and then replace the top, but the scar was obvious, even when the chocolate glaze was added, and the top tended to slide when tasters took a bite. We had more success by removing a cone-shaped section of cake. Once the glaze was applied, the incision became invisible.

These pretty little cupcakes taste so good that the adults at your party will be fighting the kids for seconds.

BOSTON CREAM CUPCAKES

MAKES 12 CUPCAKES

It's important to bake these cupcakes in a greased and floured muffin tin rather than paper cupcake liners, so the chocolate glaze can run down the sides of the cupcakes.

PASTRY CREAM

- 1½ cups heavy cream
- 3 large egg yolks, room temperature
- ½ cup sugar
- Pinch salt
- 4 teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 2 pieces
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla extract

CUPCAKES

- 1¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- 12 tablespoons (1½ sticks) unsalted butter, cut into 12 pieces and softened
- 3 large eggs, room temperature
- ¾ cup whole milk, room temperature
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla extract

GLAZE

- 8 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
- ¾ cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup light corn syrup
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract

1. FOR THE PASTRY CREAM: Bring the cream to a simmer in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Meanwhile, whisk the egg yolks, sugar, and salt together in a medium bowl, then whisk in the cornstarch until pale yellow and thick, about 30 seconds.

2. Slowly whisk the hot cream into the egg mixture to temper, then return the mixture to the saucepan and cook over medium heat, whisking constantly, until thick and glossy, about 1½ minutes. Off the heat, whisk in the butter and vanilla. Transfer the mixture to a small bowl, press plastic wrap directly onto the surface, and refrigerate until chilled and set, about 2 hours.

3. FOR THE CUPCAKES: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour a 12-cup muffin tin.

4. Whisk the flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt together in a large bowl. Using an electric mixer on medium-low speed, beat the butter into the flour mixture, one piece at a time, about 30 seconds. Continue to beat until the mixture resembles moist crumbs, 1 to 3 minutes. Beat in the eggs, one at a time, until combined, about 30 seconds. Beat in the milk and vanilla, then increase the mixer speed to medium and beat the batter until smooth, light, and fluffy, 1 to 3 minutes.

5. Using a greased ⅓-cup measure, portion the batter into each muffin cup. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with a few moist crumbs attached, 18 to 20 minutes, rotating the tin halfway through. Cool the cupcakes in the tin for 10 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

6. FOR THE GLAZE: Microwave all of the glaze ingredients together on high, whisking often, until melted and smooth, 1 to 2 minutes. Cool the glaze, uncovered, until thickened but still pourable, about 20 minutes.

7. Following the photos on page 219, cut around the inside edge of the top of each cupcake,



removing a cone-shaped piece of cake, and fill with 2 tablespoons of the pastry cream. Trim and replace the cupcake top and set each cupcake on a wire rack set on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Spoon the glaze over the cupcakes, letting it run down the sides. Refrigerate the cupcakes until the glaze has set, about 10 minutes, before serving. (The glazed cupcakes can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days. Bring to room temperature before serving.)

FILLING BOSTON CREAM CUPCAKES



1. Insert the tip of a small knife at a 45-degree angle about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from the edge of the cupcake and cut all the way around, removing a cone of cake.



2. Cut off (and discard) the pointed end of each cone, so that the remaining cake disk measures about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick.



3. Fill each cupcake with 2 tablespoons of the pastry cream, then cover each with a cupcake top. Press lightly to adhere.



4. Spoon 2 tablespoons of the glaze over each filled cupcake, allowing it to drip down the sides.

Blueberry Crumble

A big pan of juicy blueberry crumble is perhaps one of the easiest and most welcome desserts on the summertime potluck table. But just because this dish is simple—sweetened blueberries baked under a crunchy streusel topping—doesn't mean it's foolproof. Many blueberry crumbles have soupy fillings, because the thick streusel on top of the fruit prevents the excess moisture in the berries from evaporating, or the streusel sinks into the filling and becomes soggy. We wanted to make a crumble that featured a thick, fresh-tasting blueberry filling topped with a contrasting layer of crunchy streusel.

Ten cups of fresh blueberries was an ample amount for our 13 by 9-inch baking dish, which would make a crumble that served 12. We baked batches of untopped filling (we'd get to the streusel later) to test granulated sugar against light brown and dark brown sugars, and the results were unanimous: the brown sugars competed with the fresh berry flavor.

We had two choices to firm up the filling: precooking the berries or adding a thickener. Simmering the mixture on the stovetop thickened the filling, but it also reduced the blueberries to mush and cooked out their fresh flavor. Moving on to the thickeners, we tried tossing the sugared berries with flour, tapioca, and cornstarch. The flour worked but made the filling pasty. Tapioca needed at least 40 minutes in the oven to thicken, which was too much cooking time for the berries. Just under 3 tablespoons of cornstarch was enough to quickly tighten up the filling without muting the flavor of the berries.

Next, we made our own streusel by combining flour, butter, sugar, and oats in the food processor. For more flavor in the streusel, we

replaced the granulated sugar with light brown sugar and added a touch of cinnamon for spice.

Our tasty new topping still sank into the filling and became quite soggy. We wondered if the size of the crumbles was the problem. Rather than processing the mixture until it was fine, we pulsed the cold butter into the dry streusel ingredients just until they clumped together. Better, but not perfect. To get even bigger crumbles, we pulsed the mixture into rough dime-sized pieces and used our fingers to incorporate the last dry bits. This streusel baked up crisp and crunchy, and we finally had a foolproof blueberry crumble, perfect for sharing at any summer get-together.

BLUEBERRY CRUMBLE

SERVES 12

Avoid instant or quick oats here—they will make the crumble mushy. In step 3, do not press the crumble into the berry mixture or it may sink and become soggy. Frozen berries do not work in this recipe. If you don't have a food processor, you can make the streusel by hand. Mix the dry ingredients together in a large bowl as directed in step 2, then use a pastry blender or two knives to cut the butter into the dry ingredients until dime-sized clumps form; pinch together any powdery parts. This recipe can be easily halved and baked in an 8-inch square baking dish.

- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 10 cups fresh blueberries (see note above)
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup old-fashioned oats (see note above)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup packed light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 12 tablespoons (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ sticks) unsalted butter, cut into 6 pieces and chilled

1. Adjust an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees. Combine the granulated sugar, cornstarch, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of the salt in a large bowl. Add the berries to the bowl and toss to coat. Transfer to a 13 by 9-inch baking dish.

2. Process the flour, oats, brown sugar, cinnamon, and the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt in a food processor until combined. Add the butter and pulse until dime-sized clumps form. Transfer the crumble to a bowl and pinch together any powdery parts.

3. Sprinkle the crumble evenly over the berries. Bake until the filling is bubbling around the edges and the topping is golden brown, about 30 minutes. Cool on a wire rack for at least 30 minutes. Serve. (The cooled crumble can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day. Bring to room temperature before serving.)

Apple Slab Pie

With tender, sweet apples and buttery, crispy crust, apple pie is one of the most beloved desserts in the American culinary landscape. Unfortunately, a standard apple pie doesn't feed a barbecue crowd or softball team. That's why we turned to apple slab pie—a double-crust apple pie made in a baking sheet. It is short in stature, its filling is thickened to ensure neat slicing, and it's topped with a sugary glaze.

Starting out, we decided to use sturdier store-bought pie dough rounds. By gluing two of them together with water and then rolling out the double dough into a large rectangle (actually, two large rectangles—one for the top crust and one for the bottom crust), we had large enough crust

layers that didn't tear. Now that we had the shaping down, we needed to find a way to improve the bland flavor of the store-bought dough. Using an old test-kitchen trick, we tried rolling the dough in crushed animal crackers for a welcome sweet and buttery flavor. Brushing the rolled dough with melted butter added even more richness.

In the test kitchen we like to use two kinds of apples in pies: a tart variety that will hold its shape and a sweet, soft variety that will cook down to create a saucy filling with balanced flavor. We needed about eight of each to fill our pie. We added cinnamon, sugar, and lemon juice to the sliced apples, filled and covered the pie, and baked it. The flavor was great, but the filling was too soupy to cut into neat squares. Cornstarch gave the filling a slightly slimy texture, but tapioca thickened the filling without making it starchy.

But even with this thickened filling, the bottom crust was getting soggy. We'd been making the filling right before assembling the pie, but for one test we got pulled away from the kitchen and left a batch of apples sitting for about 30 minutes. We noticed a pool of juice in the bottom of the bowl, so we drained away the juice and baked the pie as usual. This time the filling was much firmer, and the crust wasn't soggy at all.

As for the glaze, the traditional combination of confectioners' sugar and milk tasted a little flat. Remembering the pool of apple juice that had drained from the filling, we made another pie and reserved the juice. This time, we reduced it in a saucepan to concentrate its flavor, then mixed the reduced juice with confectioners' sugar and lemon juice. Spread over the top crust, this glaze offered just the right finish for our crisp and buttery giant of a pie.

APPLE SLAB PIE

MAKES ONE 18 BY 13-INCH PIE, SERVING 20

We prefer the convenience of store-bought pie crust in this recipe, but if desired, 2 recipes of Double-Crust Pie Dough (page 106) can be substituted. You will need an 18 by 13-inch rimmed baking sheet for this recipe; we prefer to use a nonstick baking sheet, but a greased traditional baking sheet will work. For tart apples, we prefer Granny Smith, Empire, and Cortland. For sweet apples, we recommend Golden Delicious, Braeburn, and Jonagold.

FILLING AND CRUST

- 3½ pounds firm tart apples (7 to 10 apples; see note above), peeled, cored, and cut into ¼-inch slices
- 3½ pounds firm sweet apples (7 to 10 apples; see note above), peeled, cored, and cut into ¼-inch slices
- 1½ cups granulated sugar
- 1½ cups (4 ounces) animal crackers
- 2 (15-ounce) boxes Pillsbury Just Unroll! Pie Crust (see note above)
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- 6 tablespoons Minute tapioca
- 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon salt

GLAZE

- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, softened
- 1¼ cups confectioners' sugar

1. FOR THE FILLING AND CRUST: Adjust an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Toss the apples and

1 cup of the granulated sugar in a large bowl and let sit, tossing occasionally, until the apples release their juice, about 30 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, pulse the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar and the animal crackers together in a food processor to coarse crumbs, about 15 pulses. Sprinkle $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of the crumbs onto a counter and lay 2 of the pie dough rounds on top of the crumbs. Following the photos, overlap the rounds by half and brush with water to help seal. Sprinkle $\frac{1}{3}$ cup more crumbs over the top and roll the pieces of dough together into a 19 by 14-inch rectangle.

MAKING APPLE SLAB PIE



1. Use water to "glue" together two store-bought pie crusts.



2. Roll out the crust in a mixture of cookie crumbs and sugar for flavor.



3. Brush the dough with melted butter for extra richness.



4. Top the filled pie with a second "double" crust. Use a fork to seal the edges.

3. Loosely roll the large rectangle of dough around the rolling pin, then gently unroll it over an 18 by 13-inch nonstick rimmed baking sheet. Gently fit the dough into the baking sheet and brush with the melted butter.

4. Drain the apples thoroughly in a colander set over a bowl, reserving $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the juice for the glaze. In a large bowl, toss the drained apples, tapioca, lemon juice, cinnamon, and salt together until well combined. Spread the apples evenly in the dough-lined baking sheet, pressing on them lightly to flatten. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until needed.

5. Following the directions in step 2, roll the remaining 2 dough rounds together with the remaining $\frac{1}{3}$ cup crumbs to a 19 by 14-inch rectangle. Loosely roll the large rectangle of dough around the rolling pin and gently unroll it over the pie. Trim, fold, and crimp the edges using the tines of a fork.

6. Poke vent holes in the top crust at 2-inch intervals using a fork. Bake until the pie is bubbling and the crust is golden brown, about 1 hour. Cool the pie slightly on a wire rack, about 30 minutes.

7. FOR THE GLAZE: Meanwhile, simmer the $\frac{1}{4}$ cup reserved apple juice in a small saucepan over medium heat until syrupy and reduced to $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, about 6 minutes. Stir in the lemon juice and butter. Cool the mixture to room temperature. Whisk in the confectioners' sugar and brush the glaze evenly over the warm pie. Cool the pie on a wire rack until the filling has set, about 2 hours; serve slightly warm or at room temperature, cut into squares. (The pie can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day. Bring to room temperature before serving.)



Dream Bars

A stack of bar cookies is a guaranteed crowd-pleaser and dream bars are no exception. They are as popular today as when they were first invented in the early 1900s. In these bars, a simple pat-in-the-pan shortbread crust made with brown sugar is topped by a sticky, uncluttered filling of eggs, more brown sugar, shredded coconut, and nuts. By the 1940s and '50s, some dream bar recipes had branched out to include chocolate chips, cornflakes, graham cracker crumbs, dried apricots, or even rolled oats. As the ingredient list swelled, the recipes were rechristened several times over as Hello Dolly Bars, Seven-Layer Bars, and Magic Bars. We wanted to get back to basics and focus on the pared-down, toffee-flavored original.

Even the simplest versions we tested were too sweet for modern tastes, and the coconut and pecans all but disappeared because the sugar flavor was so far forward. To bring out their flavor, we tried toasting the nuts and coconut. The pecans tasted crunchy and rich, but the shredded coconut was dried out. Perhaps a structural change was in order; if we separated the filling into two layers, one a layer of coconut and the other a simple filling of brown sugar, eggs, nuts, and vanilla,

we figured the coconut had a fighting chance to hold its own. We were wrong—the coconut, and its tropical flavor, dried out even more and was totally flavorless.

We were stumped—until a colleague came up with an interesting idea. She suggested we intensify the flavor of the shredded coconut by soaking it in coconut milk. Nobody liked the white, cottony topping that resulted, but the test wasn't a total failure: it led us to cream of coconut, which has almost 10 times as much sugar as coconut milk. That sugar helped the coconut topping caramelize.

Unfortunately, the initial problem resurfaced with a vengeance—the bars were cloyingly sweet. Up to now, we'd been using a standard shortbread crust. Reducing the amount of brown sugar in the crust was a good first step. Making the crust thicker and adding pecans to it created a nutty density that helped counterbalance the sweet topping.

With the crust baked and its sweetness toned down, we spread the filling on the crust. After smoothing dollops of the soaked shredded coconut on top of the filling, we baked our bars and held our breath. At long last, we had chewy, butterscotch-y dream bars, topped with a crispy layer of coconut, sure to disappear almost as soon as they're served.

THE AMERICAN TABLE SELLING DREAMS

In the depths of the Depression, Americans badly needed sweet dreams. And that's exactly when recipes for the rich, nutty coconut bar cookies known as dream bars first made the rounds in newspapers. Within 20 years, these bars were so popular that manufacturers had taken to using them to promote a wide range of ingredients. A Domino sugar advertisement went so far as to promise that the housewife who used its brown sugar to make her dream bars would become known as "a cook with a touch of genius." Whether that ad sold more sugar we'll never know, but what is certain is that dream bars are here to stay.

DREAM BARS

MAKES 24 BARS

Spread the coconut mixture as evenly as possible over the pecan layer, but don't worry if it looks patchy.

CRUST

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup packed dark brown sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pecans
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- 10 tablespoons ($1\frac{1}{4}$ sticks) unsalted butter, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces and chilled

TOPPING

- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups sweetened shredded coconut
- 1 cup cream of coconut
- 2 large eggs
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup packed dark brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup pecans, toasted (see page 39) and chopped rough

1. FOR THE CRUST: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Following the photo, line a 13 by 9-inch baking pan with an aluminum foil sling and grease the foil.

2. Process the flour, sugar, pecans, and salt in a food processor until the pecans are coarsely ground, about 15 seconds. Add the butter and pulse until the mixture resembles coarse meal, about 10 pulses. Press the mixture evenly into the prepared baking pan. Bake until golden brown,

about 20 minutes. Transfer the pan to a wire rack and cool for 20 minutes.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: Combine the coconut and cream of coconut in a medium bowl. In another bowl, whisk the eggs, sugar, flour, baking powder, vanilla, and salt together until smooth. Stir in the pecans, then spread the filling evenly over the cooled crust. Drop heaping tablespoons of the coconut mixture over the filling, then spread into an even layer.

4. Bake until the topping is deep golden brown, 35 to 40 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through. Cool on a wire rack, about 2 hours. Remove the bars from the pan using the foil, cut into 24 squares, and serve. (The bars can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 5 days.)

MAKING A FOIL SLING



1. Lay two large sheets of foil in the pan, perpendicular to each other, so extra foil is hanging over the edges. (If the dish is rectangular, the sheets will be different sizes.) Push the foil into the corners and up the sides, then grease the foil.

2. After the brownies or bars have baked and cooled, use the foil sling to transfer them to a cutting board before peeling away the foil and cutting them into tidy squares.



Mississippi Mud Brownies

When you're looking for a brownie recipe to really wow chocolate fans, look no farther than Mississippi mud brownies. These über-fudgy brownies are related to Mississippi mud pie in that they boast a dense gooeiness that approximates the texture of the silt that settles in the Mississippi River delta. The brownie variation is topped with mini-marshmallows when the base is set but still moist, briefly returned to the oven, and then covered with chocolate frosting once cooled.

We prepared brownies using several existing recipes, but they were more like candy than brownies—and their chocolate flavor was lost under the marshmallows and cloying frosting. All these great ingredients were not living up to their potential.

We started with the most promising brownie recipe from our initial testing, which had a decent fudgy texture, but little chocolate flavor. A combination of upping the unsweetened chocolate (there's already ample sugar in the ingredient list) and adding cocoa powder lent deeper chocolate flavor and had no adverse effect on the brownies' texture. Rather than using mini-marshmallows, we found that a thin layer of marshmallow crème evenly coated the brownies and kept the sugar quotient in check.

Tasters thought the thick blanket of chocolate frosting was overkill. A colleague suggested that since the brownie layer was so chocolaty, the frosting could now be minimized to just a melted drizzle. We melted a few chocolate chips and added a little oil to keep the chocolate flowing from the spoon we waved over the brownies. With just a small quantity of chocolate, we were able to give these rich and fudgy brownies a dressed-up look that will make them the star of the dessert table.

MISSISSIPPI MUD BROWNIES

MAKES 24 BROWNIES

Be careful not to overbake these brownies; they should be moist and fudgy.

BROWNIES

- 6 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped
- 16 tablespoons (2 sticks) unsalted butter
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup Dutch-processed cocoa powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 cups sugar
- 5 large eggs
- ¾ cup chopped pecans

TOPPING

- ¾ cup marshmallow crème
- ¼ cup semisweet chocolate chips
- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil

1. FOR THE BROWNIES: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Following the photo on page 225, line a 13 by 9-inch baking pan with an aluminum foil sling and grease the foil.

2. Microwave the chocolate and butter together on high in a large bowl, stirring occasionally, until smooth, 1 to 2 minutes; cool slightly. Combine the flour, cocoa, and salt in another bowl. Whisk the sugar and eggs together in a third bowl, then whisk in the melted chocolate mixture. Stir the flour mixture into the chocolate mixture until no streaks of flour remain. Fold in the pecans and scrape the batter evenly into the prepared pan. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with a few moist crumbs attached, about 35 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through. Transfer the pan to a wire rack.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: Dollop the marshmallow crème over the hot brownies and let sit until softened, about 1 minute. Meanwhile, microwave the chocolate chips and oil in a small bowl on high until smooth, stirring occasionally, about 30 seconds. Spread the marshmallow crème evenly over the brownies, then drizzle with the melted chocolate. Cool the brownies completely in the pan, about 2 hours. Remove the brownies from the pan using the foil, cut into 24 squares, and serve. (The brownies can be stored in an airtight container for up to 2 days.)

Raspberry Cream Cheese Brownies

Brownies are a great treat for kids, but we like raspberry cream cheese brownies, topped by a marble swirl, for a richer, more sophisticated dessert offering. All too often, though, the chocolate and cream cheese dominate, making you wonder what happened to the berries, or the cream cheese layer is so thin and dry that it practically flakes off. We set out to make over the raspberry cream cheese brownie so that all the flavors were in balance, with a moist, creamy layer of cream cheese in the middle.

Our testing began with the test kitchen's recipe for moist, fudgy brownies. As is usual for brownies, the chocolate and butter are melted together, then the sugar and eggs are mixed in, followed by the flour, baking powder, and salt. We quickly realized that to balance the extra sugar in this recipe (from both the jam and the cream cheese mixture), we needed to use unsweetened chocolate; a test of brownie batters made with unsweetened versus semisweet chocolate proved us right. We added a standard-issue creamy layer

MAKING CREAM CHEESE BROWNIES



1. Top half of the brownie batter with dollops of cream cheese filling and spread into an even layer.



2. Dollop jam over the cream cheese filling, then use the tip of a knife to swirl it into the filling.



3. Spread the remaining brownie batter evenly over the filling.

made from cream cheese, sugar, vanilla extract, and an egg yolk.

We then turned to the raspberry part of the equation. Most recipes for raspberry cream cheese brownies have you swirl a little jam into the cream cheese layer. That's good if what you're looking for is just a hint of flavor. For bold berry flavor, we swirled in some jam and also scattered the cream cheese layer with fresh berries before adding more brownie batter on top and baking. Instead of the bright flavor we'd envisioned, we got a pan full of soggy, seedy brownies.

What if we added raspberry jam to the brownie batter, too? We tried it, keeping the swirl in place, and these brownies baked up with a winning raspberry depth. On the downside, the jam made them somewhat wet. Knowing that sugar adds moisture as well as sweetness, we wondered if reducing the amount of sugar would reduce the sogginess. We cut the sugar by $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (exactly the amount of jam we had added to the batter) and baked a new batch. We were thrilled to find that we'd not only repaired the brownie's texture but also boosted the raspberry flavor—with less sugar, the flavor popped and more than held its own against the chocolate.

RASPBERRY CREAM CHEESE BROWNIES

MAKES 25 BROWNIES

We used Smucker's, which is the test kitchen's top-rated seedless jam; preserves will also work. Because the brownies are so rich, almost like truffles, we cut them into small squares.

FILLING

- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar
- 1 large egg yolk
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon vanilla extract

BROWNIES

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch pieces
- 4 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup raspberry jam (see note above)
- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups sugar
- 3 large eggs
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons vanilla extract

1. FOR THE FILLING: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 350 degrees. Following the photo on page 225, line an 8-inch square baking pan with an aluminum foil sling and grease the foil. Process the filling ingredients in a food processor until smooth, about 20 seconds.

2. FOR THE BROWNIES: Combine the flour, baking powder, and salt in a small bowl. Microwave the butter and chocolate together on high in a large bowl, stirring occasionally, until smooth, about 1 minute. Whisk in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the jam and cool slightly. Add the sugar, eggs, and vanilla to the chocolate mixture, stirring until combined. Whisk in the flour mixture until no streaks of flour remain.

3. Microwave the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup jam on high until warm, about 30 seconds; stir until smooth. Scrape half of the brownie batter into the prepared pan. Following the photos on page 228, dollop the filling over the batter and spread into an even layer. Dollop the warm jam over the filling and, using the tip of a knife, swirl the jam into the filling. Spread the remaining brownie batter evenly over the filling.

4. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with a few dry crumbs attached, 50 to 60 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through. Transfer the pan to a wire rack and cool for at least 2 hours. Remove the brownies from the pan using the foil, cut into $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch squares, and serve. (The brownies can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days.)

CONVERSIONS AND EQUIVALENCIES

Some say cooking is a science and an art. We would say that geography has a hand in it, too. Flour milled in the United Kingdom and elsewhere will feel and taste different from flour milled in the United States. So we cannot promise that the loaf of bread you bake in Canada or England will taste the same as a loaf baked in the States, but we can offer guidelines for converting weights and measures. We also recommend that you rely on your instincts when making our recipes. Refer to the visual cues provided. If the bread dough hasn't "come together in a ball," as described, you may need to add more flour—even if the recipe doesn't tell you to. You be the judge.

The recipes in this book were developed using standard U.S. measures following U.S. government guidelines. The charts below offer equivalents for U.S., metric, and Imperial (U.K.) measures. All conversions are approximate and have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

EXAMPLE:

- 1 teaspoon = 5 milliliters (rounded up from 4.9292 milliliters)
1 ounce = 28 grams (rounded down from 28.3495 grams)

VOLUME CONVERSIONS

U.S.	METRIC
1 teaspoon	5 milliliters
2 teaspoons	10 milliliters
1 tablespoon	15 milliliters
2 tablespoons	30 milliliters
¼ cup	59 milliliters
½ cup	79 milliliters
⅓ cup	118 milliliters
¾ cup	177 milliliters
1 cup	237 milliliters
1¼ cups	296 milliliters
1½ cups	355 milliliters
2 cups (1 pint)	473 milliliters
2½ cups	592 milliliters
3 cups	710 milliliters
4 cups (1 quart)	0.946 liter
1.06 quarts	1 liter
4 quarts (1 gallon)	3.8 liters

WEIGHT CONVERSIONS

OUNCES	GRAMS
½	14
¾	21
1	28
1½	43
2	57
2½	71
3	85
3½	99
4	113
4½	128
5	142
6	170
7	198
8	227
9	255
10	283
12	340
16 (1 pound)	454

CONVERSIONS FOR INGREDIENTS COMMONLY USED IN BAKING

Baking is an exacting science. Because measuring by weight is far more accurate than measuring by volume, and thus more likely to achieve reliable results, in our recipes we provide ounce measures in addition to cup measures for many ingredients. Refer to the chart below to convert these measures into grams.

INGREDIENT	OUNCES	GRAMS
Flour		
1 cup all-purpose flour*	5	142
1 cup cake flour	4	113
1 cup whole wheat flour	5½	156
Sugar		
1 cup granulated (white) sugar	7	198
1 cup packed brown sugar (light or dark)	7	198
1 cup confectioners' sugar	4	113
Cocoa Powder		
1 cup cocoa powder	3	85
Butter†		
4 tablespoons (½ stick, or ¼ cup)	2	57
8 tablespoons (1 stick, or ½ cup)	4	113
16 tablespoons (2 sticks, or 1 cup)	8	227

* U.S. all-purpose flour, the most frequently used flour in this book, does not contain leaveners, as some European flours do. These leavened flours are called self-rising or self-raising. If you are using self-rising flour, take this into consideration before adding leavening to a recipe.

† In the United States, butter is sold both salted and unsalted. We generally recommend unsalted butter. If you are using salted butter, take this into consideration before adding salt to a recipe.

OVEN TEMPERATURES

FAHRENHEIT	CELSIUS	GAS MARK (IMPERIAL)
225	105	¼
250	120	½
275	130	1
300	150	2
325	165	3
350	180	4
375	190	5
400	200	6
425	220	7
450	230	8
475	245	9

CONVERTING TEMPERATURES FROM AN INSTANT-READ THERMOMETER

We include doneness temperatures in many of the recipes in this book. We recommend an instant-read thermometer for the job. Refer to the above table to convert Fahrenheit degrees to Celsius. Or, for temperatures not represented in the chart, use this simple formula: Subtract 32 degrees from the Fahrenheit reading, then divide the result by 1.8 to find the Celsius reading.

EXAMPLE:

"Roast until the thickest part of a chicken thigh registers 175 degrees on an instant-read thermometer."

To convert:

$$175^{\circ}\text{F} - 32 = 143$$

$$143 \div 1.8 = 79^{\circ}\text{C (rounded down from 79.44)}$$

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