

Cooking Meat 101

One of the least understood areas of food preparation that I receive questions about from readers has turned out to be how to cook different cuts of meat. This is a “meat eating” region of the country and it’s amazing how little we understand about getting great results in the kitchen.

My mother will kill me for this but the meat police should arrest her whenever she buys steak at the market. It is, in fact, criminal what she does to a great cut of steak such as rib eye or a porterhouse. If you ever watched a chef working in a fine steak house when an order comes in for a beautifully marbled premium steak cut to be cooked “well done,” you’d see something of a mournful look as he/she cooks the life out of the selection. Sorry, Mom...I had to say something!

Cooking styles for meat are pretty basic and it’s important to understand as many as possible. You should choose how you are going to prepare a cut based on what you’re going to cook...loin, sirloin, a brisket, a roast, stew, etc.

The preparations we can choose from include techniques using high, medium and low heat. The object of your choice should be to end up with a final result that is tender, flavorful and not dried out. It’s not surprising that these same results apply to most types of meat and fowl, including turkey, lamb, mutton, chicken, wild venison and most other hoofed or feathered creatures.

High heat “dry” preparation is used for the very best cuts of meat found in the most expensive steaks or chops. In this case you’ll generally get your best results by grilling or broiling. A great steak is laced with marbled fat and even with high heat you’ll finish up with nice amounts of moisture and tons of flavor from the fat being cooked down into the cut. I strongly urge you not to cook past medium to medium-well when cooking your best cuts. At medium-well there’s no pink left in the meat and you should still have sufficient moisture to make the meal a great one. Rib eye’s also will offer the best levels of marbled fat of most cuts and will hold up well to longer cooking times. Whatever cut you use, it will be very important to select something with a decent amount of fat if you like to cook to medium-well or (gasp!) well-done.

Another dry heat approach besides grilling and broiling is roasting. Roasting is a great way to prepare what I would call your quality or tender roasts such as prime rib. These cuts of meat are cooked to a specific internal temperature to achieve the doneness you desire. For example, a prime rib roast cooked to an internal temperature of 130° F. will be medium-rare and very juicy, while at 170° F. it will be gray and less moist.

For beef or lamb, those temperature ranges are: Rare (120° to 130° F.), Medium-Rare (130° to 135° F.), Medium (140° to 150° F.), Medium-Well (155° to 165° F.), and Well (170° to 185° F.).

As you move to the “not so tender” meat selections located in the back half of the beef, you’ll note that these muscles are used more and therefore have a tougher texture. Also, keep in mind that this exercise does intensify the beef flavor, which means they provide great taste so long as you can prepare them to be tender. This includes the rump roast, round roast, and the sirloin.

While dry heat cooking can be done at high or low temperatures, moist heat cooking, which we use for these roasts, is always done at lower temperatures. A great way to remember these choices is that naturally tender meats should be cooked by temperature (using your instant read thermometer), while tougher cuts are cooked by time based on weight. Check your favorite recipe book for the specifics on whatever you are preparing.

When preparing these roasts we want to braise the meat and slow cook it at a relatively low temperature for a fairly long period of time. Preparation needs to be gentle, as we want to gradually break down the collagen-filled muscle structure to end up with fork tender beef. At high heat the beef will shrink up and lose moisture making it tasteless and very tough. Place a sirloin on the grill and you’ll know what I mean.

Braising differs from stewing based on the amount of liquid in the pot when you cook. Braising involves only about 1 inch of liquid while stewing requires enough liquid to totally cover the meat. In both cases you start by browning the meat in fat of some type. This can be olive oil, vegetable oil or even some of the fat that was trimmed from the roast and has been cooked down in the pot. Once the meat is browned over a medium heat source you should have a brown crust on the meat and a lightly brown crust on the bottom of your pot. Take your time and watch your heat levels...this isn’t a race.

Next you will want to deglaze your pot so that the bits of browned meat sticking to the bottom can be used to enhance the flavor of your liquid base in the pot. Remove the beef from the pot and using liquid such as stock, wine or water (I prefer the wine, of course!) you cover the bottom of the pot and slowly cook and scrap until the pieces have worked into the liquid and it has been reduced a bit. At this point your liquid levels can be increased using any combination of the stock, wine and water you like, to a level that allows you to continue your preparation. Other choices for liquid include fruit juice, beer, tomato juice or just use your imagination.

Since body and texture are incredibly important in a stew or in the sauce created during braising, a couple of tricks are worth keeping in your arsenal for top results. The collagen we mentioned earlier will thicken or thicken your sauce as it melts down during gentle cooking. You can kick up the character of your dish by adding beef oxtail during the cooking. A chunk of pork rind, a calf’s foot or even a pig’s ear also work wonderfully. They don’t need to be left in the pot for serving, but you’ll love the texture and flavor they add.

It’s also a good idea to brown any veggies you will be using in your stew or roast separately from the beef as they will cook at a different speed than the meat. Cooking them together is simply too complicated. Another consideration is the Dutch oven or

heavy pot you use which should have a heavy bottom and a well-sealed lid. Don't scrimp on your cookware and you'll thank yourself every time you use it. We'll talk about that subject at a later date!

In closing, pay close attention to the meat you are preparing. Be picky at the market and consider how you will prepare your meal using some of the concepts we've talked about. When examining the meat before cooking, don't be shy about trimming away excess fat or removing connective tissue, which can be cooked for a week and it will still be tough. Cut it away and be done with it. Your best buddy in this whole process is a good butcher if you can find one. (They are still out there!)

And once the beef is done and the wine comes out...

We would make some specific recommendations that do combine well with beef. Our first suggestion is a great Pinot Noir, which is the base wine of one of the most famous beef dishes of all time, Beef Burgundy. The 1999 Bouchard Bourgogne Pinot Noir is a wonderful value with a bright, fruity character and a round, silky texture. It offers the complexity of a great Burgundy at a bargain price. The earthy fruits in the flavor along with the restrained power of the wine allows it to compliment even the richest stewed beef dish perfectly.

Our friends in Paso Robles, California, continue to produce remarkable reds and the 2001 Peirano Estate Cabernet Sauvignon is a great example. The wine has shoulders and structure but is very approachable now at a relatively young age. It will improve for at least another ten years if well cellared. We noted well measured tannins and oak along with a slightly fruity character which comes from its top quality fruit picked at the peak of ripeness. Let the wine breath for an hour before you serve it as it is stilled a bit closed but this one is a keeper!

Let us know if you would like help finding these wines at 888-288-0668. Also, we'd like to thank those of you who stopped by to see us at the Bridal Show this past weekend. It's great fun to meet readers! Cheers!