

Seared Beef Tenderloin with Cilantro & Mint

For this recipe, beef tenderloin is well seasoned, quickly seared and then sliced paper-thin, a simple preparation that preserves the cut's natural tenderness. If you prefer your tenderloin more fully cooked, increase the cooking time to 8 to 10 minutes.

Pour the vinegar into a small saucepan. Place over low heat, bring to a gentle simmer and cook until reduced to ½ cup, about 1½ hours. The vinegar will have become syrupy. Remove from the heat and let cool to room temperature. Transfer the balsamic syrup to a small bowl, cover and refrigerate until needed. Set aside 2 Tbs. for this recipe; reserve the remainder for another use. (The balsamic syrup will keep, tightly capped, for up to 1 month.)

Let the beef stand at room temperature for about 30 minutes.

In a small bowl, stir together the ginger, garlic powder, onion powder, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, cilantro, salt and pepper. Spread the mixture on a large flat plate. Brush the beef on all sides with the mustard. Roll the beef in the spice mixture, coating it evenly and pressing the mixture lightly with your fingers so that it adheres to the surface.

In a large nonstick fry pan over high heat, warm the olive oil. When the oil is hot, add the beef and sear, turning as needed, until browned evenly on all sides, about 5 minutes; the meat will still be rare in the center. Let the meat rest for about 10 minutes. (The meat can be prepared up to this point 1 hour in advance.) Transfer the meat to a cutting board and slice against the grain as thinly as possible.

Divide the slices evenly among individual plates, folding the pieces and overlapping them slightly to cover the center of each plate. Scatter the cilantro, mint and green onions over the beef slices. Finish each plate with a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil and the reserved balsamic syrup. Serve immediately. Serves 4.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma, *Entertaining*, Edited by Chuck Williams (Oxmoor House, 2004).

Ingredients for Seared Beef Tenderloin with Cilantro & Mint

2 cups young balsamic vinegar

1½-lb. piece of beef tenderloin, trimmed

1 tsp. ground ginger

1 tsp. garlic powder

1 tsp. onion powder

1 tsp. cumin seeds, crushed

1 tsp. coriander seeds, crushed

2 Tbs. chopped fresh cilantro

1 tsp. coarse salt

1 tsp. freshly ground pepper

1 Tbs. Dijon mustard

2 Tbs. olive oil

For the garnishes:

½ cup fresh cilantro leaves, torn into pieces

6 fresh mint leaves, finely slivered

2 green onions, including tender green tops, thinly sliced diagonally

2 Tbs. fruity extra-virgin olive oil

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Tips & Tricks

When searing, keep these tips in mind:

- Pat the meat or seafood dry with paper towels before searing; otherwise, the excess moisture will hinder proper browning.
- Use a large, heavy pan, preferably one that retains heat well.
- Oil the food to be seared rather than the pan because an oiled pan will soon start to smoke at the high temperatures needed for searing.
- Allow sufficient space between pieces of meat or a single piece of meat and the sides of the pan. If the food is crowded in the pan, this will lower the temperature, trap moisture and create steam, preventing the meat from browning properly.
- Turn the meat frequently to brown it evenly on all sides.
- To make the most of the pan drippings created by searing, deglaze the pan before continuing with the recipe.

When simmering, keep these tips in mind:

- Some recipes call for simmering large pieces of bone-in meat or whole poultry in liquid. The cooked meat is removed from the liquid and pulled from the bones, then the meat is returned to the cooking liquid. Simmering the meat on the bones helps the dish to develop richer flavor.
- Browning meats and vegetables in oil before simmering the food in liquid caramelizes the natural sugars, developing rich surface color and deep flavor.
- An important step in simmering is reducing the cooking liquid. This typically involves simmering the liquid briskly for several minutes, reducing its volume, concentrating its flavor and thickening its body.

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Essential Cooking Techniques: Searing & Simmering

Good cooking begins with high-quality ingredients and well-made cookware and tools, so knowing how to select the best ingredients and determine the right tools to use in the kitchen is key.

What is Searing?

Searing involves browning food, typically meat, poultry or seafood, quickly over high heat, usually to prepare it for a moist cooking method, such as braising or stewing. For years, cooks believed that searing sealed in juices and kept the meat from drying out, but food scientists have proven that it does just the opposite—searing actually draws juices to the surface and releases them into the pan.

Cooking meat over high heat with a small amount of fat sets off a series of reactions between the sugars and the proteins, essentially caramelizing the surface and producing a more complex and richer flavor. The crisp, browned surface of a seared piece of meat is also more appetizing than the dull, gray look of meat that has not been properly browned before moist cooking.

What is Simmering?

Simmering involves cooking food gently in liquid at a temperature just below a boil (about 185°F) so that tiny bubbles just begin to break the surface. Simmering resembles braising because with both methods, the ingredients are cooked while being partially or fully covered with gently simmering liquid. By incorporating the cooking liquid into the finished dish, simmering promotes tenderness and concentrates the flavors.

Simmering is ideal for cooking delicate meats and vegetables and for allowing the flavors of the ingredients to meld over a longer cooking time. When cooking or simmering foods at a low temperature, the liquid is not moving rapidly as it does with boiling, which can cause delicate foods to break apart, meats to toughen and liquids to scorch, ruining the texture and flavor of the dish.

Ingredients for Pan-Seared Salmon with Pea Shoots & Watercress
⅔ cup extra-virgin olive oil
⅓ cup fresh lemon juice, preferably from Meyer lemons
3 shallots, minced
½ tsp. salt
½ tsp. freshly ground pepper
¼ tsp. sugar, if needed
5 cups watercress leaves
5 cups pea shoots
For the salmon:
1 ½ tsp. salt
8 salmon fillets, each about ⅓ lb. and ½ inch thick
1 tsp. freshly ground pepper
½ cup dry white wine
8 Tbs. fresh lemon juice, preferably from Meyer lemons
4 Tbs. water

Photo of Pan-Seared Salmon with Pea Shoots & Watercress

Ingredients for Chicken Breasts with Kumquat-Honey Sauce
4 boneless chicken breast halves, each 6 to 8 oz., with skin
Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
1 Tbs. olive oil
1 shallot, thinly sliced
¼ cup brandy
4 oz. kumquats, quartered
1 Tbs. honey
1 Tbs. chicken demi-glace
¾ cup chicken stock
2 whole star anise
1 Tbs. unsalted butter, at room temperature

Pan-Seared Salmon with Pea Shoots & Watercress

Once cooked, the salmon and its pan juices become a topping for a tangle of sprightly flavored greens dressed with a lemon vinaigrette. Pea shoots, the clippings from young pea plants, have a mild pealike flavor that blends well with the peppery watercress. They are sold in Asian markets, but if you can't find them, substitute baby arugula, spinach or lettuce.

In a large bowl, combine the olive oil, lemon juice, shallots, salt and pepper. Add the sugar if not using juice from Meyer lemons. Mix until well blended. Add the watercress leaves and pea shoots to the dressing and turn gently to coat well. Divide the greens evenly among 8 individual plates.

To prepare the salmon, sprinkle the salt in a wide, heavy fry pan and place over medium-high heat until nearly smoking. Add the salmon fillets and sear for 2 minutes on one side. Turn the salmon over and sear for 1 minute on the other side. Season with the pepper. Reduce the heat to low, then pour in the wine and 2 Tbs. of the lemon juice. Cover and cook until the juices are nearly absorbed and the fish is halfway cooked, about 3 minutes. Uncover and pour in 2 Tbs. of the lemon juice and 3 Tbs. of the water. Re-cover and cook just until the fish flakes easily with a fork, about 3 minutes more. Most of the pan juices will have been absorbed.

Place a salmon fillet on each mound of greens. Increase the heat to high, add the remaining 4 Tbs. lemon juice and the remaining 1 Tbs. water, and deglaze the pan, stirring to dislodge any browned bits from the pan bottom. Pour the pan juices evenly over the fish and serve immediately. Serves 8.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma Lifestyles Series, Casual Outdoor Dining, by Georgeanne Brennan (Time-Life Books, 1998).

Chicken Breasts with Kumquat-Honey Sauce

These chicken breasts are cooked using both of the techniques featured in this class—searing and simmering. The meat is first seared to brown the exterior and then gently simmered in a small amount of liquid so it emerges tender and succulent.

Season the chicken breasts with salt and pepper. In a sauté pan over medium-high heat, warm the olive oil. Place the chicken, skin side down, in the pan and cook until golden, 3 to 4 minutes. Turn the chicken over and brown for 2 minutes. Transfer to a plate.

Reduce the heat to medium, add the shallot and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, about 3 minutes. Add the brandy and boil until almost evaporated, about 2 minutes. Add the kumquats, honey, demi-glace, stock and star anise and bring to a boil. Return the chicken, skin side up, to the pan. Cover and cook until the chicken is opaque throughout, about 10 minutes. Transfer to a carving board and cut into ½-inch slices.

Whisk the butter into the sauce, increase the heat to medium-high and cook until thickened, about 2 minutes. Pour the sauce over the chicken and serve immediately. Serves 4.

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Chicken Breasts with Cherry Tomatoes, Zucchini & Olives

As if cherry tomatoes weren't small enough already, new varieties of even tinier tomatoes are turning up in markets. They are much sweeter, too, with fewer bitter seeds than regular cherry tomatoes. Raw, they're a perfect addition to salads, and if cooked just briefly (so that they hold their shape), they bring a delightful sweet-and-tangy flavor to sautéed dishes. Two of the most common new varieties of tiny cherry tomatoes are called Sweet 100s and grape tomatoes.

In a large fry pan or sauté pan over medium-high heat, warm 1 Tbs. of the olive oil. Add the zucchini and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned, about 6 minutes. Add the shallot and cook, stirring, until softened, about 1 minute. Add the tomatoes, olives and rosemary and cook, stirring occasionally, until the tomatoes are heated through but not collapsed, about 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer the mixture to a plate and set aside.

Add the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil to the pan. Season the chicken breasts with salt and pepper. Cook, turning once, until browned on both sides and firm when pressed in the centers, about 8 minutes total. Transfer to a plate and keep warm.

Add the wine to the pan and bring to a boil. Return the vegetables to the pan and cook for 1 minute to reheat, stirring once or twice. Transfer to a warmed platter and top with the chicken breasts. Serve immediately with the hot rice. Serves 4.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma Collection Series, Chicken, by Rick Rodgers (Simon & Schuster, 2001).

Seared Scallops with Spicy Aioli

If diver scallops are available from your fishmonger, use them for this recipe. As the name implies, these scallops are hand picked off the rocks by divers, a more ecologically friendly way of harvesting sea scallops.

In a bowl, whisk the egg yolks. Whisking vigorously, add the 1 cup olive oil drop by drop until the mixture thickens, then drizzle in the oil in a slow, steady stream until emulsified. Whisk in the garlic, 2 tsp. of the lemon juice, salt, coriander, cumin and paprika. If the aioli is too thick, whisk in a few drops of water. Cover the aioli with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes or up to overnight.

In a bowl, toss the asparagus with 1 Tbs. of the olive oil, salt and pepper. Preheat a grill pan over medium-high heat. Working in batches, grill the asparagus, turning occasionally, until tender, 6 to 8 minutes. Transfer the asparagus to a platter and toss with 1 to 2 tsp. lemon juice. Cover with aluminum foil.

Season the scallops lightly with salt and pepper. In a fry pan over medium-high heat, warm the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil until just smoking. Add the scallops and cook, turning once, until golden brown and opaque throughout, 3 to 4 minutes per side.

Arrange the scallops on the platter alongside the asparagus. Serve immediately with the aioli. Serves 4 to 6.

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Ingredients for Chicken Breasts with Cherry Tomatoes, Zucchini & Olives
2 Tbs. olive oil
2 zucchini, trimmed and cut into ½ -inch cubes
2 Tbs. chopped shallot
2 cups halved red and yellow cherry tomatoes or whole small cherry tomatoes, such as grape tomatoes or Sweet 100s, stems removed
⅓ cup pitted, coarsely chopped black Mediterranean olives
1 tsp. chopped fresh rosemary
Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
4 boneless, skinless chicken breast halves, each about 6 oz., pounded to an even thickness
½ cup dry white wine or vermouth
1 ½ cups long-grain white rice or 1 ¾ cups orzo, cooked according to package directions

Ingredients for Seared Scallops with Spicy Aioli
2 egg yolks
1 cup plus 2 Tbs. olive oil
2 garlic cloves, pounded to a paste
3 to 4 tsp. fresh lemon juice
Kosher salt, to taste
1 ¼ tsp. toasted ground coriander
¾ tsp. toasted ground cumin
½ tsp. hot paprika
2 bunches asparagus, tough ends trimmed, stems peeled
Freshly ground pepper, to taste
2 lb. large diver scallops

Photo of Chicken Breasts with Cherry Tomatoes, Zucchini & Olives

Photo of Seared Scallops with Spicy Aioli