

Pan-roasting the Best Steak

My wife and I have pretty much stopped ordering steak when we go out, since I seem to be able to cook it better than they can, for less money... granted, I can't say how my steak compares to the really expensive steak houses. They probably have access to better cuts of meat than I can get, so they might have an edge in that department. Still, I'm sure we're saving money, even if it is an extravagant meal, but since I only do it about once a month, it's bearable.

First off, you need to buy the proper steak. It won't do to go to the Safeway, and buy whatever red meat they've got on sale. The cut of steak that you choose is important. It boils down to three, as far as I'm concerned : filet, strip, or ribeye. My wife prefers the filet mignon, but I usually always go for the strip. I'll only buy ribeye if it's on sale, since it's a substantially fattier cut.

You'll also want to find the best butcher that you can. For me, that ends up being at Whole Foods. Look for good marbelling – little lines of yellow fat flowing through the deep red of the meat. I also like to get one that's an inch thick. I'll sometimes go for the dry-aged steak, which costs \$4 more per pound, but most times, I'll just go for the prime. Recent prices peg that at \$17 a pound, with one steak usually coming in at one pound, and one strip steak like this will feed both of us for one meal. Pricey, yes, but if you went to a fine steak house, there's no way we'd both eat for \$17.

45 minutes to an hour before you're ready to start cooking, take the steak out of the fridge and to let it start coming to room temperature. 20 minutes before you start cooking, set your oven to 300° and let it preheat. 5 minutes before you start cooking, turn a burner on high, and put a cast iron frying pan on it, and let it start getting hot.

Meanwhile, unwrap the steak, and dry the surface off with a paper towel, then liberally coat the steak with salt and fresh ground pepper. You can also put a couple drops of canola oil on one side, and rub it all over that side.

Now turn on the exhaust fan, and open a window a little bit, because there may be a little smoke. Put the steak(s) in the pan, oiled side down, and let it cook for 4 minutes. Then turn the steak over, and cook another 4 minutes. Then move the pan into the oven, and let it roast. The amount of time you let it roast really depends on how thick the steak was. I've found that for a 1 inch thick steak, roasting it another 8 minutes seems to give a good medium-rare.

There's a way to tell how your steak is cooked by touch. Hold your left hand out, relaxed, and feel the section of skin at the base of your thumb and forefinger. This is how a rare steak will feel when you press it. Now flex your hand, stretching your fingers and thumb out. Press your finger at the fleshy base of your thumb near the palm. This is how a medium steak will feel when cooked correctly. (I can't tell you how to figure out what a well-done steak feels like because I've never done it, and think it's a bit of a sin.)

Once your steak is of the proper doneness, you're still not ready to eat. You have to let the meat rest. Let it sit on a plate for 15 minutes, loosely covered with foil. This lets the piece of meat relax a little, and allow all the juice that's been forced into the center of the cut to redistribute.

Bonus : You can do this same method on a charcoal grill. Follow the instructions for preparing the meat, but instead of preheating the oven and the pan, prepare your charcoal grill as you normally would, but keep the coals only on one side of the kettle. (In a gas grill, if you only light one element, you should be able to replicate the same cooking conditions.) Grill the steak over the hot side, similar to above, at 4 minutes a side. (You could even cook it 2 minutes, then turn

the steak a quarter turn, and cook it for another 2 minutes. This will give you those professional looking grill marks.) Once that's done, move the steak to the cooler side of the grill, and put on the lid. There's no telling how long you'll want to cook it this way, since it really depends on how hot your coals are. You can try telling by touch, or by using an instant read thermometer.

On an instant-read thermometer, your rare steak should read about 110° in the center, before resting. Medium rare, 120°, and medium, 130°. If you must eat your steak well done, you'll be ok if you get it up to 145°.

Seasoning a Cast Iron Pan



With proper care, these inexpensive pans will become treasured heirlooms. And it really isn't all that tricky to maintain them. The prime directive for these pans is, **never, ever use soap** to clean them. I know it probably sounds icky, but you should never use soap on a seasoned cast iron pan. The stuff that makes a cast iron pan seasoned is oil, and soap breaks down oil. So soap goes against everything you're trying to accomplish here.

Ok, so the real first step is to **buy a pan**. If you want to streamline this process, you have two options – option one is to buy a used pan in an antique store, or on ebay. Chances are, you'll end up paying about 3 times what you would spend for a new pan, but you'll be getting the fine, aged, slick surface that someone's grandma spent 20 or more years to create. (You might also luck out and find a deal at a yard sale.) Your other option is to go for a factory-installed pre-

seasoning. Lodge puts out a whole line of pre-seasoned pans. They're not perfect, but they're a good start – saving you a few months on the long journey to seasoned bliss.

So here's the process you probably want to start even with a pre-seasoned pan, but especially a new, unseasoned pan, or a pan that has been mishandled and shows signs of rust, or that has a layer of grody goop. Thoroughly wash your new pan, getting off any debris or gunk. (It's actually ok to use soap here if your pan is really dirty.) Turn your oven on to 375°, and put a sheet pan on the lower rack. Put the pan in the cold but warming oven, and let it preheat and then bake for a while. At least half-an-hour, but an hour is better. Carefully remove the pan with pot-holders and move it to your stove top. Crack a window and turn on the exhaust fan, then pour a couple teaspoons of canola oil into the pan, and using a thick wad of paper towels, spread the oil all over the inside of the pan, and up over the edge, and even the outside, being extra careful not to burn yourself. (Seems stupid to do it on the outside of the pan, but one of the reasons for doing all this is to add a protective layer onto the metal and keep it from rusting on you.) Return the pan to the oven, upside down over the sheet pan, and repeat this process, a couple more times, as many as you can handle. Early in the life of the pan, you'll end up with a thick, shiny layer of oil on the pan, sort of like urethane on wood. Eventually, with heating, this layer will cut back and form a matte black, slick finish. If your pan ever gets mistreated, rusty, or otherwise, repeat this process. (I inherited a huge cast iron frying pan from my grandmother, and it had a thick, spongy layer of black goo completely covering it. I lit up my charcoal grill and put the pan in there, lid on, and walked away. 3 hours later, the 80-year old pan emerged pristine and good as new, ready for its first layers of oil.)

So, once you've got this pan going, what next? Well, **use it**. It won't be perfectly non-stick at this point, and will

probably require a little more elbow grease to clean it, but you need to repeatedly heat it and cook the seasoning. These early days, it's probably a bad idea to cook anything acidic, like chili, tomato sauce, or deglazing with balsamic. If you do, your food will end up tasting sort of nasty. It'll have a distinct metallic taste. (In general, acidic foods in cast iron is never a great idea, but you can get away with it once in awhile, once the seasoning has matured.)

So now you've cooked with it. Now what? Ok, you want to rinse it with hot water and a stiff sink brush, or even a plastic scrubby sponge. No soap. Never soap. Also, never let the pan soak in water. Once you get most of the food off, you want to dry the pan. Do this by putting it back onto the stove over high heat. What's left of the water will fizzle away. As the pan gets hotter and hotter, what's left of the fragments of food will burn away, too. I usually let the pan sit on the stove until I smell it. Then, turn the heat off, and apply a new layer of oil. For this, you can use the canola and paper towel method, but what I do is spray the pan with a canola oil non-aerosol spray. (Trader Joes sells the stuff for, like, \$2.50 a can, which will last you for months.) Just a thin layer, and since the pan is hot, it'll probably smoke a little. That's ok. Let the pan sit on the stove and cool completely.

Remember that cast iron is pretty brittle. If you drop it, provided you don't break a toe, the pan could shatter. (The unfortunate demise of my grandmother's heirloom.) Also, these steps can be used on [french steel pans](#), too, which are just as inexpensive as cast iron, but they don't have the mass, so they're not as good at providing even heating... much better for a fast sauté. (French Steel, sometimes known as "blue steel" pans can be purchased mail-order or through restaurant supply stores, and you can get a 10" pan for about \$20.)

These methods apply to any cast iron pan shape you can think

of. I recommend the 10" and the 15" pre-seasoned pans, as well as the reversible griddle/grill pan. I don't recommend a cast iron dutch oven, unless you can't afford to get an enameled one, since you'll probably want to use the dutch oven for those acidic foods I mentioned before, and it's just not worth the risk of ruining the flavor with the strong flavor of metal.

Oof!, Part 2

So, as a follow up to [this post](#), the short ribs were quite the success. I can tell you now that I was making an elaborate and unusual [beef stew](#) that Alton Brown described in a recent episode. The hardest part was reheating everything up at the family house in Connecticut. I was prepared to bring some of my tools, but I wasn't going to bring up anything I wasn't 100% ok about leaving behind if I forgot it, or for whatever reason. So that meant leaving my [enameled french cast iron](#) at home. I did bring the one [cast iron dutch oven](#) I had because I hardly ever use it here. And I ended up using a cast iron dutch oven that normally sits next to the fireplace, and was completely covered with dust. After washing it inside and out, the inside still had a whiff of the oil that was applied to its inside who knows how long ago. I couldn't get rid of the slightly rancid odor, and unfortunately, half the stew ended up taking on a little of that flavor. All's well that ends well, because everyone seemed to like the stew anyway. And, for dessert, I served the Ina Garten's [rice pudding](#).

As for the competition, it ended up not really coming off, since my oldest brother didn't get a chance to prepare his meal, since we all raced home a day early due to a threat of snow. Still, everyone had a great time, and everyone enjoyed

the meal I made.