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JEANMARIE BROWMILLER, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

CASTING CALL

Why your cast-iron skillet is perfect for pork chops

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If you only own one pan, make it a cast-iron skillet. This versatile pan will serve you well, from making breakfast pancakes to griddled sandwiches to main-course meats and vegetables.

The most important technique when cooking in cast iron is to heat the pan well before adding anything, including oil. The hot surface prevents food from sticking, basically creating a nonstick surface. Once the pan is hot, add a little oil (less than you think) and then the meat or vegetables. There's no need to use high heat with cast iron; it conducts heat so well that medium heat is almost always just right for browning chops and searing vegetables.

Like to pair tea of hanout, a Moroccan spice blend made with cinnamon and cumin, with the dark flavors of browned meat, raisins, olives and rich balsamic vinegar. Here, the blend seasons pork chops destined for a pile of sauteed peppers.

Pork Chops With Sweet Peppers and Olives

Yield: 2 to 3 servings

2 teaspoons ras el hanout seasoning (or ½ teaspoon each cinnamon, paprika and ground cumin, and ¼ teaspoon each thyme and ground cloves)
½ teaspoon each salt and freshly ground pepper
2 to 3 bone-in rib pork chops, each about 1 inch thick and 8 to 10 ounces
1 small red onion, halved
½ of each small, red, yellow and green bell peppers
½ cup dark raisins
¼ cup sliced pitted Kalamata olives
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
2 tablespoons vegetable oil for high-heat cooking, such as grapeseed, sunflower or safflower oil
¼ cup balsamic vinegar or red wine vinegar
1 or 2 tablespoons butter
Chopped fresh parsley, chives or green onions for a combination), for garnish
Cooked polenta or egg noodles, for serving

1. Mix ras el hanout, salt and pepper in a small dish. Pat pork chops dry, then season generously on both sides with about ½ of the spice mixture. Refrigerate chops, covered loosely, up to 24 hours.
2. Thinly slice the onion and bell peppers. Mix raisins, olives, garlic and remaining spice mixture in a small bowl.
3. Set a 10- or 12-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat. Let the empty pan heat until drops of water sizzle on contact. Add 1 tablespoon oil, swirl to coat the pan bottom, then add the onions and peppers.
4. Cook, stirring often, until peppers are crisp-tender, 5 to 6 minutes. Stir in olive mixture. Cook 1 minute, then transfer to a bowl.
5. Reheat the pan if necessary, then add remaining oil.
6. Add pork chops in a single, uncrowded layer. Cook, without turning, over medium heat until bottoms are beautifully browned, about 6 minutes.
7. Flip and brown the other side, about 4 minutes. Remove to a plate.
8. Pour vinegar into pan, and swirl to boil while scraping up browned bits from bottom of pan. Swirl in the butter, and when it's melted, return the pepper mixture to the pan. Nestle in the pork chops. Remove from heat. Sprinkle with herbs. Serve hot from the pan with cooked polenta or egg noodles.

BREAKFAST BITES

START YOUR DAY WITH A TASTY SANDWICH

ROB DAVIS
Contributing Columnist

Whether you have eaten one or not, we are all familiar with the fast-food breakfast sandwich phenomenon. In 1972 the Egg McMuffin, A McDonald's breakfast classic, it was the brainchild of then-three-hise owner Herb Peterson and patterned after his favorite breakfast of eggs Benedict.

This simple sandwich of bacon, egg and American cheese sandwiched between two buttery toasted English muffins was the beginning of the fast-food breakfast. However, what we know as a breakfast sandwich has been around much longer than the McDonald's original.

A breakfast sandwich consists of ingredients that are typically eaten during breakfast. Meats like sausage, bacon and ham are common. Eggs and potatoes make an appearance, along with a variety of breads.

The breakfast sandwich became a staple of American factory workers during Prohibition because it was convenient and portable.

These early sandwiches were filled with ham, eggs, onions and green peppers, with an early recipe appearing in print in 1920. Recipes in 1930s newspapers consisted of buttered toast with sausage, bacon and grated American cheese.

When Americans became obsessed with convenience foods post–World War II, the breakfast sandwich exploded in popularity. But like mid-century homemakers, it served as a simple advertorial for more time–consuming morning fare.

One common recipe in 1948 called for hard-cooked eggs covered in cheese sauce and topped with sliced apples and walnuts as between toast slices.

Healthier variations added tuna, salmon or sardines to the egg filling.

Recipes of the 1960s pushed us away from the canned fish ingredient and more toward an egg salad–style filling with bacon in an elaborate double-decker broiled sandwich.

No matter the filling, it is clear we have had a love affair with the breakfast sandwich for well over a century.

By the early 2000s, cookware brands like Progressive and Chefmate had breakfast sandwich makers on the market.

They ranged from inexpensive microwave cookers to a more complex toaster and egg-poacher/warmer/plate. Remember that one?

Today, anything goes in a breakfast sandwich. They can be indulgent and elaborate, or simple and healthy. Either way, they are easy enough to make on the homefront with no need for much more than a skillet and maybe a toaster. With a few ingredients, even a tween can learn to make a hot breakfast.

In fact, an egg sandwich is the first thing I learned to cook. I was 10 years old, and my dad talked me through the process. He had a pretty sound argument – I would never starve if I could make an egg sandwich.

For us, it was buttered white toast, a fried egg with the yolk broken, a slice of American cheese and mayonnaise. Sometime we added a slice of fried bologna. Simple, economical and delicious.

As the McMuffin turns 50 and I quickly approach the same age, the breakfast sandwich is still my go-to breakfast.

Although wheat bread has replaced white, and various cheeses make an appearance, I still break the yolk of my egg so it is slightly runny.

When I'm feeling especially nostalgic, I fry up a slice of bologna and toast the buns who made sure I would never starve.

GRACE PHOTO

Chicken and Waffle Breakfast Sandwich

Yields: 1 breakfast sandwich

1 frozen breaded chicken patty
2 frozen waffles
1 egg
1 ounce shredded Monterey Jack cheese
1 teaspoon butter (optional)

1. Place the chicken patty into your air fryer, and cook at 400 degrees for 7 minutes. Place the cheese on top of the chicken patty, and cook for another minute to melt the cheese. While the chicken is cooking, prepare the waffles and egg.
2. Toast the waffles in your toaster. Alternatively, they can be toasted in the air fryer in the last 5 minutes of the waffle's cook time, flipping after 3 minutes.
3. Melt the butter in a small skillet over medium heat. Crack the egg into a small bowl, and whisk until the yolk is broken and combined with the white. Pour the egg into the skillet, and let cook until it is set – it should be a solid texture.
4. Place the toasted waffles on a plate. Top one waffle with the cheesy chicken patty. Using your spatula, carefully fold the egg into quarters so it will fit on the sandwich, then transfer the egg to the top of the chicken patty. Top the sandwich with the remaining waffle.

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