

BLT: The perfect balance of flavors, textures

By Debbie Moose
The News & Observer (Raleigh, N.C.)

I was plucking lettuce and planting tomatoes in the pots and old green recycling bins-turned-planters that I consider a backyard garden when The Hub arrived with a question:

“You’ve got lettuce and tomato. When are you going to put in a bacon plant?”

I would if I could.

It’s an ideal balance of flavors and textures — of acid to fat, salty to sweet, crisp to tender — proving that a dozen ingredients aren’t necessary to make an ideal dish. Sometimes it’s better to back off a little.

A BLT is a simple three-letter statement that, like SOS, needs no elaboration. However, people will try to mess around with it. They might add avocado, and another letter, turning it into a BLAT, which

is what a flat tuba sounds like, not a sandwich.

I’ve come across some BLTs where the makers threw in herbs, which are unnecessary and chewy. Or raw onion. Seriously? Then you get a BLOT, a clash of flavors along with rather aromatic breath. Putting a BLT on a fluffy burger bun instead of sliced bread is like digging through the packing peanuts to retrieve the tiny item you ordered. The sandwich is about the filling, not the bread.

And I’ve had plenty of IDCBLTs — I-don’t-care sandwiches slapped together with insufficient bacon, limp lettuce and golf-ball-hard tomatoes. You have to be invested in the BLT, to love the details.

The beauty of a good BLT is its uncomplicated nature. However, still sandwiches run deep. With only five ingredients, every last one of them has got to be good.

Take a roast beef sandwich. Cheese, pickles and onions on top could camouflage meat that looks more like, well, camo. And if the chicken salad is good enough, you might not notice that the bread is less than fresh.

With a BLT, there’s nowhere to hide.

Let’s start with the bread. You don’t have to insist on organic-brick oven stuff, but it should be decent and fresh. Slices. Remember, the bread merely is the stage for the BLT show. White or whole wheat, your choice, but no chunks or seeds. Lightly toast the bread so that it holds up to the fillings.

Now we arrive at the always controversial topic of mayonnaise. I am a Duke’s girl and am not afraid to say so. I suspected that I was in for a good BLT recently when the restaurant menu specifically stated the use of Duke’s. I was not disap-

pointed, despite a few extraneous and ignorable basil leaves. Cooks are always trying to get a hand in.

At home, I put mayo on both slices of the bread, enough to lightly cover them.

For the ingredients, first of all, have plenty of them. Load it on so that you can taste everything, but keep a balance of B and L and T. Yes, we all love the B part, but without enough L and T, the sandwich is just a weird pork slider.

How you layer ingredients on the bread is vital. It’s like building a house: Thought, planning and care result in an appealing structure; while haphazardly slapping materials together leads to mismatched paint in the bathroom and ugly recriminations.

The acid of the tomato is a perfect foil for the fat of the bacon, so I like to have those touching. Crisp lettuce provides a textural balance

for the soft tomato. Because the bacon already has so much rich flavor, putting it next to the mayo is excessive. I want the lettuce (whole leaves, not shredded) to meet up with the mayo.

A BLT is an ensemble production, featuring the best summer tomatoes, but you do need ample bacon. I prefer about six slices of bacon with a good smoke flavor, fried crisp and well drained.

Here’s how I build a BLT: lettuce, tomato, bacon, then bacon, tomato, lettuce. All the bacon is in the middle, benefitting from the juicy tomato. Lightly salt the tomatoes before adding the bacon, because tomatoes always need salt.

I firmly believe in my layering method, but however you build your BLT, there’s only one way to eat it — with plenty of napkins.

MESS

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For a crowd, I make a double batch of the base recipe below and freeze it in my wooden bucket White Mountain ice cream maker. Rather than a hand crank, it has an electric motor on top and yields 4 quarts of fantastically smooth and creamy ice cream. It requires ice cubes and salt to help freeze the cream. So I plan ahead to procure those ingredients.

We have a family member that prefers sorbet to ice cream every time. So, I make his favorite lemon sorbet for a summertime treat. Like ice cream, making sorbet is not about saving money. It’s about controlling the sweetness and tasting the freshness.

Eton mess, served with a dollop of homemade ice cream or lemon sorbet, to friends and family. Now there’s the perfect way to celebrate summer.

MERINGUES

Prep: 10 minutes
Bake: 2½ hours
Makes: 6 large meringues

If you don’t have superfine sugar, put 1 cup granulated sugar into a food processor; run the machine a few minutes until sugar is very fine. Cream of tartar helps stabilize the meringues; buy it in a small container and know that it will keep a long time in a cool, dry spot.

4 large egg whites
½ teaspoon cream of tartar
Pinch salt
2/3 cup superfine sugar

1. Heat oven to 200 degrees. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.

2. Beat egg whites in a large bowl of an electric mixer until foamy. Beat in cream of tartar and salt. Very gradually beat in sugar, about 1 tablespoon at a time, until the mixture forms shiny, nearly stiff peaks, about 4 minutes depending on the power of your mixer.

3. Divide the mixture into 6 mounds on the prepared baking sheet. Use the back of a

spoon to smooth the piles into 4-inch diameter circles about 1 inch thick.

4. Bake, rotating the baking sheet once or twice, until crisp and firm but not browned, 2 to 2½ hours. Turn off the oven and let the meringues cool completely. Store in a tin for a day or two.

ETON MESS WITH OR WITHOUT ICE CREAM

Prep: 15 minutes
Stand: 15 minutes
Makes: 6 servings

Frozen berries and store-bought meringues can be used here. I add ice cream or the lemon sorbet when serving this dessert in the summer.

1 cup heavy (whipping) cream, very cold
4 tablespoons powdered sugar
1½ cups mixed small berries (such as raspberries, blueberries, blackberries and thinly sliced strawberries)
6 meringues, see recipe
6 small scoops vanilla ice cream or lemon sorbet, optional
Mint sprigs for garnish

1. Put cream into a small mixing bowl. Beat on high until frothy. Beat in 2 tablespoons of the sugar; beat just until soft peaks form. Do not overbeat. Refrigerate up to several hours.

2. Put berries into a large bowl. Crush berries slightly while stirring in remaining 2 tablespoons sugar. Let stand 15 minutes to draw out the berries’ juices.

3. Just before serving, fold the cream into the berries. Break the meringues into bite-size chunks; fold into the cream mixture. Spoon mixture into 6 pretty serving bowls. Add 1 small scoop ice cream to each bowl. Garnish with mint and serve right away.

VANILLA CUSTARD-STYLE ICE CREAM

Prep: 20 minutes
Cook: 10 minutes
Chill: Several hours

Makes: about 1 quart, 8 servings

Save the egg whites for making the meringue recipe above.

½ vanilla bean
2 cups whole milk
4 large egg yolks
½ cup sugar
1 cup heavy (whipping) cream
Optional mix-ins: About 1 cup chopped nuts, soft candy such as peanut butter cups, or shaved chocolate

1. Read the manufacturer’s directions on the ice cream maker; freeze the container if necessary overnight.

2. Use a sharp knife to split the vanilla bean lengthwise in half. Scrape the seeds out with the tip of the knife; put the seeds and the pod into a saucepan along with the milk. Heat on low just until the milk is warm; do not allow to boil. Remove from the heat and let stand, 15 minutes. Remove the pods.

3. Set a wire mesh strainer over a large bowl set into a large bowl filled with ice.

4. Put the egg yolks into a small bowl. Whisk to mix and then whisk in ½ cup of the warm milk mixture to gently warm the yolks. Pour this mixture back into the remaining milk in the pan. Whisk in the sugar. Set the pan back over low heat. Cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the mixture barely thickens — it will coat the back of a spoon lightly. Do not walk away and do not let the mixture boil or the yolks will curdle. Immediately, pour the mixture through the strainer set over the bowl. Stir the cream into the bowl. Refrigerate until very cold (or up to 2 days).

5. Freeze the cold mixture in your ice cream maker according to manufacturers’ directions. Then scoop into a container. Stir in any mix-ins, if using. Cover and put into the freezer at least 20 minutes. Let soften a few minutes before serving.

LEMON SORBET

Prep: 15 minutes
Cook: 5 minutes

Chill: Several hours
Makes: about 3 cups, 6 servings

8 to 10 large juicy lemons
¾ cup sugar

1. Using a fine grater, grate the yellow zest from 2 of the lemons (avoid the white pith or the mixture will taste bitter) into a small saucepan. Stir in ½ cup water and the sugar. Heat to a simmer, and cook

until the sugar is dissolved. Refrigerate until cold.

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