

GARLIC

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And while vegan and vegetarian cooks may use it to bring that umami depth to vegetable dishes, some meat cooks use it for the same quality but for a different reason: to reinforce the meaty flavor already present. Los Angeles' barbecue master, Kevin Bludso — a judge on the Netflix cooking competition show "American Barbecue Showdown" — is one such cook, having used garlic powder his whole life. He learned early on to treat it as its own ingredient, not something to use only when fresh isn't available.

"Garlic powder — or granulated garlic as we call it — melds with the meat and smoke to create that bark on the brisket that makes it perfect," Bludso says. "It gets into the seams of the meat and gives it just a hint of garlic that brings out all the other flavors. People always say you can't taste it, but if you don't put it in, then you notice it's missing! It's just like cayenne: If you use it right, it's an enhancer, but if you use too much, it overpowers everything."

This unique characteristic of garlic powder — its ability to add a loaded dose of sweet funk where the pungent punch of fresh garlic has no business being — is also why it's often used as the backbone for concentrated seasonings in potato chips, nut mixes and other salty snack mixes. In fact, my favorite treat from my childhood in the South uses it as the primary flavoring. Called "firecrackers," saltines — or "soup and oyster" crackers in my home — are doused in oil flavored with the umami-packed allium along with onion powder, dried ranch dressing powder and plenty of crushed red chile flakes. After the initial heat of the chile flakes subsides, you get the salty sweetness from the garlic powder that makes you reactively grab another handful.

It's a common snack in households across the South because it uses ingredients everyone has. And whether all home cooks will admit it or not, everyone has garlic powder. It's this ubiquity that led Burlap & Barrel, a New York-based spice company known for selling a meticulously curated collection of single-origin spices, to begin carrying garlic powder in its inventory.

"I really wanted it in our lineup because I use it and love it and think it really elevates the flavor of a dish, especially savory baked goods like cornbread," says Burlap & Barrel co-founder Ori Zohar. "And when we looked at what the cooks were actually using, we realized that everyone has garlic powder in their pantry. But, at the same time, a big consideration for inclusion in our spice lineup is always to pick spices that are really flavorful and have a great story, and garlic powder is typically neither of those things."

But a trip to Vietnam early last year found Zohar and business partner Ethan Frisch tasting a garlic that

met their standards and was worth preserving for their customers.

"There was a group of farmers growing purple-stripe garlic, so we tried it," says Zohar. "Theirs was much more fragrant and had a more concentrated garlic flavor than the larger Chinese-grown type."

Indeed, its story starts as being cast as a cheap, convenient way to add flavor to humble food — a reputation it suffered from for many years — and being denigrated for how it compares to its fresh counterpart. Now it's lauded by social media cooking stars and has bespoke versions sold by discerning spice companies. Prized once again for its indispensability, you could say that garlic powder has finally arrived. But then again, it never really went anywhere. Like that dependable working actor — you know their face but not their name — whose career we don't appreciate until it outlasts that of the flashier movie stars, garlic powder was under our noses the whole time, waiting for us to realize what a good thing we've always had.

GARLIC FRIED CHICKEN

Time: 1 hour 15 minutes
Yields: Serves 4 to 8

Along with salt and pepper, garlic powder acts as the primary seasoning for this simple fried chicken, inspired by the one made by the mother of Kevin Bludso, owner of Bludso's Bar & Que. This recipe uses only a double coating of flour as a crust, which lets the flavor of the chicken and seasonings shine through. If you prefer a thicker, crunchier coating, try the buttermilk-brined variation, below.

1 whole chicken (4 to 5 pounds), or 3 to 4 pounds chicken drumsticks and thighs
2 tablespoons plus 1/2 teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt, divided
1 tablespoon plus 2

salt together in a small bowl. Using your fingers, rub spice mixture onto all sides of pork tenderloin. Place tenderloin in a shallow roasting pan or jelly roll pan.

Roast tenderloin in the

teaspoons freshly ground black pepper, divided
2 1/8 teaspoons garlic powder, divided
2 cups all-purpose flour
6 cups vegetable or peanut oil, vegetable shortening or rendered pork lard, for frying

1. If using a whole chicken, first cut off the whole legs on each side and separate the thighs from the drumsticks. Next, cut out the backbone, then remove the center breastbone. Halve the breasts to separate. Then, cut each breast crosswise so that one piece has the wing with about a third of the breast and the other piece has most of the breast; remove the tips from each wing if you'd like. You will have 8 pieces total; save the chicken carcass for making stock or discard.

2. Set the pieces on a large cutting board and dry them thoroughly with paper towels. Season the chicken all over with 1 tablespoon salt, 2 teaspoons pepper and 2 teaspoons garlic powder. In a large bowl or brown paper grocery bag, combine the flour, 1 tablespoon salt and the remaining 1 tablespoon pepper; shake to combine. Add two chicken pieces to the bowl or bag and toss to coat evenly in the flour. Transfer the coated pieces to a wire rack set over a rimmed baking sheet and repeat dredging the remaining chicken pieces.

3. Let all the pieces sit on the rack for at least 10 minutes, then dredge the pieces a second time. Discard the flour in the bag, fold the bag flat and reserve the bag. In a small bowl, combine the remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/8 teaspoon garlic powder and reserve.

4. Pour the oil or melt the shortening or lard in a large, deep cast-iron skillet or heavy-bottomed pot (it should come about 3/4 inch up the side). Attach a deep-fry thermometer to the side of the pan and heat the fat to 375 degrees over medium-high heat.

5. Add half the chicken pieces to the fat and fry, flipping the pieces over every 2 to 3 minutes to prevent them burning where they touch



Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times-TNS

Simple fried chicken needs only salt, pepper and a sprinkling of garlic powder to highlight the umami sweetness of the bird.

the pan, until golden brown all over and an instant-read thermometer inserted into each piece reads at least 160 degrees, about 15 minutes. The temperature of the oil will drop once you add the chicken and might rise too high over time, so adjust the heat to maintain a temperature between 350 and 360 degrees throughout cooking.

6. Transfer the chicken to the reserved paper bag (or paper towels) to drain and repeat cooking the remaining chicken, allowing the oil to return to 375 degrees before frying. While the cooked chicken is still wet with hot oil, sprinkle it with some of the garlic-salt mixture, then let cool for 10 minutes before serving.

VARIATIONS

• Buttermilk-Brined Fried Chicken

After cutting up the chicken in Step 1, transfer the pieces to a large bowl and mix with 4 cups buttermilk to coat. Season the buttermilk and chicken liberally with salt and pepper, then cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours or up to overnight. Drain the chicken pieces thoroughly before dredging in the seasoned flour. For a thicker crust, return the dredged pieces to the bowl of buttermilk to coat, then dredge a second time in the seasoned flour. Let rest on the rack for 10 minutes, as in Step 3, before frying.

GARLIC-CRUSTED CORNBREAD

Time: 45 minutes
Yields: Serves 8

Ori Zohar, one of the co-founders of the spice company Burlap & Barrel, loves using its garlic powder as an enhancer on the top of his cornbread. He adds it toward the end of cooking so the powder blooms in the heat and forms a flavorful crust on top. Burlap & Barrel's uniquely aromatic purple-stripe garlic powder is wonderful here,

but you can use any garlic powder you have. If you want a classic Southern-style cornbread for other uses, simply omit the garlic powder here.

1 cup plus 4 teaspoons fine yellow cornmeal
1 cup all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon baking soda
2 cups buttermilk
2 large eggs
1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, plus more for serving
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder

1. Place a 9-inch round cake pan or oven-proof skillet in the oven and heat the oven to 425 degrees.
2. Meanwhile, whisk together 1 cup of the cornmeal, plus the flour, baking powder, salt and baking soda in a large bowl. In another bowl, whisk together the buttermilk and eggs until smooth. Pour the liquid ingredients over the dry ingredients, but do not stir them together.

3. Remove the pan from the oven, add the butter, then return the pan to the oven to melt the butter, 1 minute. Carefully remove the pan from the oven and gently swirl it so the butter coats the bottom and halfway up the side of the pan. When the butter is fully melted, pour it into the liquid ingredients in the bowl and quickly stir everything together with a small rubber spatula or spoon just until the batter combines and there are no dry patches of flour.

4. Sprinkle the bottom and side of the pan with the remaining 4 teaspoons cornmeal to lightly coat, then immediately scrape the batter into the pan and smooth the top. Place the pan in the oven and bake for 10 minutes.

5. Remove the cornbread from the oven; the top will be under-set and still wet on top. Using your fingers (not a spoon), sprinkle the garlic powder evenly over the cornbread and then return pan to the oven. Continue baking the cornbread until golden brown at the edges and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, an additional 12 to 15 minutes.

6. Remove the pan from the oven and let the cornbread cool for 10 minutes. Invert the cornbread and remove it from the pan or cut into wedges and serve from the pan. Serve with more butter melted over the top of each wedge or split the wedges in half and sandwich more butter in their middles, letting the butter melt before serving.

VARIATIONS

• Southern-Style Skillet Cornbread

Use a 9- to 10-inch cast iron skillet in place of the cake pan. Heat the skillet on a stovetop over medium-high heat for 3 minutes, before adding the butter and swirling the skillet until the butter fully melts. Pour the butter into the batter, sprinkle the bottom of the skillet with the 4 teaspoons cornmeal, then add the batter. Bake in the oven according to the instructions above, omitting the garlic powder.

FIRECRACKERS

Time: 1 hour
Yields: Makes 10 cups

coating is hot, about 5 minutes more.

Let pork rest for 5 minutes before slicing. Serve with roasted potatoes and a green salad.

Serves 4.

These crackers were a staple at any party my parents threw when I was a kid. The traditional recipe uses larger saltine crackers, while this riff uses smaller soup & oyster crackers, which are easier to pick at and eat with your fingers or shovel into your mouth at once. I prefer Nabisco's Premium brand, but any brand will do. Look for them in the cracker and cookie aisle of any grocery store.

Don't be tempted to use olive oil or butter here. You want a flavorless oil to let the seasonings shine through, unadulterated. And melted butter contains some water, which tends to make the crackers go soggy or have a stale chew to them. The traditional recipe uses packets of dry ranch seasoning mix; in lieu of that mix, which contains dairy and MSG, I use nutritional yeast to keep the mix vegan while also retaining its cheese-like, umami bite. If you'd like, however, use two 1-ounce packets (or 1/4 cup) dry ranch seasoning mix instead of the nutritional yeast.

As for the salt, I know it may look like a lot, but the original recipes call for double the amount listed here. This is an intentionally salty snack, meant to be served with cocktails during a party or at the beginning of a meal. If you want, you can halve the amounts of all ingredients and make less, but I guarantee you won't have a problem eating them all very quickly.

1 1/3 cups vegetable oil
1/4 cup nutritional yeast
1 tablespoon seasoned salt, such as Lawry's
1 tablespoon crushed red chile flakes
2 teaspoons garlic powder
1 teaspoon onion powder
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
10 cups soup and oyster crackers, such as Nabisco's Premium (1 pound 2 ounces), or the same weight of square saltine crackers

1. In a large bowl or gallon-size plastic bag, combine the oil, nutritional yeast, seasoned salt, chile flakes, garlic powder, onion powder and pepper. Whisk together the ingredients in the bowl or close the bag and massage until evenly combined.

2. Add the oyster crackers and toss to ensure that everything is evenly coated, then let stand for at least 30 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes or so to ensure the crackers have absorbed the seasonings well. If using a bag, close the bag, lay it on your counter and gently flip and rub the crackers in the seasonings every 10 minutes.

3. Heat the oven to 250 degrees. Spread the crackers on a large rimmed baking sheet. Bake, stirring the crackers halfway through, until fragrant and dry (you do not want to toast or color the crackers), about 16 minutes.

4. Transfer the baking sheet to a wire rack and let cool to room temperature before serving.

MAKE AHEAD

Store the crackers in airtight containers at room temperature for up to 1 month.

SPICE

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Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Whisk chili powder, black pepper, cinnamon, cumin and

salt together in a small bowl. Using your fingers, rub spice mixture onto all sides of pork tenderloin. Place tenderloin in a shallow roasting pan or jelly roll pan.

Roast tenderloin in the

preheated oven until no longer pink in the center, about 30 minutes. (An instant-read thermometer inserted into the center should read 150 degrees.)

Stir pepper jelly and bal-

samic vinegar together in a small saucepan and cook over low heat until jelly is completely melted, 1 to 2 minutes. Brush pepper jelly mixture over pork tenderloin and continue to bake tenderloin until jelly

coating is hot, about 5 minutes more.

Let pork rest for 5 minutes before slicing. Serve with roasted potatoes and a green salad.

Serves 4.

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