

Beehives as weapons — and more weird food facts

By DANIEL NEMAN

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Last week, I wrote about some fun, weird facts about food gleaned from Matt Siegel's new book, "The Secret History of Food."

But that was just the tip of the iceberg (lettuce). The book has so many fun, weird facts about food that I feel compelled to share a few more.

Such as this one: When they are in outer space, astronauts tend to crave spicy food. Part of their longing may be due to the effects of microgravity; very low gravity causes the tongue and nasal passages to swell, meaning a lot of the food does not get to taste receptors on the tongue — and as a result, the astronauts may seek out stronger flavors.

But part of the reason, Siegel hypothesizes, is that spicy foods can also help, in a small way, take the astronauts out of the monotony of their routines and cramped surroundings.

Or there is this juicy fact: In World War II, some soldiers used Spam to lubricate their guns or waterproof their boots. Others in the U.S. Army Air Forces used the tin cans as an emergency patch to fix holes in plane wings.

Containers for food, it turns out, have been used in battle going back all the way to the Stone Age.

I am speaking here about beehives. Our earliest ancestors covered beehives in mud and threw them into enemy caves. Romans put them into catapults and hurled them at their foes.

And before there were cannonballs, sailors would throw beehives on other ships' decks. The word "bombard" even

comes from the Ancient Greek word "bombos," which means "bee."

These days, of course, people are more interested in the honey than the hives. Honey is so popular that a whole industry has sprung to fraudulently source it.

The United States increased the tariff on Chinese honey in 2001. Ever since then, Chinese honey producers have been shipping their product to other countries in order to illegally hide their true source. It is estimated that nearly 100 million pounds of honey each year, or about one-sixth of all the honey sold in this country, is in violation of the law.

Meanwhile, even domestic honey is frequently mislabeled. The problem is that bees fly wherever they want, and while the producer may assume the bees are spending all of their time among orange blossoms, only scientific analysis such as DNA tests can confirm how much of the nectar actually came from clover, or even poison ivy.

Sometimes, honey on the shelves isn't even honey at all. It's just corn syrup with yellow food coloring.

Fortunately, the book has some happier news involving vanilla.

Vanilla only grows within about 1,700 miles of the equator, and the flowers only bloom for a few hours. The two types of bees known to pollinate them are nearly extinct, so vanilla in the wild has only about a 1% chance of being pollinated.

But in 1841, a 12-year-old slave named Edmond Albius figured out how to pollinate vanilla by hand, which is why we have vanilla today. Albius was freed seven years later, when

France outlawed slavery, but was imprisoned again five years later for stealing jewelry.

Albius regained his freedom once more when his former owner asked for clemency for him, citing his irreplaceable contribution to the vanilla industry.

Siegel devotes one entire chapter to breakfast cereal, which leads us to a couple of tasty nuggets: As of 2014, cereal marketed for adults was, on average, 18% sugar by weight; cereal marketed for children was, on average, 34% sugar by weight.

The worst offender, apparently, was Kellogg's Honey Smacks, which was more than 55% sugar by weight. Kellogg's has since changed the recipe, so the cereal is now a mere 50% sugar.

That doesn't sound healthy, especially for a product, cereal, that was created to promote good health. Grape Nuts, for instance, was originally promoted as a "scientific health food" that would help cure malaria, heart disease and appendicitis.

Finally, I want to conclude with a notion that is less a weird fact than a philosophy, as devised by the Greek sage Epicurus.

Epicurus preferred bland food to dishes that were highly flavored, because he thought that true pleasure could be found in an absence of pain. Simple foods ended the pain of hunger, while luxurious foods made the rest of the world seem bland in comparison.

The concept intrigues me, but I don't think I agree with it. If the food is good enough, who cares if the rest of the world is bland?

A different sort of patty melt

By GRETCHEN MCKAY

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Ever since they were first served commercially in the 1940s, patty melts have been a terrific stand-in for burgers.

Served between two slices of buttered, griddled bread instead of a bun, a patty melt is a humble yet tasty sammie that doesn't take long to prepare. It's classic American comfort food.

Tradition calls for making a patty melt with rye bread and topping the meat with sweet and jammy caramelized onions. This version is made with plant-based Impossible burgers and thick-cut white sandwich bread with mayonnaise slathered on the outside for frying instead of butter. A chipotle-spiked mayonnaise flavored with quick-charred scallions adds a touch of smoky heat.

The original recipe called for making the burgers with 80% lean ground beef but I substituted Impossible burgers because 1) it's a little kinder to the earth, 2) I'm trying to eat more vegetables and 3) they were on sale at my local grocery store.

I used sliced smoked gouda, but any melting cheese would work well.

IMPOSSIBLE PATTY MELTS WITH CHARRED SCALLION-CHIPOTLE MAYO

- 1 bunch scallions (6-8 scallions), root ends trimmed
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon plus a pinch of kosher salt, divided
- 1 teaspoon plus a pinch of black pepper, divided
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise, divided
- 2-3 canned chipotle chiles, minced, plus 3 teaspoons adobo sauce from can
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter

- 4 Impossible (plant-based) burgers
- 8 thick slices white sandwich bread
- 8 slices melting cheese such as gouda, Monterey Jack or cheddar

Cut scallions in half lengthwise and toss together in a bowl with oil, a pinch of salt and a pinch of black pepper.

Heat a large skillet over medium-high. (I used cast-iron.) Add scallions and cook, turning occasionally, until charred in spots and tender, about 4 minutes.

Transfer scallions to a cutting board and coarsely chop. In small bowl, stir together chopped scallions, 1/4 cup mayonnaise, chipotle chiles and adobo sauce; set aside. Wipe skillet clean.

Add butter to skillet and melt over medium-high. Add Impossible patties and sprinkle evenly with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper. Cook patties, pressing tops occasionally using a spatula to keep them thin and flat, until bottoms are well-browned, about 2-3 minutes.

Flip patties; sprinkle evenly with remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper.

Cook patties, pressing tops occasionally, until a crust forms on bottoms and they're cooked to desired degree of doneness (an internal temperature of 160 degrees). Transfer patties to a plate lined with paper towels. Wipe skillet clean.

Spread about 1 tablespoon scallion-chipotle mayonnaise on 4 bread slices. Top each with 1 cheese slice, 1 patty and 1 more cheese slice. Cover with remaining bread slices.

Return skillet to heat over medium. Spread one outer side of each sandwich with 1/2 tablespoon mayonnaise. Place sandwiches, mayonnaise side down, in skillet. Cook, pressing tops with a spatula, until bottoms are golden, 2-3 minutes.

Spread other side of each sandwich with 1/2 tablespoon mayonnaise and flip. Cook sandwiches, pressing tops occasionally with spatula, until bottoms are toasty and cheese is melted, 2-3 minutes. Cut sandwiches in half, and serve.

Makes 4 patty melts.

— Adapted from foodandwine.com

CHICKEN

Continued from Page B1

for an elegant sauce bold enough for chicken thighs.

If you're still in a grilling mood, tucking chicken thighs into a foil pack yields moist results with no fuss. Season the chicken with a special blend of curry powder, cider vinegar and raisins. Adding potatoes to the pack makes it a great casual supper.

BASIC ROASTED CHICKEN THIGHS

Prep: 5 minutes
Cook: 25 minutes
Makes 6 servings
Here is a great go-to recipe for all your cooked chicken needs. Make this once and you will skip purchasing rotisserie chicken! Seasoned and cooked on the bone under its own skin, the chicken turns out moist every time.

- 4-6 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs (about 2 pounds)
- 1 tablespoon expeller-pressed canola oil, safflower or sunflower oil

Salt
Freshly ground black pepper
1. Heat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit on convection setting or 375 degrees Fahrenheit on conventional setting.

2. Pat chicken thighs dry and place on a rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon of oil and turn to coat all the pieces with the oil. Sprinkle generously on both sides with salt and pepper.

3. Roast, rotating the pan once or twice until juices run clear when you pierce a thigh near the bone, about 25 minutes. Serve hot. Or cool and refrigerate for up to several days to use shredded or chopped in salads, sandwiches, rice bowls, enchiladas, etc.

STICKY SESAME-BAKED CHICKEN WITH BROCCOLI AND RICE

Prep: 25 minutes
Cook: About 1 hour
Makes 4 to 6 servings
Note: Make the sesame sauce in advance. Then start the rice in a rice cooker before making the chicken. That way, everything will be hot and ready at the same time.

For the sesame sauce:

- 3 tablespoons soy sauce or tamari
- 3 tablespoons agave syrup
- 1 1/2 tablespoons toasted sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon black bean garlic sauce
- 1 tablespoon Sriracha
- 1 tablespoon refrigerated ginger puree (or grated fresh ginger)
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed

For the chicken:

- 3 medium-size carrots (8 ounces) peeled, sliced into 1/4-inch-wide circles
- 2 tablespoons expeller-pressed canola oil, safflower oil or sunflower oil
- 4-6 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs (about 2 pounds)
- 4 cups (10 ounces) broccoli florets
- 2 tablespoons sesame seeds
- 3 cups hot cooked white or brown rice
- Chopped fresh cilantro and green onions for serving

For the sesame sauce:

Mix all ingredients in a small bowl. Refrigerate covered up to 1 week.

For the chicken:

1. Heat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit. Toss 8 ounces peeled, sliced carrots with 1 tablespoon

of the oil on a large rimmed baking sheet. Add 2 pounds chicken thighs to the baking sheet. Bake for 15 minutes. Remove from the oven.

2. Add 10 ounces broccoli florets to the baking sheet and toss with the remaining tablespoon of oil. Return to the oven and roast until chicken juices run clear and broccoli is almost tender, 20 to 25 minutes.

3. Spoon the sauce over chicken and vegetables. Stir to coat everything nicely. Sprinkle with sesame seeds. Roast, stirring vegetables once, until glazed, 10 to 15 minutes.

4. Pile chicken and vegetables over 3 cups cooked rice; spoon pan juices overall. Sprinkle generously with cilantro and green onions.

SAUTEED CHICKEN THIGHS WITH ARTICHOKE AND LEMON CREAM

Prep: 20 minutes
Cook: 20 minutes
Makes 4 servings
Notes: Serve this with cooked spaetzle or orzo.

- 4 boneless skinless chicken thighs, about 1 1/4 pounds
- Salt**
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 2 large shallots or 1 small white onion, finely chopped
- 1 1/2 cups thinly sliced white or cremini mushrooms
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 1/3 to 1/2 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/2 teaspoon minced fresh thyme or 1/8 teaspoon dried
- 1 can (14 ounces) artichoke hearts, drained, halved
- 1/2 teaspoon finely grated lemon rind
- Chopped flat leaf parsley

1. Pat 4 boneless chicken thighs dry; season generously

with salt and pepper.

2. Heat a large nonstick skillet over medium heat until hot. Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil and 1 tablespoon butter. Add chicken in a single, uncrowded layer, using a splatter guard if you have one. Cook chicken without turning for 4 minutes. Flip and cook to brown the other side, 3-4 minutes. Use tongs to transfer chicken to a plate.

3. Stir 2 finely chopped shallots and 1 1/2 cups sliced mushrooms into pan juices. Cook over medium heat until shallots are softened, about 3 minutes. Add 1/2 cup wine and increase heat to high. Boil, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pan, to reduce pan juices by half. Add 1/3-1/2 cup cream and heat to boil. Cook until the sauce thickens enough to lightly coat the back of a spoon. Season with 1/2 teaspoon minced thyme, salt and pepper.

4. Add chicken and 14 ounces artichoke pieces to the pan. Reduce heat to low and simmer to heat everything through, about 3 minutes. Sprinkle with 1/2 teaspoon lemon rind and chopped parsley. Serve immediately.

CURRIED CHICKEN ROASTING PACKS

Prep: 25 minutes
Cook: 40 minutes
Makes 6 servings
Note: Look for curry powder made in small batches for freshness and spice. I like Spicewalla's Madras curry version.

- 4 medium-size red or gold potatoes, scrubbed, cut into 1-inch chunks
- 1 medium-size sweet onion, halved, thinly sliced
- 1/4 cup dark raisins
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 1/2 tablespoons curry powder or garam masala
- Salt**
- 6 boneless skinless chicken thighs, 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 pounds
- Freshly ground pepper
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- Chopped fresh cilantro or chives, for serving
- Lime wedges and plain yogurt, for serving

1. Mix 4 scrubbed, cut potatoes,

1 thinly-sliced onion, 1/4 cup raisins and 2 cloves crushed garlic in a large bowl. Add 1 1/2 tablespoons curry powder and 1 teaspoon salt; toss to coat.

2. Season 6 boneless, skinless chicken thighs with salt and pepper.

3. Preheat a gas grill or prepare a charcoal grill to medium heat. OR, heat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit.

4. Cut three 18-inch lengths of aluminum foil and stack two of them on top of each other. Put 3 chicken thighs on the foil. Top with half of the potato mixture. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon of olive oil and 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar. Cover with a third sheet of foil and crimp the edges to enclose everything in a neat package. Repeat with remaining ingredients and more foil to make a second pack.

5. Place foil packs on the grill directly over the heat maintaining a temperature of 350 degrees. Or, place on a baking sheet in the hot oven. Cook (no need to flip packages, but rotate them occasionally) for 40 minutes. Let rest for 10 minutes.

6. Open packet and spoon contents into a serving bowl. Serve topped with cilantro. Pass lime wedges and yogurt at the table.



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