

Charcuterie boards aren't just for meat and cheese anymore

By DANIELA SIRTORI-CORTINA
Bloomberg News

These days, charcuterie doesn't just mean meat. You can thank COVID-19 for that.

Long a common feature of social gatherings, the platters garnered fresh attention in the past 18 months as people sought to elevate their at-home snacks. Sure, hungry humans have arranged provisions such as prosciutto and cheese on boards for centuries. But amateur chefs aren't just flocking to salami or brie. They're redefining the term charcuterie itself, adding novel ingredients to their creations.

There are Mexican boards featuring nachos, while others focus on breakfast foods and even candy. "Barkuterie" boards with dog treats are also a thing.

These alternatives aren't exactly new, but they truly blew up as people entertained themselves during lockdown with posts of eye-catching designs and odd ingredients. And it doesn't seem like they're going away: In August, Pinterest searches for mini charcuterie cups rose more than 30-fold from a year ago, the company said. Hot cocoa and pumpkin platters also attracted attention.

This creative explosion could be a sign of a broader shift. In the view of food historian Ken Albala, the COVID-19 era



Hannah Babiak/Dreamstime-TNS

A candy and cookie charcuterie board with Easter candies. Amateur chefs are redefining the term charcuterie itself, adding novel ingredients to their creations.

represented the last gasp of a rustic, do-it-yourself approach to eating. As people get bored with making their own bread, he said interest in more exotic, over-the-top meals and ingredients could take hold.

"The charcuterie board is a kind of harbinger of what's about to change in our culinary aesthetic," Albala said.

Before any connoisseurs object: yes, the dessert, brunch and vegan boards taking over Instagram and TikTok aren't technically charcuterie, a term derived

from a French phrase meaning cooked meat. If anything, the expanded definition shows just how much people are craving colorful ensembles on the dinner table.

The trend has even benefited more traditional creators. Marissa Mullen, a New York City-based author and food stylist who sticks to more conventional elements such as cured meat and cheese, published a cookbook outlining her technique in May 2020. At first, she was bracing for disaster given lockdowns, but the craze has brought

in more followers.

"I get all these people who are interested in the loose term 'charcuterie board,' and I can teach them to go a little bit further," Mullen said. "What can we learn about cheese? What can we learn about presentation?"

The surge in interest has also spawned a cottage industry of entrepreneurs, many of them women. Mel Rodriguez started making the boards in July 2020, after being furloughed from her job as a case manager at a Los Angeles law firm. Demand

has remained strong after orders doubled in January, she said.

Her firm, Curated Spread, already has requests for Halloween (searches for charcuterie have been particularly popular around special occasions, including Valentine's Day and Fourth of July).

In Detroit, Victoria Cummings pivoted to charcuterie after running an events business alongside her teaching job. Although she works weekends to fill orders, she prefers the platters to tradi-

tional catering, which can involve days of preparation and expensive ingredients that cut into her margins.

Her company, Detroit Charcuterie, offers everything from individual snack boxes to spreads that can span entire countertops — also called grazing tables. She's incorporating tacos, chocolates and myriad other ingredients into her products.

"I've never known that you could make a rose out of so many different things," Cummings said of a popular charcuterie design. She initially thought she might get one or two orders a month, but instead she's booked every weekend. "Cucumber roses, salami roses, mango roses, orange roses. It's crazy how creative people get with what they display on the board."

The pandemic prompted Suzanne Billings, who has run Noble Graze in Fayetteville, Arkansas, since 2017, to make single-serve snack bundles known as "jarcuterie." At one point, she couldn't get enough mason jars for her arrangements, thanks to virus-induced supply chain woes. So, she turned to boxes, cones, plastic cups and just about anything she could find. Billings is now writing a cookbook on single-serve charcuterie.

"The vessel can be just about anything you want," she said. "That's the beauty of it. You can just use what you have on hand."

The science of searing steak

By JAMES P. DeWAN
The Daily Meal

Before I talk about the "reverse sear," I should talk about the regular sear.

Searing is the basic cooking process of applying high heat to the outside of foods to give them a golden-brown crust. Mostly we use it on tender meats, like steaks and roasts.

Why sear?

The reasons for searing are many:

A golden-brown crust on a steak or roast looks more appealing than a damp, gray exterior.

The toothsome texture of that crust provides a delightful contrast to the creamy tenderness of the interior.

The crust's flavor is decidedly different from that of the interior, offering a salty, charred taste that compares to sweeter interior meat.

The rich aromas of searing meat draw us to the table and make our mouths water — an important physiological reaction called trigeminal response. This makes us experience the meat as juicier and also aids in digestion.

One thing searing does not do is "seal in the juices." Mythical poppycock notwithstanding, the previously mentioned actual results of searing make it more than a worthwhile endeavor.

How does searing work?

Searing takes advantage of chemical processes known as the Maillard reactions. The process involves high heat and is similar to the caramelization of sugar, but it works on amino acids

instead. Maillard reactions begin at temperatures in the high 200s, well above the boiling point of water. That's why we dry meat before cooking: If there's water in the pan, the temperature is below 212 degrees, the Maillard reactions can't take place and the meat won't brown.

When cooking meat, most cooks sear first, either in a stovetop pan or a very hot oven. After achieving the crust, the meat is placed in a lower temperature oven until the interior reaches the desired temperature.

The problem with starting by searing

The problem with searing is that you've already cooked the outside of the meat to where you want it before the inside is done. As you cook it, the crust extends farther into the meat while the center is still coming up to temperature, which results in a band of dry, gray meat that falls between the crust and the pink center.

The solution

Imagine bringing the entire piece of meat from its raw state up to the desired temperature all at once. In other words, for medium-rare, imagine the entire steak or roast at 130 degrees Fahrenheit from end to end. Of course, it'd still look wan and damp on the outside — decidedly unappetizing. However, if you took that piece of meat and seared it quickly, you'd have a beautiful piece of meat that's golden brown on the outside while the entire inside is exactly the doneness you like.

How to reverse sear



Kristen Mendiola/The Daily Meal-TNS

Reverse searing steak is a useful cooking technique to have in your arsenal.

While any roast works with this method, steaks should be at least 1 1/2 inches thick. Regardless, preheat your oven to 275F. Line a sheet pan with parchment paper and place an oven-safe wire rack on top of the lined pan. Place the meat on the wire rack and season it with salt and pepper or your favorite spice rub. Place the whole thing in the oven and roast it until the interior is about 15 degrees below your desired final temperature — anywhere from 30 to 50 minutes. Start checking the internal temperature with an instant-read thermometer after 15 minutes to get a sense of where you are in the process.

When the center reaches your target temperature, remove the meat from the oven. If you want, you can tent it and let it rest at room temperature for up to 90 minutes.

- For steaks: Set a heavy bottom pan — cast iron is perfect — over the highest heat you can muster. When the pan is smoking hot, add a touch of oil and lay in the steak. It should take only 1 to 2 minutes per side to get a nice sear.
- For roasts: Crank the oven to its highest setting — usually 500 to 550F. Place the roast in the oven until the outside is golden brown, about 10 to 15

minutes. A note about times and temperatures: Remember, all equipment is different. Different ovens have different hot and cool spots. Different pans conduct heat differently. Thus, never expect perfection your first time out. Get to know the process, learn from your experiences, and make adjustments to your method.

GARLIC AND HERB REVERSE SEARED NEW YORK STRIP STEAK

Prep time: 10 minutes

- Cooking time: 20 to 30 minutes, total**
- Makes 2 to 4 servings**
- 2 boneless New York strip steaks, 1 1/2 to 2 inches thick**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, or steak rub as needed**
- 1 tablespoon canola oil**
- 4 tablespoons butter**
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed with the side of a chef's knife (optional)**
- 12 cherry or grape tomatoes (optional)**
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme (optional)**
- 3 sprigs fresh rosemary (optional)**

- 30 minutes before cooking, remove the steaks from the refrigerator. Place on a wire rack.
- Season 2 steaks with salt



Kristen Mendiola/The Daily Meal-TNS

Reverse seared steak.

and pepper or steak rub and place in the center of a preheated 275F oven. For medium-rare, cook until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the center of steaks reads 115-120 degrees F, about 20 to 30 minutes. (See note.)

- Remove steaks and tent with tin foil.
- Set a heavy bottom pan — cast iron is perfect — over medium-high heat. When the pan begins to smoke, add 1 tablespoon oil to coat the bottom of the pan.
- Add steaks and sear one side to golden brown, about 1-2 minutes. Flip steaks and sear for another minute, or more if you

like your steak well-done.

- Add 4 tablespoons butter and optional garlic, tomatoes, thyme and rosemary. When butter melts, tilt pan slightly to pool butter on one side. Baste steaks with melted butter for 1-2 minutes, until the bottom of the steak is golden brown.
- Remove steaks to a cutting board and rest for 1 minute. Slice on a bias and serve garnished with steak drippings, garlic and tomatoes and serve immediately.

Note: Different steaks of different thicknesses in different ovens can have vastly different cooking times. Start checking internal temperature about 15 minutes after they go into the oven.

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