

# RIBS 101:

## Four methods for cooking

By DANIEL NEMAN

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

“Ribs” should never be a four-letter word.

They represent everything that is great about meat: They have an amazing, instantly recognizable flavor that is hearty yet mild at the same time. They are tender, but also have just the right amount of chew. They taste wonderful on their own, but they also pair spectacularly well with any number of sauces.

And they are practically impossible to cook badly.

And yet, a lot of people find them daunting, or too much work. Ribs are something they only order at a restaurant, preferably a barbecue joint.

But it’s not hard to turn your home into your own personal barbecue joint. Ribs are not difficult to cook at all, and the best part is that when you are done, you have ribs.

I made ribs — we are talking here about pork ribs — four different ways, with different results.

First, I made them the traditional way, by smoking them at a low temperature for several hours. These turned out the best by far, tender and juicy with the exquisite flavor and aroma of smoke running all the way through. If you have the time and you have a smoker or a grill you can use for smoking, this is unquestionably the way to go for the true rib experience.

Next, I tried a method I had always abhorred: I boiled the ribs before grilling them. Some restaurants love to parboil their ribs because it makes them extra-tender and especially because it saves them time.

Not everyone agrees. Grillmeister Steven Raichlan says, “in my barbecue religion, that’s heresy.”

Boiling ribs does help to render out some fat, but at the same time it also renders out some flavor. But what I hadn’t guessed was just how much other flavor is added by grilling the meat over direct heat. Ten minutes is all it takes to finish off the nearly cooked ribs with a mouth-watering taste of flame and smoke.

Cooking ribs in a slow cooker takes more time than any other method, but it’s time that you can spend away from the kitchen, if you like. You just rub the ribs with spices, plop them in the slow cooker and forget about them — until the enticing aroma reminds you that dinner is almost done.

They come out tender, but with just enough resistance to your bite, and have a delectable flavor, meaty and full. They are awfully good, but they lack the smokiness that, for a lot of people, defines the taste of ribs.

I don’t particularly recommend the fourth method of cooking ribs, roasting them in the oven, unless you don’t have a smoker, a grill or a slow cooker.

What oven-roasted ribs

have is the proper texture, and you can enjoy the fact that you are eating ribs. But the flavor is minimal and, frankly, kind of insipid.

Still, the end result is ribs. And that is better than not having ribs.

### What are the different cuts of ribs?

The most popular ribs are baby back ribs, which come from the top part of the rib cage. They have the most meat of all the rib cuts, and are also the quickest and easiest to cook.

Spareribs are cut just below the baby back ribs. They have more marbling between the bones, and thus more flavor, but they also are not as tender as the baby backs.

St. Louis-style ribs are essentially spareribs, but are cut shorter so they don’t have the rib tips on the bottom. Rib tips are the toughest part of the ribs.

### What about country-style ribs?

Country-style ribs are not ribs (you can tell because they are not attached to a bone). They are actually cut from the pork butt, which is to say the shoulder. They are sometimes inaccurately lumped in with ribs because they, like ribs, have to be cooked at a low temperature for a relatively long time.

### What is the skin, and does it have to be removed?

What people call the “skin” is actually a membrane, the pleura. When cooked, it becomes tough and chewy, and most people find it unpleasant to eat — however, it is edible (and some like it). It is usually best to remove it, although we left it on while cooking ribs in a slow cooker because it helps hold the rack together when using that method.

To remove it, simply slide a thin, sharp knife between the bone side of the ribs and skin to loosen enough of it to be able to grab it. Hold it with a clean towel or paper towels and pull the skin off the ribs. It comes off baby back ribs very easily; it takes more effort with spareribs and St. Louis ribs.

### If you are smoking ribs, what wood should you use?

Hickory is a good place to start; it produces perhaps the most familiar smoke flavor.



Smoked ribs.



Oven-roasted ribs.

Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

But go easy on the chips, because too much hickory smoke can add a bitter note to your meat.

Fruit woods such as apple (which won’t impart as much flavor) and cherry are mild, and are good to mix with other woods. Mesquite is delicious and unmistakable, but it can easily become harsh so be sure to use it sparingly.

Oak is not traditionally used with pork, unless you’re from East Texas, where post oak grows like a weed and is used to barbecue everything. I used to live in East Texas, so for this story I used a combination of post oak and hickory.

### When should I put on the sauce?

Most barbecue sauces have sugars in them (the vinegar-based sauce of North Carolina is a significant exception). Sugars burn quickly, ruining your barbecue. If you are cooking at a low temperature, such as in the smoker, oven or slow cooker, do not apply your sauce until the last 20 to 30 minutes of cooking. If you are cooking at a high temperature, such as finishing it under the broiler or on a grill over direct heat, do not add the sauce until the last three to five minutes.

Some experts don’t even put a sauce on at all while the ribs are cooking. They serve the sauce on the side. A few purists disdain the thought of sauce entirely and don’t believe in using it, but I do not see any reason for such extremism.

## SLOW-COOKER RIBS

Yield: 6 servings

**3 racks baby back ribs or 2 racks spareribs**  
**3/4 cup spice rub**

1. Coat both sides of the ribs with the spice rub and rub it into the meat. Do not remove the membrane. Place the ribs, standing vertically, in a large slow cooker (an oval-shaped cooker will work best). You may have to cut rack into pieces to fit them in. A small slow cooker will fit 1 rack.

2. Cook 4 to 5 hours on high or 7 to 8 hours on low. The ribs are done when the meat is tender, it has pulled away from the bone by about 3/4 inch and its internal temperature is 195 degrees.

Per serving: 535 calories; 38 g fat; 13g saturated fat; 156 mg cholesterol; 44 g protein; 6 g carbohydrate; 3 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 1,389 mg sodium; 86 mg calcium

Recipe by Daniel Neman

## SMOKED RIBS

Yield: 6 servings

**3 racks baby back ribs or 2 racks spareribs**  
**3/4 cup spice rub**  
**1 cup wood chips, for smoking**  
**1/3 cup apple juice**  
**3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar**  
**Chipotle barbecue sauce or your favorite barbecue sauce, optional**

1. Remove membranes from bone-side of ribs by slipping a thin, sharp knife between meat and membrane. Pull up on membrane with the knife until you can grip it with your thumb (use a towel or a paper towel for a better grip). Lift membrane off meat, and discard.

2. Coat both sides of ribs with spice rub and rub into the meat. Refrigerate 4 to 8 hours or let sit at room temperature for 1 hour. Do not keep out of the refrigerator for more than 1 hour.

3. Meanwhile, soak wood chips in water for at least 20 minutes if small or 1 hour if larger chunks. Wrap wet chips in aluminum foil and cut 4 slits in top of package.

4. Prepare a grill for indirect heat.

5. Light the grill and use dials or vents to keep the temperature very low, 250 to 275 degrees. Try not to go above 300 degrees. Place wood-chip package in center of coals or directly on top of gas flame. Place the ribs, bone-side down, on the grate and close the cover. If using charcoal, you will have to add additional coals every hour.

6. Mix together the apple juice and cider vinegar. After 1 hour of cooking, brush this mixture sparingly over the ribs. Cover and continue cooking. Every 30 minutes, brush more of the liquid sparingly over the top of the ribs.

7. Baby back ribs will be done in about 4 hours; spareribs will take longer. About 20 to 30 minutes before they are done, brush ribs with barbecue sauce, if desired. The ribs are done when the meat is tender, has pulled away from the bone by about 3/4 inch and its internal temperature is 195 degrees.

Per serving: 600 calories; 39 g fat; 15 g saturated fat; 156 mg cholesterol; 44 g protein; 17 g carbohydrate; 12 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 1,578 mg sodium; 102 mg calcium

Recipe by Daniel Neman

## SPICE RUB

Yield: About 1/2 cup

**2 tablespoons paprika**  
**2 tablespoons packed light brown sugar**  
**1 tablespoon salt**  
**2 teaspoons chili powder**  
**1 1/2 teaspoons garlic powder**  
**1 1/2 teaspoons pepper**  
**1 1/2 teaspoons onion powder**  
**1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper, see note**  
**1/2 teaspoon dried thyme**

**Note: This recipe makes a moderately spicy rub. If you want it spicier, use 1 1/2 teaspoons cayenne pepper. If you want it mild, eliminate the cayenne.**

Combine all ingredients in a bowl.

Per serving (based on 8): 20 calories; no fat; no saturated fat; no cholesterol; 1 g protein; 5 g carbohydrate; 1 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 894 mg sodium; 13 mg calcium

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## A cooking icon turns 100

By RICK NELSON  
Minneapolis Star Tribune

Spoiler alert: Betty Crocker, arguably the most recognized Minnesotan of the past century, isn’t a real person. Still, Cathy Swanson Wheaton is making sure that the 100th birthday of General Mills’ fictitious spokesperson is not going unnoticed.

Wheaton is executive editor of the Golden Valley, Minnesota-based company’s cookbooks, overseeing recipe development, photography and manuscript writing.

For her latest project, Wheaton has compiled a collector’s edition of recipes into “Betty Crocker Best 100: Favorite Recipes From America’s Most Trusted Cook” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$25), ranging from tried-and-true standards like banana bread and Swedish meatballs to classics-in-the-making along the lines of spiced pumpkin cupcakes and gluten-free tuna-noodle casserole.

In a recent phone conversation, Wheaton discussed Betty’s beginnings, the vagaries of memory and the appeal of easy-to-make chicken pot pies.

**Q:** How did you go about narrowing what had to be a mountain of archived recipes?

**A:** It was daunting. I lost a lot of sleep. How am I to know what are the 100 top recipes? I ended up looking at the data that we had. Bettycrocker.com has 12 million visits each month — it’s one of the largest food websites out there — and selecting the most popular recipes there was a good way to choose. We have a large and robust consumer relations department. They receive a million questions each year, and I pored over their recipe requests. A lot came from the nearly 400 cookbooks that General Mills has published since Betty was born, and also recipes that we’ve given clever new twists.

**Q:** Such as?

**A:** Fruitcake. It got a bad rap as being a good doorstop. But there’s a recipe on bettycrocker.com for fruitcake bars that take 20 minutes to prepare, and people rave about them.

We never changed for change’s sake. There was always a purpose. We tried to keep the essence of the recipe — we did take some favorites and made them gluten-free — but in some cases, ingredients and methods have changed and improved over time. For example, it didn’t make sense to share the old recipe for stuffed peppers, because you boiled them for 30 minutes. That’s when people cooked vegetables to death. Now, we stick them in the microwave with 2 tablespoons of water, and they’re done in three minutes.

**Q:** How many recipes did you consider before whittling the list down to a hundred?

**A:** There were hundreds, easily. Every night, I’d be pulling back my memories, asking myself, “What did I have 30 years ago?” and “What did I have 20 years ago?”

**Q:** Memory can be tricky, right?

**A:** We’ve learned that while we may have our memories, our taste buds have moved on. If you taste the mac-and-cheese you remembered from your childhood, you’d probably think, “This doesn’t have much flavor.” We expect more flavor combinations these days,

which is why we updated the mac-and-cheese recipe with dry mustard and Worcestershire sauce. They enhance the cheese flavor, and match today’s expectations for the tongue.

**Q:** First on my to-do list is going to be making those single-serving chicken pot pies. Why did you include them?

**A:** That recipe is very much comfort food; it says “fall” to me. We recognize that people have busy lives. We don’t want cooking to be daunting — we want people to be successful at it, and to be proud to serve what they’re making to their family and friends. With those pot pies, it’s so easy to place the crust over the top, it doesn’t have to form beautiful edges. People aren’t looking for perfection, they’re looking for things that taste good and are easy to make.

**Q:** The Star Tribune has an annual holiday cookie recipe contest. Which one of the book’s 16 cookie and bar cookie recipes would you submit for our competition?

**A:** The Brownie Cookies. Chocolate is always going to be a favorite. The recipe is a twist on brownies, and with the pecans, it delivers so much flavor and texture.

**Q:** You produce three or four cookbooks a year. Was this a fun project to take on?

**A:** Oh, my gosh, yes. It was so exciting when we realized, a few years ago, that the 100th birthday was coming up. We had to do a book. It helps consumers see that she’s still relevant. She’s not your grandmother’s Betty Crocker. She has that history, but she’s still going forward and still has great ideas. She trends with the times, she’s not ahead of the times. Poring through old books, finding original sources and seeing how recipes have touched our lives and continue to touch our lives, that was a lot of fun. I’m super-honored that I can keep up the traditions.

**Q:** We’re talking about a fictitious character as if she were a living, breathing person. Is that standard operating procedure in your workplace?

**A:** It’s definitely part of the culture of General Mills. As a writer, it’s a little odd to talk about her in the first person as much as I did in the book. But it is about her birthday, and she lives in the hearts of all of us who represent her.

**Q:** Can you shorthand Betty’s origin story?

**A:** Our parent company, the Washburn-Crosby Co., had a contest. A lot of the responses included cooking questions, and the marketing people realized that they needed more food-related people to answer them. They decided to create a persona for all of the home economists working at the company. They chose “Betty” because it was popular, and warm, and friendly, and “Crocker” because it was the last name of a retiring executive.

**Q:** It’s great that the book includes reproductions of the famous eight Betty Crocker portraits. The last one was created 25 years ago. Will there ever be another one?

**A:** I would hope so, but it’s hard for me to say. I know they’ve toyed with the idea, and about how they would represent her today. But everyone can

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