

Cooking Tender, Flavorful

A quick broil or sauté makes rib and loin chops juicy; a slow, gentle braise makes shoulder chops fork-tender

BY JOSH EISEN

While there are many great main dishes that you can cook in a hurry, few are as versatile, as easy to prepare, and as satisfying as lamb chops. Whether I have friends coming over or I'm just spending a quiet evening with my wife, I find broiled herb-marinated rib chops to be the perfect dish: they take very little planning, they look beautiful on a platter, and they taste great. Other times, when I'm craving warm and spicy eastern flavors, I like to put a coating of freshly ground spices on loin lamb chops and serve them with a simple yogurt-based sauce. I happened to have made these the night my wife went into labor, unfortunately. *She* still can't eat them, but my friends and I love them.

Although rib and loin chops are great for just the two of us or for a small party, I like to braise shoulder chops for a crowd, so that I'm not busy at the stove when everyone else is having fun. Shoulder chops are inexpensive, and most of the work can be done ahead of time. Braising makes shoulder chops meltingly tender and produces a rich, flavorful sauce.

Shoulder, loin, and rib chops are all tasty, with just enough fat to be flavorful. Their small size makes them ideal for portioning, and they each pair well with just about any red wine. To enjoy lamb chops, all you need is a basic understanding of the different cuts so you can choose the cooking method that will bring out the best in each chop.

LOOK FOR LAMB WITH NICE MARBLING AND PINK MEAT

Naturally, before you cook lamb, you've got to shop for it. The best way to choose lamb is by its looks.



These tender rib chops need just a flash under the broiler to cook them to juicy perfection. An herb and lemon marinade adds a counterpoint to the rich flavor of the lamb.

Lamb Chops Three Ways



Lamb meat should be pinkish to pale red when cut, with a fine marbling of fat within the meat. The meat shouldn't be deep red like beef, nor should the exterior fat be brownish, greasy, or brittle. If you look around a bit, you'll notice there is variation from animal to animal; don't be shy about asking for what looks best.

You shouldn't worry too much about what country your lamb comes from. Most of the lamb in our markets is either from America or New Zealand. New Zealand lamb tends to be a little smaller than American. The smaller size doesn't mean the lamb will be more tender or flavorful, however. Lamb's flavor is affected by where it is raised, what it eats, how old it is at slaughter, and what type of sheep it is. But unless you're buying lamb directly from a farm (or from one of the sources listed on p. 38), it will be difficult for you to find most of this information. The younger the lamb, the sweeter the meat will be. New Zealand and the United States share similar laws that allow any sheep under twelve months of age to be called lamb.

RIB AND LOIN CHOPS LOVE HIGH HEAT; SHOULDERS SAVOR SLOW BRAISING

To bring out the herby, earthy flavor of lamb chops, cook them with care. Rib and loin chops respond best to high-heat cooking methods such as broiling and sautéing. Both of these methods develop the flavor by caramelizing the exterior.

For best results, bring your meat to room temperature before cooking. Pat the meat dry since a wet chop will steam rather than sear. Lightly rub it with oil before cooking, rather than putting the fat in the pan. You should also get your broiler or sauté pan really hot before you start cooking.

When broiling chops, find the best distance from the heating element. If you cook lamb chops too close to the heat, the outside will be well done before the inside has even warmed up. Yet if the meat is too far away from the heat source, the outside won't caramelize. Ideally, the chops should be two to four inches away from the element, so put the oven rack on its topmost level. Another way to boost the heat of a home broiler is to heat the broiling pan until it's really hot before adding the chops.

Sautéing is an excellent way to caramelize chops and seal in flavor. Choose a pan big enough to hold your chops without crowding them. If they're too crowded, the chops will steam rather than sear and brown. Make sure your pan is really hot before you start sautéing. You might want to sear your lamb chops until browned on both sides, and then finish the cooking in a very hot oven. After searing your chops, you can hold them at room temperature for 10 to 15 minutes if you wish, before finishing them in the hot oven.

Braising shoulder chops yields melt-in-your-mouth lamb. With more connective tissue, shoulder chops have to be cooked until well done or

The cut of lamb determines its tenderness

RIB CHOPS ARE DELICATE AND TENDER

Rib chops, with their pearly white "handles," are cut from the ribs just behind the shoulders along the spine. Each rack of ribs, on either side of the spine, will contain seven or eight ribs. Lamb ribs cost about \$8.99 per pound as whole racks and as individual chops. Many cooks like their rib chops frenched (the handle is scraped of all meat, fat, and connective tissue), but I prefer to leave most of that on for flavor.



LOIN CHOPS ARE COMPACT AND MEATY

Directly behind the ribs, running down the spine towards the animal's hindquarters, are the lamb loins. The lamb loins removed with their bones make a saddle; boneless lamb loins make delicate roasts. But most frequently you will see lamb loins cut into thick chops and sold for about \$8.99 per pound.



SHOULDER CHOPS ARE BONY BUT TASTY

The least known—and least expensive (about \$4.29 per pound)—lamb chops come from the shoulder. Your grocer will probably have shoulder blade chops, cut from the rib side of the shoulder, and shoulder arm chops, that come from the shank side of the shoulder. These chops have several bones running through them, but their meat is very tasty and an excellent value.



they'll be tough. It is possible to grill or sauté them if they've been marinated for a long time, but ideally, they should be cooked like a pot roast. Stacking several shoulder chops together and tying them into a bundle makes an easy roast to brown in a Dutch oven and then simmer in liquid. The long, slow cooking produces meat that practically falls off the bone.

PROPER TIMING YIELDS DELICIOUS LAMB CHOPS

While an hour and a half or two hours of braising will tenderize shoulder chops, a few too many minutes of broiling can toughen a beautiful rib or loin chop. How quickly a chop will cook depends on its thickness, its temperature when it is put on the fire, and the heat of the fire. As a result, it's best to check the chops after the minimum suggested time in your recipe. I have a method that I think works

well for chops: Cook the chop for the approximate time in the recipe. Then stick a fine metal skewer or a slender, sharp knife into the center of the eye of the meat for about ten seconds. Pull it out and touch the end of it to the outer edge of your bottom lip. If the metal is warm to your lip, the lamb is cooked medium rare (rosy at the center); this is the way I like chops. If it's cool, the chops need some more time; if it's hot, they're well done—which seems a shame for lamb chops.



Spread a lot of garlic between each shoulder chop. The garlic will mellow and flavor the meat as it braises.



Tie the stacked shoulder chops together securely. This will make a tidy bundle that you can easily turn with tongs as you brown the meat.



Josh Eisen thoroughly browns the bundle of shoulder chops to caramelize the exterior of the meat. This adds flavor to the rich braising liquid, which becomes the sauce for the final dish.

Herb- & Wine-Braised Lamb Shoulder Chops

Long, slow cooking tenderizes the shoulder. The meat will be rich and succulent and will practically fall off the bone. This can be a base for a *ragù* to serve with pasta, and it makes excellent leftovers. *Serves four.*

4 lamb shoulder chops (about 2 lb. total)
15 cloves of garlic (about 1 head), chopped
Freshly ground black pepper
1 tsp. kosher salt
2 Tbs. olive oil
4 oz. pancetta (2 thick slices), diced (or 2 oz. diced bacon plus 2 Tbs. butter)
2 medium onions, chopped
2 carrots, cubed
1/8 oz. dried porcini, reconstituted in 1/2 cup hot water (liquid reserved and strained of grit), chopped
One 17-oz. can Italian tomatoes, with juice
Pared zest of 1 orange
2 bay leaves
6 large sprigs fresh thyme
6 large sprigs flat-leaf parsley
10 fresh celery leaves
2 cups dry white wine (the less oaky the better)

Heat the oven to 350°F. Lay one chop on a cutting board and spread a third of the garlic on it. Season with a grind of black pepper and a pinch of the salt. Lay another chop on top, so that the bones in the chops are aligned, and season with more garlic, pepper, and salt. Repeat with the last two chops, making sure that all the garlic is packed *inside* the roast. Securely tie the chops together in a bundle with kitchen twine.

Choose a casserole or Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid that's just large enough to hold all the ingredients and heat it over medium heat. Add the olive oil. When hot, add the bundle of chops, brown it on all sides, and transfer it to a plate. Add the pancetta to the pan and cook until the fat renders and the pancetta browns, about 4 min. Add the onions and carrots and cook until lightly browned, about 10 min.

Return the lamb to the pot and add the rest of the ingredients, including the reserved porcini liquid. If needed, add enough water to bring the liquid about halfway to two-thirds up the sides of the lamb bundle; don't let the liquid cover it. Bring to a simmer. Cover the pot, put it in the middle of the oven, and cook slowly for 2 hours. If the liquid becomes more active than a slow simmer, reduce the heat. The slow cooking of this dish makes the meat extremely tender and mellows the garlic.

When the lamb is finished (the chops should still be in a neat bundle, but the meat can be easily pulled apart with a fork), remove it from the liquid and set it aside, loosely covered, in a warm place. Remove the bay leaves, orange zest, and herb stems. If desired, bring the sauce to a simmer and reduce to thicken. Remove the twine from the chops and serve with some sauce ladled on top, along with pasta or mashed potatoes.

Broiled Herb-Marinated Lamb Rib Chops

Be sure the broiler pan is very hot before you set the chops on it, and put the top oven rack as close to the heating element as possible. This recipe also works well on the grill or on the stove in a heavy skillet. *Serves four.*

1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
4 Tbs. fresh lemon juice



The herb- and wine-laced braising liquid does double duty. It tenderizes the shoulder chops as they cook and then becomes a complex sauce.

2 bay leaves, broken in half
2 Tbs. minced fresh thyme leaves
2 Tbs. minced fresh rosemary leaves
1 1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper, or to taste
2 to 2 1/2 lb. lamb rib chops (about 12 chops, 3/4 inch thick)
3/4 tsp. kosher salt

In a nonreactive bowl or a zip-top bag, mix together the oil, lemon juice, bay leaves, thyme, rosemary, and pepper. Rub this mixture into the lamb chops and put the chops into the bowl or bag with the marinade. Seal the container, refrigerate, and marinate for at least 1 hour or as long as overnight.

If possible, remove the chops from the refrigerator an hour before cooking to bring them to room temperature. (If you can't do this, add a couple of minutes to the cooking time.) Heat the broiler and broiler pan for at least 10 min. before cooking. Remove the chops from the marinade and scrape the herbs from the chops. Pat the chops dry and season them with the salt. Put the chops under the broiler and cook for about 5 min. on the first side; turn them and cook about 3 min. for a rosy center.

Spice-Crusted Lamb Loin Chops with Green Coriander Sauce

For this recipe, be sure to use whole spices and crush them yourself. Preground spices are too fine to form a crust, and they'll turn bitter during cooking. You can also use rib chops in this recipe. *Serves four.*

2 to 2 1/2 lb. loin chops (about 4 chops, 1 1/2 inches thick)
2 Tbs. oil

FOR THE SPICE RUB:

1 Tbs. coriander seeds
1 Tbs. cumin seeds
1 Tbs. fennel seeds
1 tsp. kosher salt
1/4 tsp. freshly ground white pepper

(Ingredient list continues)





Spice-crusted loin chops are both juicy and crunchy when properly sautéed: Dry the chops, press on the spices, use high heat, and don't crowd the pan.

FOR THE SAUCE:
 6 Tbs. plain yogurt (not low- or nonfat)
 ½ tsp. coriander seeds
 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
 Kosher salt and freshly ground white pepper
 1 tsp. honey
 3 Tbs. fresh lime juice
 4 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
 1 cup loosely packed fresh cilantro leaves, finely chopped

Make the spice rub—One hour before cooking, remove the chops from the refrigerator. Crush the coriander, cumin, and fennel seeds in a mortar and pestle or by pulsing in a coffee grinder or food processor. Combine with the salt and pepper. The mixture should have a sandy texture; don't turn it into a powder.

Make the sauce—Put the yogurt in a very fine strainer or a coffee filter and suspend it over a bowl. Let it stand

for 20 min. Crush the coriander seeds and combine them with the garlic, pepper, honey, and lime juice. Beat in the olive oil and then mix in the yogurt until just incorporated. Fold in the cilantro. Season with salt and pepper. This sauce can be prepared up to a day in advance and stored, tightly covered, in the refrigerator.

Cook the chops—A few minutes before cooking the chops, unwrap them and pat them dry. Press the spices onto the chops, coating the surface thoroughly; this will become the crust. Heat a heavy skillet over medium heat until very hot. Add the oil, immediately followed by the chops. If the pan is not large enough to hold all the chops, cook them in batches. If you crowd them in the pan, the crust won't form as well. Cook the chops about 9 min. per side per inch of meat for medium rare (or about 13 min. per side in this case). Transfer to a warm platter and serve with the sauce.

SPECIALTY LAMB

If you're looking for baby lamb or naturally farm-raised lamb, try the sources below. If you live in an urban area, try Greek, Spanish, or Middle Eastern groceries for whole baby lamb or other cuts. Or visit your local greenmarket, where you may be able to meet farmers from your area. These farmers, like the sources below, will be able to tell you exactly what the lambs have been eating, or other details that ultimately affect the flavor and texture of the lamb.

LAMB SOURCES

D'Artagnan, 399-419 St. Paul Ave., Jersey City, NJ 07306; 800/DARTAGN. New Zealand and Australian lamb.

Jamison Farm, 171 Jamison Lane, Latrobe, PA 15650-9400; 800/237-5262. Spring lamb, baby lamb, young milk-fed lamb, chops, legs, racks, and shanks.

Summerfield Farm, 10044 James Monroe Hwy., Culpeper, VA 22701; 703/547-9600. Naturally raised young lamb.

Whippoorwill Farm, PO Box 717, Lakeville, CT 06039; 203/435-9657. Organic lamb.

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Wine Choices

Merlot's smooth tannins won't overpower the sweet subtleties of lamb

Lamb with Bordeaux is traditional, and for good reason: the meat's full flavor and texture needs a wine with enough tannin to balance the fat. But Cabernet Sauvignon, the chief grape of most Bordeaux wines, might be a bit much for chops (compared, say, to a leg or shoulder roast). So choose a St. Emilion—it's higher in

Merlot, smoother, and lets the meat's subtle flavors come through more readily. Château Simard and Château Puy-Blanquet are delicious and affordable.

Happily, Merlot's booming popularity has brought a surge of good values from areas as diverse as southern France (try Réserve St. Martin, Les Jamelles, or Fortant de

France), Chile (look to Carmen for fruitier flavors and Carta Vieja for dark, earthy ones), and Long Island (Pelligrini and Cristina are consistently fine).

Lamb also pairs famously well with Rhône reds, and the deep, pungent, spice-and-tar flavors of Châteauneuf-du-Pape will tie in especially well with the spice-

crusted chops. Nicely balanced Rhône-style reds at a lower price include Ensemble by California's Beaulieu Vineyard and d'Arry's Original, a Shiraz-Grenache combo from d'Arenberg of Australia.

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