

# Roasting Rack of Lamb

Cooked whole, the rack is more than the sum of its chops

BY MOLLY STEVENS

There is something undeniably elegant and indulgent about rack of lamb. With its rich flavor, tender texture, and visual appeal, this majestic cut is often reserved for special occasions or intimate dinners for two. While most lamb is eaten in restaurants, I've found that preparing rack of lamb at home is surprisingly easy and always impressive. Although the rack is simply eight lamb chops left as one roast, it is altogether more splendid than serving individual chops. Roasted whole, the meat remains juicier and the presentation is more dramatic, while the preparation itself very straightforward.

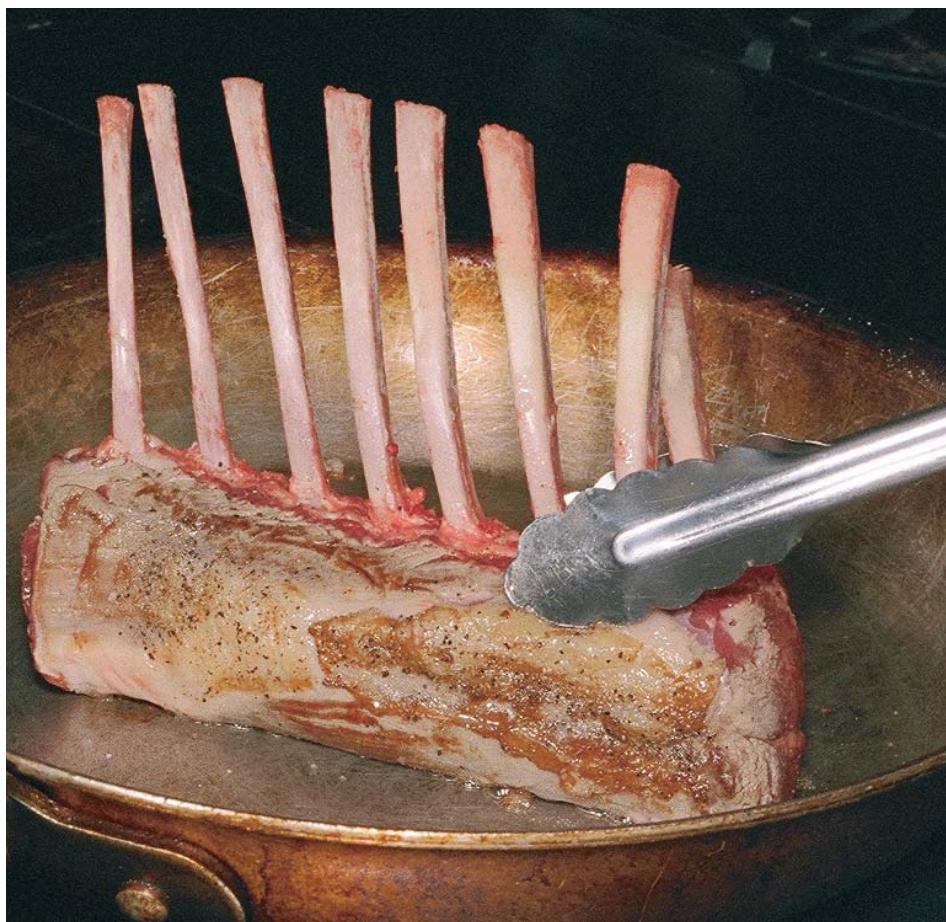
## BUYING A RACK OF LAMB

Lamb was once considered a seasonal specialty, but this is no longer true. Modern farming now ensures high-quality lamb year-round. The lamb available in markets today comes from animals ranging in age from four to nine months. Anything older is classified as mutton and is a different product altogether. Meat from the smallest livestock, known as “baby” lamb (also called “hothouse” lamb), is still easiest to locate in the spring when lamb sales are the highest. Most butchers don't regularly offer racks (only chops), but they will gladly order one for you if you call ahead.

**What's included in the rack?** The “rack” refers to the section of meat extending from the shoulder to the loin. The rack usually consists of eight rib chops, but some butchers will offer seven or nine ribs to a rack. Expect a trimmed rack, including bone, to weigh between one and a quarter and one and a half pounds. Each chop offers around two ounces of meat.

While restaurants generally feel obliged to indulge diners with four chops per person, two will satisfy modest appetites and three are usually enough for more enthusiastic eaters. So a single rack of lamb will nicely serve two or three people, at two to four chops per person. A well-trimmed rack delivers enormous flavor, even when served in moderate amounts.

**When you order a rack, ask to have the chine bones (the backbone) removed.** Many retailers prefer to leave these attached because they help



hold the chops securely together, but this also adds quite a bit of weight, which shows up at the cash register. If you roast your lamb with the backbone attached, you'll have difficulty carving the rack into individual servings. Some butchers leave the backbone attached but score it between the ribs with a saw. These cuts make carving easier. The problem with this method is finding the exact spot where the butcher made the cuts. If you forget to ask, you can remove the chine bones yourself with a heavy cleaver.

If you're planning a dinner for two and would like to order less than the standard eight-rib rack, ask the butcher to cut your roast from the saddle end (the end closest to the loin). The ribs at this end have a larger “eye”—the center nugget—of lean meat and a nicer shape. The ribs closest to the shoulder end tend to be a bit smaller. My husband and I like to treat ourselves by roasting a partial rack

*Hold the rack upright to get it nicely browned. Use the tongs to make sure all sides of the lamb come in contact with the hot pan, so the meat has a chance to caramelize.*

Photos except where noted: Martha Holmberg



Photo: Matthew Kestenbaum

*Pink, juicy meat and a crispy coating. Lamb is best served medium rare, as the flavor can become quite strong and the texture tough when cooked beyond medium.*

of lamb. We order a neat little five-rib rack and open a bottle of fine red wine.



*“Frenching” the ribs for dramatic curves. The author pulls and scrapes away all the meat, fat, and sinew to make the rib bones neat and sleek.*

#### **“FRENCHING” FOR A CLEAN LOOK**

Even if you have a helpful butcher, you’ll probably still have to do some trimming when you bring the rack home from the market. To maximize the rack’s visual appeal and reduce unwanted fat, you’ll want to trim the rack so that the rib bones are exposed and almost all visible fat has been removed. This is called “frenching” the rack.



*Removing the deckle is easy if you follow the natural seams in the meat. Pull on the fat layer with one hand while you use a knife to cut with the other.*

Lay the rack on your cutting board so that the ribs are arching away from the board. Holding a sharp boning knife perpendicular to the bones, cut through the fat just below the eye, being careful not to actually cut into the eye. You can now easily remove the bulk of the fat covering the bones by sliding the blade of your knife along the ribs—starting at the cut you’ve just made—to their ends. Next, with the point of your boning knife, cut around each rib bone and remove the fat between them. The ribs should now be free of most fat, but to give the roasted rack a clean appearance, scrape the rib ends with your knife to remove the bits of fat and tendon that remain. You can also simply pull them off with your hands (see center photo at left).

The meaty part of the rack consists of two main layers: the eye and the “deckle,” a thin layer of meat sandwiched between two layers of fat. Most butchers leave the deckle as part of the rack, but I prefer to remove it, creating a more elegant roast. Many people only trim the deckle away from the chops at the saddle end, where the eye meat is larger. To remove the deckle, simply cut along the natural seam that separates it from the eye. Start at the rib end and move your knife down the face of the rack between the fat and the meat (see bottom photo at left). The thick layer should come away easily. Leave a thin covering of fat on the meat; this will help keep it moist during cooking.



*Mustard helps the crumb coating stick. Paint a thin layer on the seared rack.*



*Roll the rack in herbs and crumbs and then roast it in a hot oven.*



*Let the rack rest before carving for juicier, more tender chops.*

## ROASTING A RACK OF LAMB

The real charm of the rack of lamb is that it's so easy to prepare. The meat itself is so superb that the less fussing, the better. Simple, unadorned roasting is my favorite way to prepare the rack, but I also enjoy a mild mustard coating or a more complex herb-crusted rack (see recipes below right).

**The roasting method has two steps**—First sear the lamb and then finish cooking it in a hot oven. While heating the oven to 475°F, put a heavy-based, dry skillet over high heat. Season the lamb with salt and pepper. Using tongs or a meat fork, put the lamb, meat side down, in the skillet. With your tongs, hold the lamb against the skillet for a minute to give it a nice brown crust. Turn the meat to sear it on all sides for a total of four minutes.

After all sides of the meat have been seared, transfer the rack to an oval gratin dish (a standard roasting pan is too large for a single rack). Cover the rib bones with strips of foil so they don't burn and then put the dish on the center rack of the hot oven. The most accurate method for judging doneness is by temperature (see the sidebar below), but

## How do you know when it's done?

Even the most experienced cooks have trouble judging the doneness of a rack of lamb by feel, so I always rely on my meat thermometer. Remove the meat from the oven when it has reached an internal temperature that is 5° to 10° lower than your desired doneness to allow for carryover cooking, which occurs during the five-minute rest before carving. This rest allows the juices to redistribute evenly and results in a moister and more tender roast. So for medium-rare meat, you should remove the roast from the oven when it has reached an internal temperature of 120°F. I don't recommend cooking lamb beyond medium because it begins to develop a strong, gamey flavor, and all its tenderness disappears.

### **Final temperature after a five-minute rest:**

- rare—115° to 125°
- medium rare—125° to 135°
- medium—140° to 145°

generally the rack should reach medium rare in about 20 to 25 minutes.

## CARVING AT THE TABLE

With the chine bones removed, carving the roasted rack is easy and quick. Use a carving knife to cut between the rib bones. Once carved, the chops will cool quickly, so you should carve at the table. Besides, you'll want to show off the beautiful rack by presenting it in its entirety.

Once you've cut the rack into chops, it's easy to make them look great on the plate. One way of doing this is to fan two or three chops on one side of the plate with the rib ends toward the center. You might even want to leave two or three chops together and serve them standing upright as a mini rack. Be sure to provide your guests with good steak knives.

## HERB CRUST FOR LAMB

Lamb goes wonderfully with anything redolent of rosemary, thyme, savory, garlic, and olive oil. Some of my favorite accompaniments are garlic-roasted potatoes, ratatouille, and a gratin of zucchini. For this recipe, use only fresh breadcrumbs, which you can make in a food processor or with a cheese grater.

- 1 large clove garlic, chopped fine*
- 2 Tbs. chopped fresh parsley*
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh thyme (or ¼ tsp. dried thyme)*
- ½ cup fresh breadcrumbs*
- 2 Tbs. olive oil*
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper*
- 1 Tbs. Dijon mustard*

Heat the oven to 475°F. In a shallow bowl, combine the garlic, parsley, thyme, and breadcrumbs. Moisten with enough olive oil to make the mixture hold together. Season the lamb with salt and pepper and sear it in a hot skillet. Remove the meat from the skillet and use a pastry brush to paint the meat side of the rack with the mustard. Roll the meat in the herb mixture to coat it. Roast the rack in the hot oven until it reaches the desired internal temperature (see sidebar at left). If you want a crispier crust, finish cooking the rack under the broiler for 2 min.

## MUSTARD COATING FOR LAMB

This is a simple yet delicious coating. Use a good-quality Dijon mustard, as its flavor will permeate the finished dish.

- 2 Tbs. Dijon mustard*
- 2 tsp. chopped fresh rosemary*
- 2 Tbs. olive oil*
- 1 Tbs. lemon juice*
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper*

Heat the oven to 475°. Stir together the ingredients and sear the lamb; then brush the coating on the meat. Roast the lamb according to the method described above left.

*Molly Stevens earned a grand diplôme from La Varenne cooking school in Paris, where she also worked at several Michelin-starred restaurants. She returned to the United States to become assistant director of the French Culinary Institute in New York City. Currently, she is a chef/ instructor at the New England Culinary Institute in Essex, Vermont. ♦*