Warm Marinated Artichoke Hearts with Olives and Feta
THE ORIGINAL KITCHEN WORKHORSE

In any cluttered kitchen (the test kitchen included), there are some pots and pans that gather dust and others that rarely get put away. After many years of careful testing, we’ve identified the truly hardworking tools, the must-have utensils that we reach for time and again. Some are pretty obvious—a chef’s knife, a cutting board, a pasta pot—but one that might come as a surprise is a cast-iron skillet. And this unassuming, sturdy pan doesn’t just stand out on the well-stocked shelves of the test kitchen; cast iron also has a special place in our home kitchens, where we don’t have room for cabinets full of specialized gear. A cast-iron skillet is an incredibly versatile, durable, and completely chemical-free way to cook. This consummate multitasking powerhouse is essential to have on hand when the right recipe comes along—and you might not realize just how many recipes are perfect in cast iron.

Most people already know that cast iron is just the thing for searing or blackening food quickly over high heat: When we’re after a really dark, even crust on steaks or chops, there’s nothing better. But a cast-iron skillet is not just for the stovetop; great heat retention makes it a natural fit for hot, shallow-fried dishes. The environment in your skillet, especially when it’s full of food, will make it much easier to lift and carry the skillet, which will make it much easier to transfer the skillet from stove to oven or from cooking to serving. If this is something you find especially challenging, look for a skillet that features a helper handle opposite the pan handle, or from cooking to serving. If this is something you find especially challenging, look for a skillet that features a helper handle opposite the pan handle, or specially made silicone cover.

CAST IRON IS HEAVY, and while we try to minimize the amount of time you’ll have to spend lifting or moving your skillet in our recipes, you will sometimes have to pick it up to transfer the pan from stove to oven or from cooking to serving. If this is something you find especially challenging, look for a skillet that features a helper handle opposite the pan handle, which will make it much easier to lift and carry the skillet, especially when it’s full of food. Be sure to protect your hands when using the helper handle as you do with the pan handle; use a towel, potholder, or specially made silicone cover.

- **Seasoning and maintaining a cast-iron pan is not as difficult as you think it is.** A well-seasoned and cared-for cast-iron skillet can definitely rival a traditional nonstick pan. With our simple advice you can create and maintain a perfect cooking surface in your skillet. (See more on page 000.)

TEST KITCHEN CAST-IRON DISCOVERIES

The cast-iron skillet has been a test kitchen favorite since day one. Yet while we have tons of practical experience with this pan, there were still questions that puzzled us. We knew that cast iron cooks in certain ways, but we didn’t quite understand why; we knew that developing and maintaining a layer of seasoning is key for a nonstick cast-iron pan, but we didn’t exactly understand what seasoning actually is or how it works. We had also heard all kinds of conflicting information and myths about the best ways to clean and use cast-iron skillets. So we set out to learn everything we could about cast iron and to develop a list of recipes that were designed specifically for the strengths of the skillet. Here are some of the most surprising discoveries we made in the process:

- **You CAN use soap on a cast-iron pan.** After months of recipe tests and thousands of dirty skillets, we developed simple, straightforward procedures for cleaning your cast iron. (See more on page 000.)
- **Food cooks faster in a cast-iron pan.** As we were testing our recipes, we started to notice that compared to similar recipes cooked in other kinds of pans, the cast-iron versions cooked quite a bit faster, largely because of cast iron’s remarkable powers of heat retention. (See more on page 000.)
- **You CAN cook tomatoes, vinegar, and other acidic ingredients in a cast-iron pan.** Acidic ingredients can cause problems in cast iron, but in order to avoid any unwanted flavors in our food or damage to our pans while still cooking all our favorite ingredients, we came up with some ways to work around this issue. (See more on page 000.)
- **There’s more than one right way to preheat a cast-iron pan.** Sometimes you want a perfect sear on a big piece of meat, and other times you just need to quickly sauté some onions. The environment in your cast-iron skillet can be customized for different types of cooking. During our testing we developed some rules for the best ways to preheat your skillet based on the cooking techniques used in a particular recipe. (See more on page 000.)

TIPS FOR COOKING WITH CAST IRON

- **Scale the pan size to the size of your burner.** The skillet will heat more evenly if it’s properly matched to the size of the heating element on your stove. This applies to both gas and electric stoves. The pan should not hang off the burner.
- **Since cast iron retains heat extremely well, the handle of your skillet will stay very, very hot for quite a while after use.** Always use a towel or potholder when taking a skillet out of the oven or moving it from the stovetop, and consider leaving the towel or potholder on the handle of the skillet to remind yourself not to grab the bare metal.
- **Cast iron is heavy,** and while we try to minimize the amount of time you’ll have to spend lifting or moving your skillet in our recipes, you will sometimes have to pick it up to transfer the pan from stove to oven or from cooking to serving. If this is something you find especially challenging, look for a skillet that features a helper handle opposite the pan handle, which will make it much easier to lift and carry the skillet, especially when it’s full of food. Be sure to protect your hands when using the helper handle as you do with the pan handle; use a towel, potholder, or specially made silicone cover.
- **Use a vegetable- or plant-based oil to season your cast iron,** fats that are more unsaturated are better for seasoning (for more information see page 000).
Baked Pepperoni Pizza Dip

Serves 8 to 10

Why This Recipe Works
To bring pizza party flavor to a fun, easy appetizer, we turned classic pepperoni pie into a rich, cheesy dip that we could bake and serve right in the skillet. The cast iron’s excellent heat retention ensured that the cheese didn’t separate or become congealed but stayed warm and gooey until the skillet had been scraped clean, with no need for Sterno or a hot plate. For the rich base of our dip, we combined cream cheese, mozzarella, and pizza sauce. Stirring in crisped pepperoni finalized the familiar flavor profile. Naturally, the perfect partner for our creamy, saucy dip was pizza dough. We rolled out ½-ounce dough balls, tossed them with garlic oil, and baked them right in the skillet. The cast iron created a crisp, golden bottom on these pull-apart garlic rolls. The dip mixture was then spooned into the center of the skillet, inside the ring of parbaked mini rolls, and the whole thing baked in the oven until bubbly and browned. We topped the dip with fresh basil and reserved pepperoni crisps. Partygoers can simply pull off a garlicky roll and use it to scoop out some cheesy dip. We like the convenience of using ready-made pizza dough from the local pizzeria or supermarket; however, you can use our Classic Pizza Dough (page 000). For the pizza sauce, consider using our No-Cook Pizza Sauce (page 000). To soften the cream cheese quickly, microwave it for 20 to 30 seconds.

3 ounces thinly sliced pepperoni, quartered
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
3 garlic cloves, minced
1 pound pizza dough
8 ounces cream cheese, cut into 8 pieces and softened
⅓ cup pizza sauce
4 ounces mozzarella cheese, shredded (1 cup)
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Cook pepperoni in 10-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat until crisp, 5 to 7 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer pepperoni to paper towel–lined plate; set aside. Off heat, add oil and garlic to fat left in skillet and let sit until fragrant, about 1 minute; transfer to medium bowl.

2. Place dough on lightly floured counter, pat into rough 8-inch square, and cut into 32 pieces (½ ounce each). Working with 1 piece of dough at a time, roll into tight ball, then coat with garlic oil. Evenly space 18 balls around edge of skillet, keeping center of skillet clear. Place remaining 14 balls on top, staggering them between seams of balls underneath. Cover loosely with greased plastic wrap and let sit until slightly puffed, about 20 minutes.

3. Remove plastic. Transfer skillet to oven and bake until balls are just beginning to brown, about 20 minutes, rotating skillet halfway through baking. Meanwhile, whisk cream cheese and pizza sauce together in large bowl until thoroughly combined and smooth. Stir in mozzarella and three-quarters of crisped pepperoni.

4. Spoon cheese mixture into center of skillet, return to oven, and bake until dip is heated through and rolls are golden brown, about 10 minutes. Sprinkle with basil and remaining crisped pepperoni. Serve.

ASSEMBLING BAKED PEPPERONI PIZZA DIP

Evenly space 18 balls around edge of skillet. Place remaining 14 balls on top, staggering between seams of lower row. There will be some gaps in top row.

Cook it in Cast Iron
Caramelized Onion, Pear, and Bacon Tart

Serves 8 to 10

Why This Recipe Works
A cast-iron skillet retains heat like a pizza stone with the functionality of a skillet, making it the perfect tool for a tart. We topped our version with bacon, which also helped grease the pan, and onions that we caramelized in the bacon fat. To ensure that this tart had broad appeal, we mixed in pear and goat cheese to balance the savory-sweet flavor profile. We like the convenience of using ready-made pizza dough here; however, you can use our Classic Pizza Dough.

8 slices bacon, chopped fine
2 pounds onions, halved and sliced ¼ inch thick
1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme or ¼ teaspoon dried
1½ teaspoons packed brown sugar
Salt and pepper
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1 pound pizza dough
1 Bosc pear, quartered, cored, and sliced ¼ inch thick
4 ounces goat cheese, crumbled (1 cup)
2 tablespoons minced fresh chives

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 500 degrees. Cook bacon in 12-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat until crisp, 7 to 9 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer bacon to bowl. Measure out and reserve ¼ cup fat; discard remaining fat.

2. Add 2 tablespoons reserved fat, onions, thyme, sugar, and ¾ teaspoon salt to now-empty skillet. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until onions are softened, 8 to 10 minutes. Uncover and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until onions are deep golden brown, about 10 minutes. Stir in vinegar and cook until almost completely evaporated, about 2 minutes; transfer to bowl.

3. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels, then grease with 1 tablespoon reserved fat. Place dough on lightly floured counter, divide in half, and cover with greased plastic wrap. Press and roll 1 piece of dough (keeping remaining dough covered) into 11-inch round. Transfer dough to prepared skillet and gently push it to corners of pan. Spread half of onion mixture over dough, leaving ¼-inch border around edge. Scatter half of pear, half of crisp bacon, and ½ cup goat cheese evenly over top.

4. Set skillet over medium-high heat and cook until outside edge of dough is set, tart is lightly puffed, and bottom crust is spotty brown when gently lifted with spatula, 2 to 4 minutes. Transfer skillet to oven and bake until edge of tart is golden brown, 7 to 10 minutes.

5. Using potholders, remove skillet from oven and slide tart onto wire rack; let cool slightly. Being careful of hot skillet handle, repeat with remaining 1 tablespoon reserved fat, dough, and toppings. Sprinkle tarts with chives and cut into wedges. Serve.

Classic Pizza Dough
Makes 1 pound

This recipe can be easily doubled.

2 cups (11 ounces) plus 2 tablespoons bread flour
1½ teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
¼ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoons olive oil
¼ cup warm water (110 degrees)

1. Pulse flour, yeast, and salt together in food processor to combine; about 5 pulses. With processor running, add oil, then water, and process until rough ball forms, 30 to 40 seconds. Let dough rest for 2 minutes, then process for 30 seconds longer. (If after 30 seconds dough is very sticky and clings to blade, add extra flour as needed.)

2. Transfer dough to lightly floured counter and knead by hand to form smooth, round ball, about 1 minute. Place dough in large, lightly greased bowl, cover tightly with greased plastic wrap, and let rise until doubled in size, 1 to 1½ hours. (Alternatively, dough can be refrigerated for at least 8 hours or up to 16 hours.)

Cook It in Cast Iron
THICK-CUT STEAKS WITH HERB BUTTER

SERVES 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS Pan-searing a thick-cut steak presents a real challenge: How do you keep the perimeter from overcooking while the center of the steak reaches the desired temperature for the perfect balance of crisp crust and tender, juicy interior? We’ve found that searing the steak over high heat and then gently finishing it in the oven works well. But we were looking for a way to make a steak with the ultimate crust entirely on the stovetop—so we turned to a cast-iron skillet, since its heat-retention properties are ideal for a perfect sear. We chose the moderately expensive boneless strip steak for its big, beefy flavor. The first step to a great sear was an evenly heated cooking surface, which we accomplished by preheating the cast-iron skillet in the oven. This also gave us time to prepare a zesty compound butter with shallot, garlic, parsley, and chives—and to let the steaks warm up to room temperature, which helped them cook more quickly and evenly. Salting the outside of the steaks while they rested pulled moisture from the steaks while also seasoning the meat. This helped us get a better sear. We started out flipping our steaks only once, halfway through cooking. However, we found that flipping the steaks more often led to a shorter cooking time and a smaller gray band of dry, overcooked meat just under the surface of the steaks. After testing different flipping techniques and heating levels, we found that flipping the steaks every 2 minutes and transitioning from medium-high to medium-low heat partway through cooking resulted in a perfectly browned, crisp crust and a juicy, evenly cooked interior every time.

2 (1-pound) boneless strip steaks, 1 1/2 inches thick, trimmed
Salt and pepper
4 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
2 tablespoons minced shallot
1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley
1 tablespoon minced fresh chives
1 garlic clove, minced
2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 Adjust oven rack to middle position, place 12-inch cast-iron skillet on rack, and heat oven to 500 degrees. Meanwhile, season steaks with salt and let sit at room temperature. Mix butter, shallot, parsley, chives, garlic, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper together in bowl; set aside until needed.

2 When oven reaches 500 degrees, pat steaks dry with paper towels and season with pepper. Using potholders, remove skillet from oven and place over medium-high heat; turn off oven. Being careful of hot skillet handle, add oil and heat until just smoking. Cook steaks, without moving, until lightly browned on first side, about 2 minutes. Flip steaks and continue to cook until lightly browned on second side, about 2 minutes.

3 Flip steaks, reduce heat to medium-low, and cook, flipping every 2 minutes, until steaks are well browned and meat registers 120 to 125 degrees (for medium-rare), 7 to 9 minutes. Transfer steaks to carving board, dollop 2 tablespoons herb butter on each steak, tent loosely with aluminum foil, and let rest for 5 to 10 minutes. Slice steaks into 1/2-inch-thick slices and serve.

VARIATION
Thick-Cut Steaks with Blue Cheese–Chive Butter
Omit shallot and parsley. Increase chives to 2 tablespoons and add 1/3 cup crumbled mild blue cheese to butter with chives.

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Cook it in cast iron

Boneless turkey breasts with cranberry chutney

SERVES 6 TO 8

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS Boneless turkey breast offers all the hearty flavor of turkey without the challenges of cooking and carving a giant bird or bone-in breast, making it a quicker and more approachable everyday meal. For crisp, golden skin, we preheated our cast-iron skillet on the stovetop and browned the turkey on all sides before roasting. This meant that the meat needed much less time to finish cooking in the oven. We came across a problem during roasting, however; the boneless breasts were very unevenly shaped, so they cooked unevenly. Tucking the tapered ends underneath and tying the breasts with twine made them more uniform and easier to cook. Finally, we developed a chutney to add flavor to the mild meat. We used shallot, fresh ginger, mustard seeds, sugar, cranberries, and orange zest, with a splash of vinegar to round out the flavors. If you’re using self-basting turkey breast halves (such as a frozen Butterball) or kosher turkey breast halves, do not brine in step 1, but season with salt in step 2. Often, boneless turkey breast halves are sold in elastic netting; be sure to remove the netting before brining or cooking.

Salt and pepper
2 (2-pound) boneless, skin-on turkey breast halves, trimmed
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 shallot, minced
4 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
1 teaspoon yellow mustard seeds
12 ounces (3 cups) fresh or frozen cranberries
1 cup packed brown sugar
¾ cup water
1 tablespoon grated orange zest
2 tablespoons cider vinegar

1 Dissolve 6 tablespoons salt in 3 quarts cold water in large container. Submerge turkey in brine, cover, and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes or up to 1 hour.
2 Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Remove turkey from brine and pat dry with paper towels. Tuck tapered end of each breast underneath and loosely tie lengthwise with kitchen twine. Tie breasts crosswise at 1½-inch intervals to make tidy, even roasts. Season turkey with pepper.
3 Heat 12-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat for 5 minutes. Add oil and heat until just smoking. Brown turkey on all sides, about 10 minutes. Flip turkey skin side down, transfer skillet to oven, and roast until turkey registers 160 degrees, about 1 hour, flipping breasts halfway through roasting.
4 Using potholders, remove skillet from oven. Transfer turkey to carving board, tent loosely with aluminum foil, and let rest while making chutney.
5 Being careful of hot skillet handle, pour off all but 1 tablespoon fat. Add shallot, ginger, mustard seeds, and ½ teaspoon salt and cook over medium heat until shallot is softened, about 30 seconds. Stir in cranberries, sugar, water, and orange zest. Bring to simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until cranberries have mostly broken down and mixture is thickened, about 15 minutes. Off heat, stir in vinegar and any accumulated turkey juices. Remove twine from turkey and slice into ¼-inch-thick slices. Serve with chutney.

TYING A BONELESS TURKEY BREAST

After folding tapered end of turkey breast underneath, loosely tie breast lengthwise with kitchen twine to secure. Tie breast crosswise at ⅛-inch intervals to make tidy, even roast.
BAKED ZITI WITH CHARRED TOMATOES
SERVES 4

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS: Baked ziti, a hearty combination of pasta, tomato sauce, and gooey cheese, can be time-consuming and fussy, between making the sauce, boiling the pasta, and then assembling and baking the dish. We were looking to streamline this dish, achieving the same delicious results in less time and without watching over, and dirtying, a multitude of pots. Our first priority was the sauce. We used a hot cast-iron skillet to get a nice blisterly char on grape tomatoes, bringing a deep, caramelized flavor to the sauce. We further bolstered the sauce by sautéing garlic, red pepper flakes, and tomato paste with the charred tomatoes. We then mashed everything to a coarse consistency and diluted it with water so that we could cook the ziti right in the sauce. Cooking the ziti in the skillet with the sauce saved us from using an extra pot, and the starch released from the pasta during cooking helped thicken the sauce nicely. We finished the sauce by stirring in some basil and Parmesan. We then sprinkled the whole dish with mozzarella and broiled it in the oven. Being able to go from the stovetop to the broiler was another perk of the cast-iron pan, and the dish needed only 5 minutes in the oven for a perfectly melty, browned cheese layer on top. You can substitute penne for the ziti. Do not use fat-free mozzarella here.

1½ pounds grape tomatoes
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper
6 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon tomato paste
1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
12 ounces (3 1/4 cups) ziti
3 cups water, plus extra as needed
1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (1/2 cup)
1/4 cup chopped fresh basil
4 ounces mozzarella cheese, shredded (1 cup)

1 Adjust oven rack 6 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Heat 12-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat for 5 minutes. Toss tomatoes with oil and 1 teaspoon salt. Add tomatoes to skillet and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly charred and blistered, about 10 minutes. Stir in garlic, tomato paste, and pepper flakes and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Off heat, coarsely mash tomatoes using potato masher.

2 Stir in pasta and water and bring to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to vigorous simmer, cover, and cook, stirring often, until pasta is tender, 15 to 18 minutes.

3 Stir in Parmesan and adjust sauce consistency with extra hot water as needed. Stir in basil and season with salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle with mozzarella. Transfer skillet to oven and broil until cheese is melted and spotty brown, about 5 minutes. Serve.

VARIATION
Baked Ziti with Puttanesca Sauce
Add 2 anchovies, rinsed and minced, to skillet with garlic and increase pepper flakes to 1/2 teaspoon. Substitute 1/2 cup dry red wine for 1/2 cup of water in step 2. Substitute 1/4 cup minced fresh parsley for basil and stir 1/2 cup chopped pitted kalamata olives and 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed and minced, into cooked pasta with Parmesan.
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