

Classic Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding

Searing and slow roasting create crisply crusted, succulent beef

BY ANNE WILLAN

There is at least one good dish that has come out of England, and that's roast beef. Roast beef at my mother's house in England remains a celebration, the centerpiece of the family Sunday lunch or a winter dinner for friends. My home was in Yorkshire, the region famous for the best accompaniment to roast beef, Yorkshire pudding. The crisp cup of batter pudding filled with gravy was always at least as good as the meat itself. Other side dishes always included crisp potatoes, roasted until golden in drippings from the meat, and horseradish sauce made from the freshly grated root stirred into whipped cream.

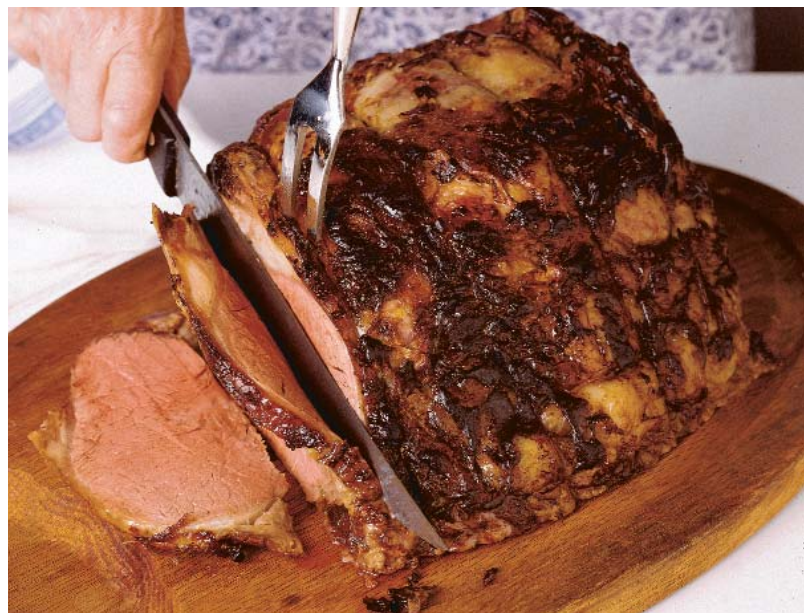
When I moved to the United States, I was delighted to find the beef here is as good as that from England. By buying the best meat available, roasting it carefully, and adding the traditional accompaniments, beef becomes a feast.



CARVING A RIB ROAST



1 Steady the roast with a large fork; slice with a long, sharp knife. Cut along the rib bones to remove them completely. (Serve them along with the slices of meat.)



2 After removing the bones, set the meat cut side down and cut vertical slices for a four- to seven-rib roast (pictured here). For a smaller roast, turn the meat on its side and slice horizontally.



Let the roast beef rest before serving to allow the juices to be redistributed.

SPLURGE ON A GREAT PIECE OF MEAT

My mother prefers sirloin roast, not to be confused with sirloin steak, for roasting. Cut from the loin, it comprises the shell as well as the tenderloin divided by a T-shaped bone. Common in England, the cut is hard to find in the United States, although I have seen it. A rib roast, which is also cut from the loin, makes a wonderful roast as well and is widely available here. Other cuts suitable for roasting include top round, rump, and the outsized steamship round, but they are tougher than rib roast and so need to be cooked carefully and sliced thin.

Keep the bones in for maximum flavor. A boneless roast may be easier to carve, but I find the bones add flavor and keep the meat moist. Cutting out bones also severs the muscle fibers, so valuable juices can escape during cooking. When buying a bone-in roast, allow at least $\frac{3}{4}$ pound per person; for a boneless roast, allow $\frac{1}{2}$ pound per person. I almost always buy a larger roast not only because the small ones tend to shrink, but also because leftover roast beef makes wonderful sandwiches the next day.

When buying your roast, eye the meat and check its label. Only a small percentage of meat is stamped prime, the highest grade, and much of that

is sold directly to restaurants. Prime (if you can find it) or choice, the next grade, are well worth the cost.

For a real treat, go to a specialty butcher who stocks beef that has been aged for flavor for two weeks or more on the carcass. During aging, enzymes begin to break down the meat's fibers, making it more tender. My mother still looks for the dryish cut surface that indicates well-aged beef, though nowadays almost all meat looks moist from having been frozen or stored in plastic cryovac bags.

Look for beef that's well marbled, meaning that it has heavy streaks of internal fat. This fat helps baste the meat while it cooks, keeping it moist and adding to its flavor. The roast should be trimmed of the bluish sinews and excess fat, but be sure you're left with a thin layer of surface fat to keep the roast moist.

Once you've selected your roast, store it in the refrigerator for up to three days before cooking it. If you've had to buy a frozen roast, thaw it in the refrigerator four to six hours per pound before roasting.

PREPARE THE ROAST AND PICK THE RIGHT PAN

The beef needs only a little preparation before it's ready to roast. For a boneless cut, truss it into a

Savory side dishes for roast beef

Accompaniments to authentic British roast beef never vary: Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes, and horseradish sauce or hot mustard, or both.

Yorkshire pudding resembles a popover that has been richly irrigated with drippings from the roast. It is traditionally served before the meal to cut the appetite, but many families enjoy it with the roast (see recipe at right).

Potatoes are another integral part of the meal, and they should be roasted in some of the drippings from the roast beef. To make the potatoes extra crispy, parboil peeled potatoes and roughen them with a fork before roasting.

Horseradish sauce adds piquancy to the plate. To make an English horseradish sauce, grate a heaping tablespoon of fresh horseradish root. Whisk a



Crisp, savory Yorkshire pudding has the best texture when made in large muffin tins.

scant cup of heavy cream until it holds soft peaks, and then stir in the horseradish, salt, pepper, and the juice of half a lemon. If you substitute bottled horseradish, use about 3 tablespoons.

Yorkshire Pudding

For a crisper pudding, replace $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the milk with water. Yields 12 puddings.

*1 cup flour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
Freshly ground black pepper
2 eggs*

*$\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{3}{4}$ cups milk
3 to 4 Tbs. drippings from the roasting pan (supplement the drippings with vegetable oil or lard if necessary)*

Put the flour, salt, and pepper to taste in a large bowl and make a well in the center. Add the eggs and about a quarter of the milk to the well and whisk until mixed. Stir in the flour from the sides of the well until you have a smooth, stiff batter. Stir in half of the remaining milk. Cover the batter and let it stand at room temperature for about $\frac{1}{2}$ hour.

Using a bulb baster or a spoon, pour 1 to 2 tsp. of the drippings

into each cup of 12 large (1-cup size) muffin tins. Put the tins in the oven on a rack above the roast beef. Meanwhile, stir enough of the remaining milk into the batter to make it the consistency of heavy cream.

When the drippings in the muffin tins are very hot, pour the batter into the tins, filling them about one-third full; the batter should sizzle in the hot fat. Return the tins to the oven and bake. The puddings are done when puffed, browned, and crisp, 25 to 30 min. They are best served hot out of the oven, but they can be kept warm in a low oven for about 15 min.

compact shape by tying loops around it with twine; bone-in roasts need no trussing. If there is much exposed lean muscle, you may want to wrap a layer of fat (called barding fat and available from some butchers) around the roast and secure it with string. Some British cooks dry marinate their beef with a mixture of dry mustard, sugar, and Dijon mustard. The roast is then refrigerated for at least two hours to allow the flavors to penetrate. Salt the roast only just before putting it in the oven; otherwise, the salt will draw out the juices too early, making a wet surface that would prevent proper browning.

The size of the pan should suit the roast so that the meat neither stews in too small a pan, nor dries and shrinks in one too large. The pan should have a heavy bottom and sides about two inches high,

which retain the meat's drippings but don't shield the meat from the dry heat of the oven.

Some people use a rack to keep the meat from scorching on the pan's hot surface, but I find the rib bones act as a natural rack. Always keep the fat side up; as the fat renders, it also helps to baste the meat. To keep the meat moist, I baste it often.

SEARING CREATES A CRUST TO SEAL IN JUICES

My mother likes to roast her beef in a moderate oven, allowing the heat to penetrate slowly—a method that works especially well for cheaper cuts that toughen in high heat. When I cook a premium roast, however, I favor searing the meat for about 15 minutes in a 450°F oven to form a crisp crust that seals the juices into the meat. (Some food scientists

say the seal is a fallacy, but they haven't cooked as many roasts as I have.) I then lower the temperature to 350° for the rest of the cooking time.

Once in the oven, a roast is like a baby—it cannot be left alone. Baste the roast with its drippings every 10 to 15 minutes. To tell when her roast is ready, my mother eyeballs it and gives it a poke. I am somewhat less instinctive. I stick a metal skewer into the center of the meat, where it cooks the slowest. After 30 seconds, I pull out the skewer and touch it to my wrist. If the skewer is cold, the meat is undercooked; if warm, it is rare; if hot, it is well done. The most reliable way to test if meat is done is to use a meat thermometer (see times and temperatures in the recipe).

The roast will continue to cook from its own heat when you take it from the oven, so allow for the internal temperature rising by a few degrees. The meat should rest for about 15 minutes on a cutting board before serving to allow the juices to be reabsorbed and to firm up the meat. While the meat is resting, make the gravy using the delicious caramelized juices that have stuck to the bottom of the roasting pan.

A traditional platter presentation of roast beef is part of the festivities. Like the Thanksgiving turkey, the roast beef platter, with Yorkshire puddings piled high at one end of the dish, roast potatoes on the other, and the meat in splendor in the center, is brought to the table with great fanfare. My mother, now 85, is still in charge of the carving. The crispy trimmings are hers by rights—carver's perks.

Traditional English Roast Beef

For a spicier marinade, add 2 teaspoons chili powder. Serves six to eight, with leftovers.

Standing rib roast with three to four ribs (7 to 8 lb.), trimmed
2 tsp. dry mustard
2 tsp. sugar
2 tsp. Dijon mustard
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Cut away any excess fat from the roast, but leave a thin layer. Combine the dry mustard, sugar, and Dijon

mustard and rub the mixture over the fat and the cut surfaces of the roast. Refrigerate the roast at least 2 hours or overnight.

Heat the oven to 450°F. Set the roast, rib side down, in a heavy, shallow roasting pan. (The ribs act as a natural rack.) Score the fat to encourage crispness. Sprinkle the roast with salt and pepper.

Sear the meat in the hot oven for 15 min. Lower the heat to 350° and cook, basting every 15 min., until done to your liking:

- ◆ **rare**—12 to 15 minutes per pound; 125° to 130°F internal temperature
- ◆ **medium**—15 to 18 minutes per pound; 140° to 145°F internal temperature
- ◆ **well done**—18 to 20 minutes per pound; 160° to 165°F internal temperature

Remove the roast from its pan and transfer to a platter. Let the roast rest for 15 min. under a tent of foil before carving.

Roast Beef Gravy

The key question with beef gravy is whether or not to thicken it with flour or to leave it as a thin but tasty *jus*. We always made flour-thickened gravy at home.

Caramelized juices from the roasting pan
2 Tbs. flour
2 cups beef stock or water
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

After removing the beef from the roasting pan, pour off all but 2 Tbs. of the fat, leaving the juices, which may have already caramelized to brown bits. Set the roasting pan on the stove over medium heat and, if necessary, simmer the juices until they darken to brown bits, 1 to 2 min.

Stir in the flour and cook, scraping up the caramelized bits with a spoon or whisk, until the flour is a deep, golden brown, about 3 min. Add the beef stock or water. Bring the gravy to a boil, stirring until it thickens. It should very lightly coat the back of a spoon. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Strain the gravy into a gravy boat and serve.

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Brussels sprouts add a touch of green, but roast beef takes center stage in this hearty winter meal.

Wine Choices



Subtly spicy reds enhance roast beef

A fine aged Burgundy, with its deep, woody aromas and subtle spice, would go perfectly with this classic roast beef feast. But these French wines can be hard to come by and even harder to afford. Thankfully, you can find excellent alternatives, at

better prices, closer to home.

Burgundy's Pinot Noir grape thrives in cool coastal areas, such as California's Carneros district (look for Saintsbury, Bouchaine, or Truchard), Sonoma's Russian River region, and Santa Barbara County. Oregon also turns out some very

high quality Pinots. Adelsheim, Amity, and Domaine Drouhin are all worth searching out.

For a winter holiday meal, a deep Bordeaux-style wine can be wonderful. To make this more intense wine work with this meal, choose one that's low in tannin, so as not to overpower the smooth, tender beef.

Merlot's tannins taste softer than those of Cabernet, so a Cabernet with Merlot blended in, a Bordeaux-style "meritage" blend

(try Estancia's, or "Trilogy" from Flora Springs), or a Merlot itself (look for Fetzer's "Eagle Peak" if you're watching the budget; Matanzas Creek if you're not) will likely taste far smoother than a full-fledged Cabernet. And since tannins soften over time, older wines work better than younger ones. —*Rosina Tinari Wilson is a food and wine writer and teacher based in the San Francisco area. She is a contributing editor for Fine Cooking.*