

MASTER CLASS

Making a Country Pâté

Generous seasoning and gentle cooking create a savory, succulent *pâté*



Author Katherine Alford loves a good country pâté for its smooth texture and complex flavor.



BY KATHERINE ALFORD

When I had my first taste of rich, moist country *pâté*, I immediately classified it as a luxury food. The sumptuous texture and complex flavor told me that this stuff must be expensive to buy and difficult to make. I was right on the first score but decidedly wrong on the second.

Years later I learned that, in spite of its elegant name, *pâté* is really just well-bred meatloaf—a simple mixture of seasoned ground meat gently

baked in a terrine mold. (Although the terms *pâté* and terrine once had distinct definitions, they're now both used to refer to this kind of dish.)

When I learned that *pâté* is actually better when made a few days in advance, I was completely converted. It now shows up frequently on my table as an elegant first course or as a simple supper with earthy lentils and a green salad. Crusty bread is a must, as is a good Dijon mustard.

THE MEAT OF THE MATTER

The character of a *pâté* depends on the type of meat that's used and the way it's ground or chopped into

An ideal start to a meal: a slice of country pâté served with a crusty baguette, strong Dijon mustard, and vinegary cornichons.

Mix and season the meat well for a flavorful *pâté*



Cooked onions and wine contribute a sweet note. In a small skillet over moderate heat, sauté the onions or shallots in 2 tablespoons butter until sweet, 10 to 15 minutes. Add the white wine and simmer until the wine has reduced by about two-thirds. Transfer the onions to a large mixing bowl and set aside to cool.



Chicken livers add richness. Heat 1 tablespoon butter in a skillet over medium heat. Season the livers with salt and pepper; sauté until medium rare, about 3 minutes on each side. Let cool and chop into ½-inch pieces; reserve any juices. Set aside.



Fat back keeps the *pâté* moist. Chop the fat back into small chunks and then whip it in a food processor until creamy and smooth, or mince it fine with a sharp knife.

what is known as *forcemeat*. Pork is commonly used as a base for *pâtés* because it is tender and has a mild flavor. I like to add veal for delicacy and chicken livers to enhance the smooth texture and rich taste. While purists may swear that the most succulent *pâtés* are made from meats chopped by hand, I buy lean ground pork and veal from the supermarket and have been quite pleased with the results.

If you get hooked on making your own *pâtés*, you may want to try chopping the meat by hand for the added control it gives you over the texture, but for most cooks it's impractical. If you do chop the meat yourself, first trim away any fat or connective tissue.

Fat keeps the *pâté* moist.

Adding fat to the forcemeat makes the *pâté* smooth and moist. Some recipes rely on a majority of fat, and others use equal parts fat to lean, but I've found that one-third fat in proportion to lean makes a smooth-textured, rich *pâté* that isn't at all greasy. Anything less than one-third fat will make an overly lean *pâté* that is mealy, dry, and crumbles when sliced.

The best fat to use is dense fat back (the pure white pork fat without any streaks of meat). It may be difficult to find at the grocery store, but fat back

should be available at any good butcher shop. Whip the fat in a food processor until it's creamy before adding it to the ground pork and veal. You can also mince it by hand, but your *pâté* won't be as smooth.

Egg and flour hold the forcemeat together. A well-crafted *pâté* is dense and moist enough that it can be cut into ½-inch slices that don't fall apart. While the natural gelatin of the ground veal helps, the addition of a little egg and flour ensures that the forcemeat holds together.

Let the *pâté* sit overnight
so the flavors
blend and mellow.

SEASON IT WELL

Seasoning a *pâté* to your own taste is one of the rewards of a homemade terrine. With just a slight change in the flavorings—adding pungent juniper berries or a rich Madeira—a basic meat mixture can take on a very different personality. The key to seasoning a *pâté* is to remember that no one flavor should dominate, but that the flavors should blend for a well-balanced, vivid taste.

A typical seasoning used in terrines is a spice blend known as *quatre épices*—four spices—generally composed of pepper, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, or ginger. Individual recipes, however, reflect the cook's palate. For example, I don't care for the strong



Flour and an egg bind it all together. Add the pork, veal, chopped fat back, egg, and flour to the sautéed onions.



Stir well for a smooth-textured pâté. Mix everything together with a wooden spoon until thoroughly combined.



Season well. Add the cognac, ham, pistachios, spice mix, and chopped chicken livers with their juices.

taste of cloves and prefer to substitute the rounded flavor of allspice. It's best to make your own mix by grinding whole spices to a fine powder in a spice mill rather than to use lackluster, commercially ground spices. Ginger is an exception: use dried ground ginger in this recipe. Fresh ginger would overpower the other spices.

Slowly cooked onions or shallots are standard, as is a shot of cognac, Madeira, or sherry, which brings a distinctive edge to the taste of the *pâté*. Dried herbs, such as sage, thyme, savory, and bay leaf, can complement the sweet taste of pork. For an intense, earthy taste, add minced dried porcini or morels; for an unforgettable *pâté*, finish it off with black truffles.

Salt is essential to a well-seasoned *pâté*. *Pâtés* are served cold (or allowed to come up to room temperature), and a basic tenet of seasoning is that cold temperatures mute flavors; therefore, cold foods require more salt than hot foods. Two to three teaspoons kosher salt for 1½ pounds meat should be enough to make a full-flavored terrine.

Before assembling your terrine, check the seasoning. Make a small patty of the seasoned forcemeat and gently sauté it in a little butter. Let the patty cool and then taste it—it should be quite full flavored at this point. Don't worry if it seems too strong: the seasonings will mellow as the *pâté* bakes and later as it rests.

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

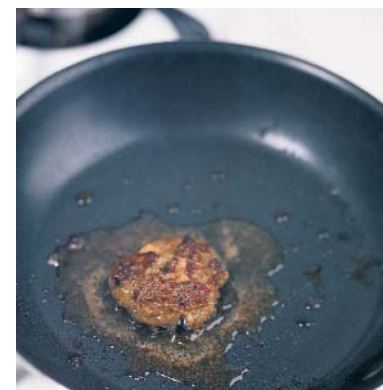
Although there are special terrine pans specifically designed for making *pâtés*, you can use nearly any heavy pan and cover it with aluminum foil. See the sidebar on p. 60 for pan options.

Line the pan with an insulating layer of fat to keep the *pâté* from drying as it bakes. Traditionally, terrines are lined with thin sheets of pork fat back, which baste the meat as it cooks. Slicing large sheets of pork fat by hand is very difficult, so ask your butcher to do it for you. Alternatively, use thin slices of bacon or pancetta, as we do here. Since American bacon is smoked, it's essential to blanch it before lining the mold, or its flavor will completely overwhelm the *pâté*. When using pork fat or bacon, I prefer to remove the lining strips before serving. Pancetta isn't smoked and is leaner than bacon, so it doesn't need to be blanched or removed before serving. It's a bit more expensive, but it contributes a dimension of flavor as well as a distinctive swirl pattern on the outside of the terrine.

CREATE A COLORFUL SLICE

I like to enhance the texture and flavor of a country *pâté* with crunchy nuts or bits of diced meats, such as ham or chicken livers. Adding these to the forcemeat (as we do here) gives an attractive mosaic look to the sliced *pâté*. Strips of ham or whole sautéed chicken livers can also be arranged

Test for taste



*Test the seasoning before you bake the *pâté*. Make a small patty of the meat mixture and fry it gently; let it cool and then taste it. Adjust the seasoning of the forcemeat if necessary.*

Line the mold to keep the *pâté* moist



Line the mold with overlapping slices of pancetta. Allow the excess to hang over the sides of the pan.



Gently press the forcemeat into the terrine mold to eliminate any air pockets. Fold the overhanging strips of pancetta over the top of the meat.



Bake slowly and gently. Seal with foil or a lid and set the terrine in a roasting pan. Fill the pan with enough hot water to come halfway up the sides of the terrine. Bake in a 350°F oven until the internal temperature reaches 160°F, about 1 hour and 50 minutes. Remove from the oven and let the *pâté* cool to room temperature in the water bath.

in the middle of the terrine for a more dramatic decorative pattern.

COVER THE TERRINE AND BAKE IT GENTLY

High heat and quick cooking will cause the *pâté* to shrink and dry out. Moderate the heat by covering the terrine with foil or a tight-fitting lid and baking it in a water bath. Even with the oven at 350°F, the water bath ensures that the temperature surrounding the terrine never rises above 212°F. At this moderate temperature, the *pâté* will take close to two hours to cook. When done, the meat will be floating in its rendered juices. Remove the terrine from the oven and let it cool to room temperature in the water bath before pouring off the excess liquid.

Weight the terrine to enhance the texture and flavor. When the *pâté* has cooled, set up a makeshift press to compact the meat and give the terrine a dense texture. Under this weight, the *pâté* should rest in the refrigerator for at least 24 hours and up to three days—a step known as ripening. As it rests, a fantastic transformation of flavor takes place, and the terrine emerges richer and more complex than when it first came out of the oven.

Before serving, slide the *pâté* from the mold and let it come to room temperature. If the cold *pâté* is reluctant to come out of the pan, simply warm the outside in water. Remove the bacon strips or fat back or, if you used pancetta, just run the terrine under warm water to rinse off any excess fat. If you're not serving the *pâté* right away, wrap it well and refrigerate it for five or six days. I don't recommend freezing *pâté*, as it gets waterlogged when defrosted.

Choose any heavy pan



You don't need to spend a fortune on a special terrine dish (the white covered pan above). Any heavy pan that conducts heat slowly, such as one made from ceramic, enamel, earthenware, or glass, will create a moist *pâté*. Avoid metal pans, as they'll conduct the heat too aggressively. The container doesn't even need to be a loaf shape. I think there's something charming about a homey, round *pâté*.

Press the terrine to give it a dense texture



Weight the terrine to firm the texture. When the pâté is cool, pour off any excess juices. Fit a clean pan on top of the pâté and fill it with 1 to 2 pounds of cans. Secure the cans with thick rubber bands or masking tape and refrigerate for at least 24 hours.



The pâté should slide easily from the mold. If not, run a knife around the edge to loosen it, or warm the pan briefly in water.



Rinse the pâté quickly to remove any congealed juices. Dry it with paper towels. Bacon or strips of fat back, if used, should be removed.

Country Pâté with Pistachios

Yields one 8-inch loaf or 6-inch round.

*1 cup minced onions or shallots
3 Tbs. unsalted butter
½ cup dry white wine
¼ lb. chicken livers, trimmed of any visible fat
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
½ lb. fat back
½ lb. ground pork
½ lb. ground veal
1 large egg
2 Tbs. flour
3 Tbs. cognac or brandy
½ cup diced ham
¼ cup skinned pistachio nuts*

FOR THE SPICE MIX:

*2 tsp. kosher salt
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
½ tsp. freshly ground allspice
½ tsp. freshly ground coriander
¼ tsp. freshly ground nutmeg
½ tsp. dried ground ginger*

TO LINE THE TERRINE:

¾ lb. pancetta, blanched bacon, or fat back, sliced thin

For the procedure, follow the photos starting on p. 58.

VARIATION

For a variation of taste and texture, omit the pistachios, substitute the following herbs and spices, and purée the raw chicken livers and add them to the forcemeat.

*2 tsp. kosher salt
1 tsp. dried thyme
1 tsp. dried savory
½ tsp. dried sage
1 bay leaf
½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
¼ tsp. freshly ground nutmeg*

Grind the herbs and spices together and add them to the forcemeat.

A well-chilled pâté is easiest to slice



Pâté tastes best when served at room temperature. Cut the cold pâté into ½-inch slices and let them sit for about 30 minutes to let the full flavor develop.

Katherine Alford learned to make pâté in France. Now the mere taste of a good one transports her from her life as a food teacher and writer in New York City back to Paris' Left Bank. ♦