

Steak

A ruby-rare steak napped with buttery sauce is classic and comforting bistro fare, be it steak frites with a sharp béarnaise, entrecôte au poivre with a peppery bite or a simple rib steak with a red wine reduction.



Steak With Red Wine Sauce

TIME: 35 MINUTES

YIELD: 4 SERVINGS

Kosher salt, as needed

Freshly ground black pepper, as needed

1½ pounds boneless steak, or 1¾ pounds bone-in steak (1½ inches thick)

2 shallots

2½ tablespoons unsalted butter

½ teaspoon neutral oil, such as grapeseed

2 tablespoons good brandy, preferably Cognac

⅓ cup dry red wine

⅓ cup beef or chicken stock, preferably homemade

1 tablespoon chopped chives

Watercress, for serving

1. Generously sprinkle salt and pepper all over steaks, then let steaks rest uncovered for 15 minutes at room temperature. Meanwhile, mince the shallots.
2. Melt ½ tablespoon butter and the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until almost smoking. Add steaks and cook until done to taste, about 3 to 4 minutes per side for rare and a little longer for medium-rare or medium. (Bone-in steaks take a few minutes longer to cook through than boneless.) If the pan begins to smoke or burn, lower the heat. Transfer steaks to a plate to rest while you prepare the sauce.
3. Add shallots to the skillet and cook over medium heat until lightly browned, about 1 minute. Add brandy to the skillet and use a long-handled match or igniter to set the brandy on fire. (Stand back when you do this.) Let flames die out, then add red wine and cook until reduced and syrupy, 2 to 4 minutes. Add stock and boil until reduced and thickened, 3 to 4 minutes longer.
4. Remove pan from heat and whisk in remaining 2 tablespoons butter and the chives. Serve steaks and sauce immediately with watercress.

TECHNIQUES AND TIPS

Choosing and Cooking the Steak

■ The French butcher the cow differently from the English and Americans. They divide tough and tender meats, creating high-quality cuts like fillets from the sirloin region (chateaubriand being the thickest, then tournedos, faux filet and the thinnest, filet mignon) and entrecôte from the fore rib region. One of the most desired cuts is the onglet (hanger steak), from just below the sirloin region.

This said, you can use any good steak in this recipe, either a boneless or bone-in cut. Boneless cuts take less time to cook, so start checking them for doneness before you'd check bone-in meat. Filet mignon, cut from the tenderloin, will give you the softest and most tender meat, but has less fat (and less flavor) than other cuts. Rib-eye and other sirloin cuts are a little chewier, but have a deeper, beefier flavor. You could also use a thinner steak (hanger, strip, flank), but watch them closely so they don't overcook.

■ You need some fat on your steak. Look for marbling. Fat equals flavor, both for the meat itself and also for the pan sauce.

■ Seasoning the steak at least 15 minutes before cooking (and up to 24 hours if you keep it in the refrigerator) gives the meat time to absorb the salt evenly. If you season it several hours ahead, you can press herbs, minced garlic or both all over the surface of the steak, then wipe it off just before cooking so nothing burns.

■ Cooking steak in butter gives the meat excellent flavor. But since butter can burn, it is often combined with a little grapeseed oil, which raises its smoking point. Or you can use all oil if you prefer. Clarified butter and ghee also work well.

■ For optimal browning, which results in a flavorful pan sauce, get your skillet very hot before adding the meat, letting it heat for at least 3 to 5 minutes. A drop of water should immediately



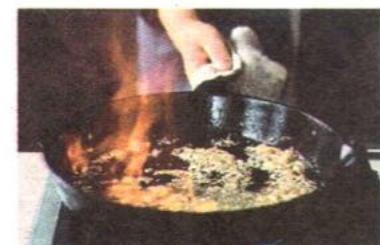
SEASONING THE STEAK.



BROWNING THE MEAT.



SLICING BEFORE SERVING.



PREPARING THE SAUCE.

sizzle when flicked into the pan.

■ The timing of your steak depends on the skillet, your stove and the temperature of the meat when it hits the pan. For rare steak, cook to 120 degrees; medium-rare is 130 degrees. Learn how meat cooked to those temperatures feels when you tap its surface with your fingers, and then use that to guide you in future cooking. For medium-rare, the meat should offer some resistance but not feel firm, which indicates a well-done steak. Rare meat is a bit softer.

■ Rest your steaks before slicing them. Put the meat on a cutting board and tent with foil. Let it sit for 5 to 10 minutes. This helps the meat reabsorb the juices and will also raise the temperature slightly. Do this every time you cook steak; it's always a good idea to keep those juices.

■ You must cook the steaks and the sauce in immediate succession, and just before serving. Once you start this recipe, there isn't much waiting around. If you're making this for a dinner party, do not start cooking the

steaks until all your guests arrive.

Making the Sauce

■ The alcohol in wine and brandy helps dissolve and release the pan drippings, extracting their flavor. While you can also deglaze a pan with stock or water, it won't be as intensely flavorful. Much of the alcohol cooks off as the sauce simmers.

■ To quickly cook off much of the alcohol in the brandy, light it with a long match or igniter. Just make sure to step back before you do. The flame should die down in a few seconds. If you really don't want to set the alcohol on fire, you can simmer it down for a few minutes instead.

■ Letting the liquids in your pan simmer until they are thick and syrupy is central for getting a silky sauce. Be sure to let them reduce before whisking in the butter and any herbs.

■ If at any point your sauce separates and you can't seem to whisk it together into a smooth, emulsified liquid, scrape it into a blender and whirl it for a few seconds. That should fix it.

WHY MASTER IT?

THERE ARE FEW faster, easier and more impressive ways to get dinner on the table than to sauté a juicy steak over a hot flame, then whisking together a sauce from the coppery drippings at the bottom of the pan.

Although the technique for making pan sauce is used here with beef, it is easily adaptable to all sorts of meats, including pork, lamb, chicken, veal and even fish.

A proper pan sauce begins with browning the meat. The pan needs to be hot enough to sear the meat and cause the Maillard reaction, which is the caramelizing of the amino acids

and sugars in food.

After the meat is cooked to taste, it is removed from the pan, leaving behind a seared-on layer of browned bits called the fond. The fond is culinary gold, containing an incredible savory character that forms the foundation of the sauce. To access that meaty flavor, the fond needs to be dissolved into a liquid; this is called deglazing the pan. Technically, any liquid can be used, and water and stock frequently are. But something alcoholic and acidic, such as wine, is better at extracting the flavors.

A classic method of building a pan sauce, which we use here, is to develop the flavors in stages. First, brandy is used to deglaze the pan, then wine and stock are added and simmered down until syrupy. At the very end, butter is whisked into the pan to thicken the sauce, giving it a silky texture that helps it cling to the steak for serving. Other liquids can stand in for the brandy, wine and stock: fruit and vegetable juices, cream or milk, condiments like soy sauce and chile paste, vinegars and spirits.

Once you've learned this adaptable technique, you will always be able to whisk up a fast and pungent pan sauce from whatever fond your pan has produced.

A BRIEF HISTORY

SINCE THE EARLIEST BOVINES met the spears of our ancestors, steaks have been prepared pretty much the same way. The cuts were grilled over a fire to quickly sear what many consider to be the choicest part of the animal. Though we may use modern stoves, the goal is the same: to brown the outside of the meat while preserving its juiciness.

But the pan sauce is a different story. The first European sauces, dating to ancient times, were meant to balance out the qualities of other ingredi-

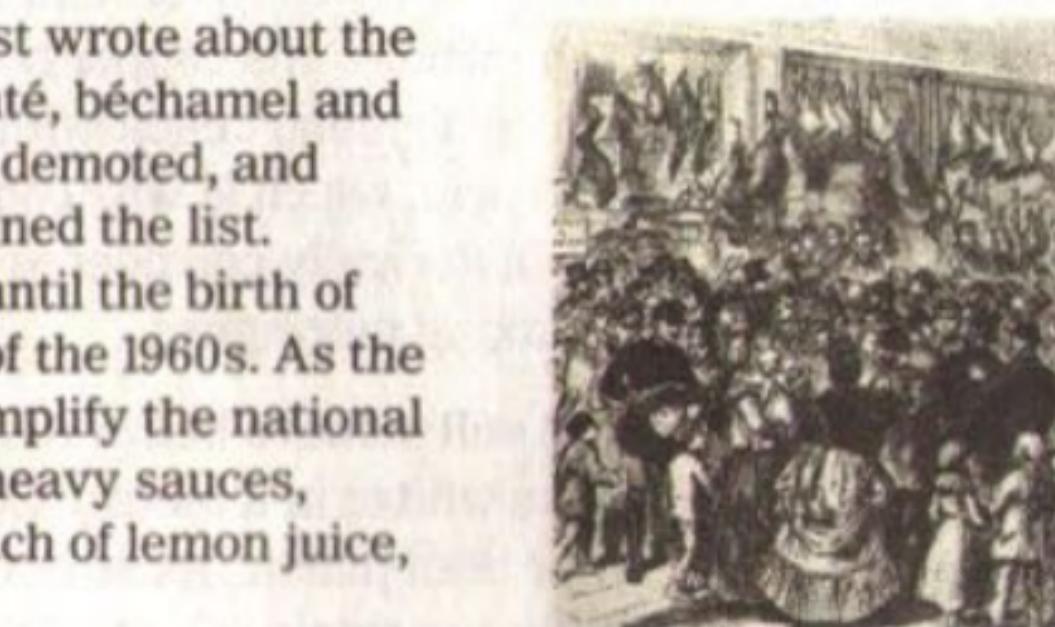
ents in the dish, in an effort to promote good health. Pork, thought to be inherently moist and cold, might be paired with spicy, acidic sauces, to avoid an upset of humors in the person eating it.

By the 17th century, a new French cuisine had begun to emerge. The focus shifted to enhancing the natural taste of foods, and cooks began to build sauces on the drippings in the pan. Over time, they became more voluptuous, beaten with butter, eggs and flour to achieve a thick consistency. In the

1830s, Marie-Antoine Carême first wrote about the

mother sauces: espagnole, velouté, béchamel and allemande. Allemande was later demoted, and tomato sauce and hollandaise joined the list.

The mother sauces reigned until the birth of the nouvelle cuisine movement of the 1960s. As the country's top chefs worked to simplify the national cuisine, they moved away from heavy sauces, turning instead to the lighter touch of lemon juice, butter and herbs.



A DEPICTION OF A PARIS PROVISION SHOP IN 1871, FROM THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS

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