

Glazed Meat Loaf

Say meat loaf and most Americans think 1950s comfort food and Mom, but this humble recipe has surprisingly elegant roots in a now-forgotten dish called "cannelon." A typical cannelon recipe from the "Fannie Farmer Original 1896 Boston Cooking-School Cook Book" calls for chopping and seasoning beef, shaping it into a log, and basting with melted butter as it bakes. It's easy to imagine cannelon served in the finest homes in Victorian-era America, along with Fannie Farmer's recommended Brown Mushroom Sauce. The wide availability of meat grinders and the advent of reliable refrigeration made ground beef a household staple in the early 20th century and meat loaf recipes gained wide circulation. But popularity rarely translates into perfection. My goal was to make meat loaf special again. BY KRIS WIDICAN

Over the years, meat loaves have been dressed up and down every which way. I tested recipes that used a range of ingredients and cooking methods. Some were OK, but none had everything my tasters and I wanted: moist meat, brawny beef flavor, classic seasonings, and a well-browned crust enhanced with a simple ketchup-based glaze. The one thing these early trials reaffirmed is the test kitchen's technique of cooking the meat loaf free-form; one and all, meat loaves baked in pans emerged with greasy, mushy undersides.

Many recipes rely on meat loaf mix, a blend of ground chuck, pork, and veal available in most supermarkets. Loaves made from this blend can be good, but because the mix varies from store to store, it yields inconsistent results. I wanted something more reliable, so I tried an all-beef meat loaf made from ground sirloin. This loaf had good meaty flavor—so good



that it now tasted too much like a burger. Cutting the ground beef with an equal portion of sweet ground pork (ground veal isn't as readily available) balanced the beefy flavor. The traditional seasonings of salt, pepper, Dijon mustard, Worcestershire sauce, and parsley emerged as clear favorites—especially when mixed with sautéed onion and garlic.

The meat loaf now had great flavor, but it was dry and crumbly. Eggs were the obvious binder; two eggs, plus an extra yolk for richness, proved perfect. We sometimes use a panade (a paste of milk and bread or crackers) to add moisture to meat loaves and meatballs, so I tested different versions. My tasters preferred the mild saltiness of the panade made with milk and saltines to those that contained bread, bread crumbs, or raw oats. Combining the panade in a food processor and then pulsing it with the meat gave the

loaf the most cohesive, tender texture.

I had been following test kitchen protocol, letting the meat loaf bake to near doneness before turning on the broiler and brushing on an easy glaze of brown sugar and ketchup. But the top and sides of the loaf beaded with moisture in the oven, preventing a flavorful crust from forming. And without a dry, textured crust, the glaze slid off before it could caramelize and thicken. After several fruitless tests fiddling with baking and broiling specifics, a colleague suggested I broil the meat loaf before glazing and baking, to evaporate the surface moisture that was inhibiting the formation of a crust. This worked beautifully, and the browned crust gave the glaze—applied twice for extra effect—something to hang onto. Combined with the tender, flavorful meat, this made for one heck of a meat loaf.