

Crispy Pan-Fried Pork Chops

In search of an easy way to build big flavor, we revisited an old-fashioned cooking method: pan-frying.

Was it time to bring it back? BY MEGHAN ERWIN

ORDER A PAN-FRIED pork chop at a family-style restaurant in the South and what you're served is a thing of beauty. Bone-in pork chops are dredged in highly seasoned flour and given a quick fry in lots of sizzling fat, traditionally bacon fat. At their best, the chops have a juicy, meaty interior set off by a thick, highly seasoned crust. For some reason, this no-fuss method has fallen out of favor with home cooks.

Is it because recipes can be maddeningly vague? "Season pork chop, cook in frying oil until done." Other recipes I found called for gobs of bacon fat, harkening back to a time when cooks kept coffee cans of the stuff by their stoves. Dredging a chop, then sliding it into a pan of hot fat (more fat than with searing, less than with deep-frying) seems straightforward. In fact, when I tried it, a few real challenges emerged. For one, that crispy crust kept chipping off. Also, the seasonings in many recipes proved musty, salty, or unbalanced. Finally, without the can of fat, the flavor of the chops left a lot to be desired.

Simply dredging the pork chops in flour, as most recipes instruct, produced a spotty, insubstantial crust that wouldn't stay put. I tried dipping them in buttermilk first, but the tang was a distraction, so I went back to the simple flour dredge. After several unsuccessful test

batches, I noticed that the coatings on the dredged chops that sat around for a few minutes were getting a little wet and gummy. The test kitchen has had success letting floured chicken rest (just 10 minutes is enough) before dredging and frying. The second dredge makes for a sturdier, more substantial crust. Sure enough, my double-dipped chops emerged from the pan with a hefty, crisp, golden brown crust.

But the crust didn't taste like much. I added seasoned salt to the flour (too dusty and lacking punch), then supermarket spice mixes (musty and stale tasting). I tried making my own spice mix and went a little overboard concocting an elaborate 10-spice blend. Tasters eventually pared it down to the essentials: garlic powder, paprika, salt, pepper, and cayenne. Applying the spices directly to the meat, rather than adding them to the flour, let me season the chops more thoroughly.

I'd been frying the pork chops in ½ cup vegetable oil—just enough to come about halfway up the sides of the chops. As a nod to older recipes, a colleague suggested I render some bacon and use the fat to flavor the oil. Augmenting the oil with the fat from three slices of bacon gave the cooked chops a depth of smoky flavor that, combined with the garlicky, golden crust, had tasters licking their chops.

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE Curly Chops

Pork chops—especially thin-cut chops—have a tendency to curl as they cook. When exposed to the high heat of the pan, the ring of fat and connective tissue that surrounds the exterior tightens, causing the meat to buckle and curl. To prevent it, we cut two slits about 2 inches apart through the fat and connective tissue on each chop.



BUCKLED CHOP: NO SLITS



FLAT CHOP: SLITS CUT



A shallow pan-fry yields a beautifully browned, moist pork chop and a fast weeknight supper.

PAN-FRIED PORK CHOPS Serves 4

Chops between ¾ and 1 inch thick will work in this recipe.

- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon paprika
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 4 bone-in rib or center cut pork chops, about ¾ inch thick
- 3 slices bacon, chopped
- ½ cup vegetable oil

1. COAT CHOPS Combine garlic powder, paprika, salt, pepper, and cayenne in bowl. Place flour in shallow dish. Pat chops dry with paper towels. Cut 2 slits about 2 inches apart through fat on edges of each chop. Season both sides of chops with spice mixture, then dredge chops lightly in flour (do not discard flour). Transfer to plate and let rest 10 minutes.

2. RENDER BACON Meanwhile, cook bacon in large nonstick skillet over medium heat until fat renders and bacon

is crisp, about 8 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer bacon to paper to lined plate and reserve for another use. Do not wipe out pan.

3. FRY CHOPS Add oil to fat in pan and heat over medium-high heat until just smoking. Return chops to flour and turn to coat. Cook chops until browned, 3 to 4 minutes per side. S

BBQ PAN-FRIED PORK CHOP!

Prepare Pan-Fried Pork Chops, replacing first five ingredients with 3 tablespoons light brown sugar, 1 teaspoon garlic powder, 1 teaspoon paprika, ½ teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon dry mustard, ¼ teaspoon ground cumin, and ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper.

HERBED PAN-FRIED PORK CHOP

Prepare Pan-Fried Pork Chops, replacing first five ingredients with ½ teaspoon dried marjoram, ½ teaspoon dried thyme, ¼ teaspoon dried basil, ¼ teaspoon dried rosemary (crumbled), ¼ teaspoon dried sage, pinch ground fennel, and 1 teaspoon salt.