

Crunchy Chili Oil

Makes about 1 1/2 cups

Just as you can tell a good deli by its rye bread, I think the quality of a Sichuan restaurant is revealed by its chili oil. The best ones have small pots of the fiery stuff on every table, the salty oil glowing neon orange and floating with flaky, seedy bits, almost too hot to eat. While I have no intention of opening a Sichuan restaurant, I do think that this Crunchy Chili Oil is pretty damn good.

The peanut oil is the real hero in this recipe; since it arrives roasty and toasty, you're already halfway to something really delicious. You can also use another neutral oil with a high smoke point, such as grapeseed, vegetable, or canola, if you don't want to use peanut oil, adding a splash of toasted sesame oil for more flavor.

I really enjoy the crunchy, flaky, almost gritty (in a good way) texture that the sizzled seeds and flakes bring to the table, and I really think that's what makes this one so special. During the cooking process, a lot of the heat in the actual chile flakes and peppercorns is tamed, meaning you can stir up the settled bits and eat them with wild abandon. That said, if you're not accustomed to the mouth-numbing tingle of the Sichuan peppercorn, start with less and work your way up to more.

There's always a large jar of this oil in my fridge so I can put it on nearly everything I eat, in the way most people use Sriracha. I toss it with cold buckwheat noodles, spoon it over lackluster takeout, and drizzle it into soups like the one with chicken, celery, and mushrooms on page 219. It's especially good as a dressing for cold, crispy vegetables like kohlrabi and cucumbers (page 61), whisked into tahini and soy sauce

for an insanely delicious dressing, or simply mixed with rice vinegar and tossed with steamed greens.

3/4 cup unrefined peanut oil (grapeseed or vegetable oil will also work)
1/4 cup crushed red pepper flakes or Aleppo pepper
1/4 cup black or white sesame seeds, or 2 tablespoons of each
2 to 3 tablespoons Sichuan peppercorns, chopped
4 garlic cloves, thinly sliced (optional)
Kosher salt

Heat the peanut oil, red pepper flakes, sesame seeds, Sichuan peppercorns, and garlic, if using, in a small pot over the lowest heat possible. Let it come to a simmer (all the bits in the pot will start to sizzle) and cook until the red pepper flakes are a dark brick red and the sesame seeds are golden brown and toasted (if using black sesame seeds, you will start to smell them toasting), 15 to 20 minutes. Remove from the heat and add several generous pinches of salt. Let cool completely before chilling.

DO AHEAD: Chili oil can be made 1 month ahead and stored in a (preferably glass) jar in the fridge.

Everything Seed Mixture

Makes about 1/2 cup

There are so many "everything" puns to be made here, but I will spare you. While perfect on a just-opened avocado, this Everything Seed Mixture can be used to doctor store-bought pita or lavash (brush with oil, scatter over, and bake till crispy), sprinkled over whipped ricotta for dipping, or serve dusted on top of roasted vegetables. I like to toss these seeds into salads

for a salty crunch and pops of flavor from the caraway, and to top baked potatoes with sour cream. Point is, keep it on hand and you'll find a way to use it... on everything (get it?).

3 tablespoons white sesame seeds
3 tablespoons black sesame seeds
2 tablespoons caraway seeds
1 tablespoon poppy seeds
2 tablespoons granulated or dehydrated onion (optional)
1 tablespoon flaky sea salt

Place the white sesame seeds, black sesame seeds, caraway seeds, and poppy seeds in a small skillet. Toast them over medium heat until the sesame seeds are golden brown and the caraway is fragrant, about 3 minutes (don't walk away here; sesame seeds burn super quickly, especially around the edges of the skillet). Remove from the heat and add the onion (if using) and salt. Let cool completely before storing in jars.

DO AHEAD: This can be made 1 month ahead and stored at room temperature.

Fresh Za'atar

Makes about 1/2 cup

Za'atar is a Middle Eastern spice blend made of thyme, sesame seeds and, more often than not, ground sumac. Because the quality, texture, and type of za'atar will vary depending on where you buy it, I find it useful to just make my own (especially should I have extra thyme on my hands—literally), keeping it next to flaky sea salt as a part of my seasoning arsenal. The salt and sumac act as a sort of salty/sour dream team together in any circumstance (like with the melons on page 99), but thyme brings the fresh herbiness and toasted sesame anchors the

whole thing with a deeply savory, nutty flavor.

Use this as you would use the store-bought stuff, which is to say, use it on everything. It'll be your best friend come summer (it's perfect on raw tomatoes and nearly all grilled produce during the hotter months), but it's also great as a winter pick-me-up, dusted over roasted chicken or seared fish, sprinkled over smashed root vegetables, and, of course, served with butter-tossed radishes (page 58) any time of year. While the thyme will dry out (this is not a bad thing), this fresh za'atar will keep for up to a month at room temperature stored in an airtight container.

1/4 cup raw white or black sesame seeds
1/4 cup fresh thyme leaves, coarsely chopped
2 tablespoons ground sumac
Kosher salt

Toast the sesame seeds in a small skillet over medium heat, tossing constantly until they're fragrant and golden brown, about 4 minutes. Remove the skillet from the heat and add the thyme and sumac, tossing to combine. Season with salt and let cool completely before transferring it to a storage container.

Another Salsa Verde

Makes 2 cups

With all the salsa verde recipes out there, it seems silly to contribute yet another one to the world, I know. However, I would be remiss not to include a recipe for this one, since it truly is my favorite condiment. It's the perfect confluence of zesty, herby, salty, and oily that seems to be the

answer to the question you might ask of almost any dish that's not quite hitting all the notes for you: "What is this missing?" It makes boring fish exciting, dry meat edible, and leftovers (like the cold garlicky pasta on page 161) delicious again. It can be thinned with more lemon juice or vinegar and used as a makeshift salad dressing, or spread onto overly crusty bread to become the ultimate sandwich savior (not all heroes wear capes).

While the concept of salsa verde is basically the same wherever you go (chopped herbs, olive oil, some form of acid, and maybe shallot or another allium), there are endless ways to customize it. Mix up the herbs depending on the season and whatever you have in abundance, make it spicy with fresh or dried chiles, use garlic instead of shallot, add some salty anchovies or Asian fish sauce. Go wild. While I prefer the rustic look and coarser texture of everything chopped by hand, this is definitely an instance where a food processor comes in handy, so feel free to use that instead of going the old-school route (just know you'll get a more emulsified, finely chopped salsa verde).

1/2 small shallot, finely chopped
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, red wine vinegar, or white wine vinegar, plus more as needed
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 cups tender herbs, such as parsley, cilantro, chives, and/or mint (pick one or mix them), finely chopped (see Note)
3/4 cup olive oil

Combine the shallot and lemon juice in a medium bowl and season with salt and pepper. Let it sit for 5 minutes or so (this slightly pickles the shallot and takes a bit of the oniony edge off). Stir in the herbs

and oil, and season again with salt, pepper, and lemon juice, if needed. If you like, add anything from the following list, or keep it simple, keep it classy.

NOTE: If using a food processor, leave the herbs whole. Process them until they're finely chopped, then pulse a few times with the olive oil, salt, and pepper. Transfer to a bowl and stir in the shallot-lemon mixture, season again with salt and pepper, and adjust the lemon juice, if necessary.

THINGS TO STIR IN AT THE END, IF YOU LIKE

4 anchovy fillets, finely chopped
1/2 lemon, seeds removed, finely chopped
1 serrano chile, with or without seeds, finely chopped
2 teaspoons Aleppo pepper (if you have it—and you should have it) or 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes or hot smoked paprika
1 or 2 garlic cloves, finely grated
1 tablespoon soy sauce or Worcestershire sauce

DO AHEAD: This can be made 5 days ahead and refrigerated in a glass jar or resealable container.

Green Romesco

Makes 2 cups

For all you romesco purists out there with pitchforks, yes, I know this can't possibly be a real romesco because it lacks both tomato and red pepper, but I use this garlicky, paprika-y sauce just like I would a "real" romesco: dragging thin slices of steak through it, topping crispy-skinned salmon and radishes (page 175) with it, thinning it with olive oil to toss with beans (page 141), and eating it with every grilled, steamed, or roasted vegetable

Caramelized Winter Squash with Toasted Coconut Gremolata

Serves 4

SQUASH

2 medium winter squash, such as
delicata or acorn (1½ to 2 pounds)
3 tablespoons coconut oil, melted,
or olive oil
1 tablespoon honey
Kosher salt and freshly ground black
pepper

TOASTED COCONUT GREMOLATA

¾ cup unsweetened coconut chips
¼ cup finely chopped fresh chives
½ cup fresh cilantro, tender leaves and
stems, finely chopped
1 tablespoon finely grated lemon zest
2 teaspoons Aleppo pepper or
1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
flakes
Kosher salt

DO AHEAD: Everything but the coconut
can be made 1 day ahead; when ready
to serve, toast the coconut and add it
to the chive mixture (toasted coconut
will start to soften once mixed with the
herbs and refrigerated).

I ate a lot of squash with brown sugar and butter while growing up. This recipe is my more practical “I can’t have ice cream for every meal” compromise, using honey instead of brown sugar and coconut oil instead of butter. I would probably eat this as dinner on its own, but I happen to know it’s also great as a side with things like roasted chicken or pork chops.

While tender, caramelized, salty-sweet squash is magnificent all on its own, it should be mentioned that the real reason for making this dish is for the toasted coconut gremolata: chips of nutty, unsweetened coconut tossed with herbs, lots of lemon zest, and a bit of Aleppo pepper. It’s wildly addictive, and there is no reason it couldn’t appear over roasted carrots, sprinkled onto a curry or stew, or even over salads as a stand-in for croutons.

1 ROAST THE SQUASH: Preheat the oven to 425°F.

2 Leaving the skin on, slice the squash into ½-inch-thick rings. (I roast my squash with the seeds still inside, because they get all crispy and I love the texture they bring to the table, but you can remove them if you like. Best way to do that is cut the squash in half crosswise and scoop out the seeds with a spoon, then slice into rings.)

3 Toss the squash with the coconut oil and honey on a rimmed baking sheet and season with salt and pepper. Roast, flipping the squash once, until it is completely tender, browned, and caramelized, 25 to 30 minutes.

4 MAKE THE GREMOLATA: While the squash is roasting, heat a small skillet over medium heat and add the coconut. Shake the skillet occasionally until the coconut is starting to brown at the edges and smells all toasty and amazing, 3 to 4 minutes. Place it in a medium bowl to cool completely.

5 Once the coconut has cooled, add the chives, cilantro, lemon zest, and Aleppo pepper, and season with salt. Using your fingers, mix this together until the oils in the lemon zest have released and everything is evenly distributed (especially the lemon zest, which can stubbornly clump up).

6 Sprinkle the coconut gremolata over the roasted squash and serve.



Roasted Sweet Potatoes with Hot Honey Browned Butter

Serves 4

4 small to medium sweet potatoes,
scrubbed
6 tablespoons (¾ stick) unsalted butter
2 tablespoons honey
1 tablespoon white wine vinegar or
apple cider vinegar
1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
Kosher salt and freshly ground black
pepper
Flaky sea salt

DO AHEAD: The hot honey browned butter can be made 5 days ahead and refrigerated. Rewarm in a small pot before using.

Doubling down on sweet potatoes' sweetness by adding honey is like adding fuel to the fire, but the nuttiness from the browned butter, heat from the crushed red pepper flakes, and bright acidity from the vinegar all work together to bring it back from the brink. Speaking of, this hot honey browned butter is so good that I would likely make myself sick if left alone with a pot of it. It's also good on roasted winter squash, over plain oatmeal, and, if we are being honest, probably over ice cream, but that's a different chapter.

1 Preheat the oven to 425°F.

2 Poke each sweet potato all over with a fork and place them all directly on the oven rack. Roast until they are impossibly tender, with bits of sweet potato sugar caramelizing in the spots they've been poked, 60 to 80 minutes.

3 Meanwhile, melt the butter in a small pot over medium heat, swirling the pot just until the butter starts to bubble and brown, about 5 minutes. Add the honey, vinegar, and red pepper flakes, and season with kosher salt and black pepper. Remove from the heat and set aside.

4 Once the sweet potatoes are out of the oven, slit them down the middle. Warm up the browned butter mixture and pour over the sweet potatoes (alternatively, scoop the flesh out of the skins and transfer it to a bowl or serving dish, then drizzle with the browned butter sauce). Sprinkle with tons of flaky sea salt.

A Perfect Tomato Recipe

While an obvious choice of vegetable, there's no recipe for tomato salad in this book. I've got, like, three broccoli salads, but hardly anything with fresh tomatoes. But they're the darling of the produce world! Everyone's favorite vegetable/fruit! This is not an oversight. If you've ever had a really awesome, ripe tomato, I want to know, what could possibly be better than cutting it in half, sprinkling it with salt, and eating it like an apple?

To be honest—and I know this will not be a popular opinion—I don't even think that they belong on sandwiches or in salads. So, with this in mind, you can see my frustration when, every summer, someone inevitably asks me to bring a tomato

salad to their barbecue. I oblige, of course, with this tomato recipe that I think is perfect:

Slice a bunch of tomatoes that are ripe, planning on about one tomato per person. Remember to eat one slice from each tomato. (What if one is bad? You'd want to know!)

Put the sliced tomatoes on the biggest plate you have and sprinkle them with good crunchy salt. Drizzle with enough olive oil to make it look like they are kind of swimming in it. If there are good fresh herbs around (chives, basil, parsley, and cilantro are my favorites), throw some on there. There you have it: a perfect tomato recipe.

The Best Baked Beans

Serves 6

¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons olive oil
4 ounces slab bacon, sliced into
½-inch pieces
1 medium yellow onion or 3 leeks,
white and light green parts,
thinly sliced
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 tablespoon fresh thyme, marjoram or
oregano leaves, coarsely chopped
¼ cup dry white wine
4 cups cooked beans (from Special
Beans in Tomato Broth, page 145)
or 3 (15-ounce) cans cannellini,
navy, or butter beans, drained and
rinsed
1 cup bean cooking liquid (or vegetable
or chicken broth)
½ cup finely grated Parmesan cheese
2 cups Fresh Bread Crumbs (page 24)

Disclaimer: These are not Boston Baked Beans. They are not sweet, and there is no ketchup. They are deeply savory, bacony, and cheesy, and have a delightfully crunchy topping. Maybe it's because I'm from California, but I think they are better than anything you can find in the Northeast. If you like things on the spicy side, feel free to add some crushed chiles to the beans or even the bread crumbs.

1 Preheat the oven to 400°F.

2 Heat ¼ cup olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the bacon and cook until it's starting to brown and lots of the fat has rendered out, 5 to 8 minutes. Add the onion and season with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is softened and deeply caramelized, 15 to 20 minutes. Add the garlic and thyme and cook a minute or two, just to soften and take the edge off. Add the wine and scrape up any bits on the bottom of the skillet. Cook until the wine has reduced by about half. Add the beans, their cooking liquid, and the Parmesan. Season with salt and lots of pepper. Transfer everything to a 2-quart baking dish.

3 Mix the bread crumbs with the remaining 2 tablespoons oil and season with salt and pepper. Scatter over the beans and bake until the beans are bubbling and the bread crumbs are golden, 30 to 35 minutes. Let cool slightly before eating.

Spicy, Garlicky White Beans

Serves 4

¼ cup olive oil or chicken fat
6 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
½ teaspoon fennel seed, crushed
(optional)
1 (15-ounce) can cannellini, navy, or
gigante beans, drained and rinsed
Kosher salt and freshly ground black
pepper

DO AHEAD: Beans can be made 5 days ahead and refrigerated. Rewarm slowly before eating.

Yes, cooking dried beans from dried is great and all (especially simmered with slab bacon and tomatoes) but sometimes I just don't get it together in time to make that happen, and I don't believe I should be punished for that. The good news is that canned beans are cheap and widely available—Goya does a great job, and I hope they are around for many years, creating superlative canned bean products for all my weeknight needs. They also happen to be an excellent blank canvas for imparting other more interesting, bolder flavors like toasted chile and garlic. Slow cooking them in some super-flavorful fat (like this garlicky olive oil or the leftover chicken fat from page 229) is a quick way to breathe some much needed excitement into an otherwise pretty boring food.

1 Heat the olive oil, garlic, red pepper flakes, fennel seed (if using), and beans in a medium pot over medium heat. Season with salt and black pepper, and cook, stirring occasionally (being careful not to break up any of the beans), until everything begins to sizzle and smell fragrant, about 5 minutes.

2 Reduce the heat to medium-low and continue to cook until the garlic is browned and the skin on the beans begins to fry slightly, 15 to 20 minutes. Remove from the heat and let them hang out until you're ready to eat.

6 Mix the ricotta, cream, and Parmesan together in a medium bowl; season with salt and pepper.

7 Drizzle olive oil into the bottom of a 9 × 13-inch or 3-quart baking dish. Place a layer of cooked pasta on the bottom and top with one-third of the ricotta mixture. Top with one-third of the greens and artichokes, and top that with one-third of the mozzarella. Repeat until you have a layer of pasta on the top. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle more Parmesan over the top.

8 Cover with foil and bake until everything is warmed through and the cheese has started to melt, 15 to 20 minutes. Remove the foil and raise the oven temperature to 500°F. Bake until the top is browned and the filling is bubbling along the edges, 8 to 10 minutes longer. Let cool slightly before slicing and eating.

Fancy Pasta

All whole-wheat pastas are not created equal, and if you're going to use it, it's worth seeking out some really good, high-quality stuff. Easier to find now more than ever, even the most popular brands are

going the way of Bob's Red Mill and revisiting all those ancient grains to turn into pasta—think emmer wheat, rye, spelt, and einkorn wheat.

One of my favorite suppliers, New York-based

Sfoglino, has an extensive selection of whole-wheat, spelt, and rye pastas that come in many different shapes, *plus* you can order them online. What a world!

Cold Garlicky Pasta with Capers and Salsa Verde

Serves 2

1 tablespoon olive oil
4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons brined capers, drained and chopped
2 cups chopped greens, such as kale, spinach, or Swiss chard
3 cups leftover cooked pasta
1½ cups Another Salsa Verde (page 21)
1 lemon, halved
Flaky sea salt

I find cold pasta to be tragically underrated and pasta salad to be tragically uninteresting, which is how this dish came to be. Because it drives me crazy to have a half-opened box of pasta, especially long noodles—the top never stays closed, which means long, thin strands of dried pasta end up all over my kitchen floor, and it's a real nightmare—I'll just cook the whole box and use only what I need for that night. This means, more often than not, I'm left with at least a few cups of naked, plain cooked pasta lurking in my refrigerator.

Some people might find this leftover pasta annoying (“Why not just use tape to close the box of pasta?” you’re asking), but not I. I take joy in this, knowing that, tomorrow or the next day, there will be COLD PASTA! Cold pasta for me to adorn however I please with whatever leftover roasted vegetables I have stashed, sauce I have frozen, greens I need to cook before they’re past their prime, or—better yet—salsa verde I almost certainly have on hand.

Sure, you could definitely use freshly cooked pasta, or even reheat the cold pasta in a skillet or pot of hot water to great results, but you know what they say: “Leftover pasta is a dish best served cold.”

1 Heat the olive oil in a small skillet or pot over medium heat. Add the garlic and season with kosher salt and pepper. Cook, stirring, until it's just beginning to brown (but do not let it get too brown), about 2 minutes. Add the capers and toss to coat, letting them sizzle and pop slightly. Add the greens and season with kosher salt and pepper. Toss to coat, cooking just to wilt, then remove the skillet from the heat.

2 Place the pasta in a large bowl and pour the garlic and greens over it, followed by the salsa verde, and toss to coat everything evenly, slightly warming and softening the previously chilled pasta.

3 Squeeze lemon juice over the pasta and top with flaky sea salt.



Slow Salmon with Citrus and Herb Salad

Serves 4 to 6

- 1 (1½-pound) piece of skinless salmon (skinless halibut or cod work well here, too)**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 2 lemons, Meyer or regular, thinly sliced**
- 1 blood orange, mandarin, or regular orange, thinly sliced**
- 6 sprigs fresh thyme, rosemary, oregano, or marjoram (optional)**
- 1½ cups olive oil**
- 2 cups fresh herbs, such as parsley, cilantro, dill, and tarragon**
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice**
- Flaky sea salt**

NOTE: As I mentioned, other ingredients can be added to the baking dish to cook alongside. Try thinly sliced fennel or chiles or sprigs of herbs like rosemary and thyme.

Confession: I can't find a better way to cook salmon. I've tried, but this is truly the best. Slowly roasting an already fatty fish in even more luxurious fat (here, olive oil) makes it nearly impossible to overcook; plus, you can flavor that oil with whatever you fancy: spices, herbs, citrus, chiles, which will flavor the fish, which is why you're here.

The first time I made a version of this dish was for *Bon Appétit* magazine a few years back, and people still tell me it's their most favorite salmon in the land. This salmon isn't meant to one-up that salmon (which also had slices of fennel and fresh chiles), but to introduce it to those who haven't yet met its magic. It's also to remind those who maybe have had that dish that this very simple method is by far the most delicious, easy, and customizable way to cook *any* large piece of fish (it's hard to beat a perfect fillet of wild salmon, but other fish like cod or halibut also work), so feel free to explore your options.

Oh, and if you're wondering, why yes, this *is* the ideal dinner party trick, sitting perfectly in the center of the Venn diagram where "looks impressive" and "not a ton of work" overlap. You can even double the size of the fillet to feed a real crowd, where you will be praised endlessly by at least ten people for how silky and rich your now famous salmon is.

Should you have any salmon left over, store it in the remaining oil, which will help keep it from drying out. It makes for ideal salmon niçoise, rice bowl, bagel topping, and more, so even though I say this serves four to six, feel free to make it just for one.

1 Preheat the oven to 300°F.

2 Season the salmon with kosher salt and pepper on both sides and place it in a large baking dish (a rimmed baking sheet will also work in a pinch, although the salmon will not quite be submerged) with the sliced lemons, oranges, and herb sprigs, if using.

3 Drizzle the olive oil over everything and place the baking dish in the oven. Cook the salmon until it is just turning opaque around the edges and is nearly cooked through, 20 to 25 minutes.

4 Toss the herbs with the lemon juice and flaky sea salt, and serve with your perfect salmon.

Crispy Chicken Legs with Rosemary, Tiny Potatoes, and Sour Cream

Serves 4.

- 4 chicken legs (the drumstick and thigh should be attached)
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 12 ounces very small, waxy potatoes (about the size of a quarter or smaller)
- 1 head of garlic, split crosswise
- 4 sprigs fresh rosemary
- 1½ cups olive oil
- ½ cup finely chopped fresh chives
- ½ cup sour cream

Conventional wisdom suggests that covering something in fat to slow cook it (aka “making a confit”) is only worthy of some glorious game bird like duck or goose. But guess what, this isn’t 1778, and I think even Thursday-night chicken deserves this kind of treatment. It’s pretty much the most hands-off technique that will yield the most showstopping results.

Something to note is that while, yes, the chicken gets crazy, fall-apart tender and the crisped skin rivals even the best fried chicken, something else happens here that makes this worth cooking and justifies the amount of olive oil called for. As the chicken slow cooks, the fat melts into the oil and infuses with garlic and rosemary, leaving you with something so delicious that it’s basically worth its weight in gold.

After straining the oil, I keep it in my fridge (it’ll keep for about a month) and use it to roast vegetables, crisp up potatoes (page 73), sauté greens, and, maybe in the most genius way possible, use it to fry my morning eggs (page 116).

1 Preheat the oven to 325°F.

2 Season the chicken with salt and pepper. Place it in a large baking dish with the potatoes, garlic, and rosemary. Cover the whole thing with olive oil and bake until the chicken is basically falling apart and the garlic is golden brown, 1½ to 2 hours. Remove it from the oven and let cool slightly.

3 Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil and chicken fat from the baking dish in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Carefully remove 2 chicken legs from the baking dish and place them, skin-side down, in the skillet.

4 Cook until the skin is browned and crisp, 5 to 8 minutes. Return the chicken to the baking dish, crispy-skin-side up, and repeat with the remaining 2 chicken legs (you can also serve this chicken straight from the baking dish without crisping up the skin, but if you have 5 minutes and a skillet, I highly recommend the added step).

5 Sprinkle the chives over the sour cream and serve alongside the chicken.



Cocoa Banana Bread

Makes 1 loaf

Nonstick cooking spray, for the pan
½ cup Demerara sugar
1½ cups all-purpose flour
½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon kosher salt
6 tablespoons (¾ stick) unsalted butter,
at room temperature
⅓ cup granulated sugar
¼ cup lightly packed light brown sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 large egg
5 extremely ripe bananas, 4 coarsely
mashed and 1 sliced lengthwise
½ cup mascarpone, full-fat sour cream,
or full-fat yogurt (4 ounces)

NOTE: This bread will sink slightly from the weight of the banana on top—don't worry, that's okay. If that gives you anxiety, skip the banana on top.

DO AHEAD: Banana bread can be made 5 days ahead, wrapped tightly, and kept at room temperature.

This version of banana bread is more cake than bread, and I wouldn't be able to get away with saying "There's banana in it, so it's basically breakfast!" because no, this is not breakfast. This is a chocolatey, buttery, almost decadent thing and probably not appropriate for anyone to eat first thing in the morning. While mascarpone will give you the richest, moistest cake with the best flavor, sour cream or yogurt will get the job done; just make sure they are full-fat.

- 1 Preheat the oven to 350°F. Spray a 9 x 4-inch loaf pan with nonstick spray. Sugar the inside of the pan with ¼ cup of the Demerara sugar (or regular sugar if you don't have Demerara), tapping out any excess.
- 2 In a medium bowl, whisk the flour, cocoa powder, baking soda, and salt together; set aside.
- 3 Using an electric mixer and a separate medium bowl or a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the butter, granulated sugar, light brown sugar, and vanilla on high speed until the mixture is super light and fluffy, 3 to 5 minutes. Using a spatula, scrape down the sides of the bowl and add the egg. Beat until well combined and the mixture returns to that previously light, fluffy state, about 2 minutes. With the mixer on low, slowly add the dry ingredients and beat just to blend. Using a spatula, fold in the mashed bananas, followed by the mascarpone, mixing just to blend.
- 4 Pour the batter into the prepared loaf pan, smoothing the top. Place the banana halves, cut-side up, on top of the batter. Sprinkle with the remaining ¼ cup Demerara sugar and bake until the sides start to pull away and the cake is baked through in the center (it's a very dense, moist cake, but it should still spring back slightly when pressed in the center), 90 to 100 minutes.
- 5 Let cool completely before slicing.

Everyone's Favorite Celebration Cake

Makes one 9-inch three-layer cake

YELLOW CAKE

Nonstick cooking spray or softened butter, for the pans

3¼ cups all-purpose or cake flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

1½ teaspoons kosher salt

1½ teaspoons baking soda

1½ cups buttermilk

¾ cup vegetable oil

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut into 1-inch pieces

2 cups granulated sugar

½ cup lightly packed light brown sugar

5 large eggs

3 large egg yolks

CHOCOLATE FROSTING

12 ounces bittersweet chocolate (chocolate chips are fine)

8 ounces sour cream, at room temperature

1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1½ cups confectioners' sugar

Generous pinch of kosher salt

Lots of sprinkles

While this may look deceptively like a birthday cake, I know from personal experience that this is the perfect cake for when there is anything to celebrate or, sometimes even more, the tragic absence of anything to celebrate. It's a holiday cake, a baby shower cake, a wedding cake, and a just-because cake. It's a cake you make when you have a bit of extra time on your hands and lots of people to feed.

While I never really stress about using cake flour versus all-purpose when baking, cake flour will give you a more delicate, ethereal crumb, which is definitely a good thing. That said, you can certainly use either with great success.

For the most even three layers, use measuring cups (or, even better, a scale) to measure the batter into each pan. Yes, that is sort of type A personality overboard crazy, but it's also the best way to make sure each layer is the same, if you're not so confident in your batter distribution abilities.

1 MAKE THE CAKE: Preheat the oven to 350°F and position one rack in the top third of the oven and one rack in the middle of the oven. Prepare three 9-inch cake pans with nonstick spray or grease with softened butter.

2 In a large bowl, whisk the flour, baking powder, salt, and baking soda together; set aside. In a medium bowl or a measuring cup, combine the buttermilk, vegetable oil, and vanilla; set aside.

3 In a large bowl, combine the butter, granulated sugar, and brown sugar. Using an electric mixer or a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat everything together on high speed until it's super light and fluffy, about 4 minutes. Add the eggs and egg yolks one at a time, incorporating each one before adding the next. Beat the batter until it's almost doubled in volume and very light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. (Don't forget to scrape down the sides of the bowl periodically.)

4 With the mixer on low, gently beat in one-third of the flour mixture. Before it's fully combined, add one-half of the buttermilk mixture. Repeat with remaining flour and buttermilk, ending with the flour, until everything is well blended and no lumps remain.

5 Divide the cake batter evenly among the three cake pans and place two pans on the upper rack and one pan on the middle rack. Bake 35 to 40 minutes, rotating the pan on the middle rack to the upper rack halfway through baking, so they all get even oven love

recipe continues



Blueberry Cake with Almond and Cinnamon

Serves 8

Nonstick spray, for the pan
1 cup almond flour
¾ cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 ½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
¾ teaspoon kosher salt
¾ cup (1 ½ sticks) unsalted butter,
at room temperature
½ cup light brown sugar
¼ cup plus 3 tablespoons granulated
sugar
2 large eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 cups blueberries

DO AHEAD: The cake can be baked 4 days ahead, wrapped tightly in plastic wrap, and stored at room temperature.

Whenever I have a muffin, my first thought is generally, “Why aren’t muffins better?” Butter, sugar, eggs, flour—I mean, by all accounts, it should be at least an 8/10 every time. And yet I find myself wishing that most were even a tenth as good as the ones from Costco that I grew up eating, which we all know are just cakes baked in muffin cups. After giving it a lot of thought, I realized that instead of making a muffin that just tastes like cake, what I wanted was a cake that tasted like a muffin. So here it is, basically one giant muffin top, now in sliceable cake form.

You’ll notice that after baking it’s a bit more shallow than a classic cake, but since it’s so rich (thanks, almond flour!), the portion size remains the same. Another added bonus from the fatty nut flour is that this cake stays fresh as the day it was born for a few days, even if you forget to wrap it tightly every time you sneak a bite, which is my signature move.

I prefer the tinier late-summer blueberries for this because they tend to be juicier and tangier (and cuter). Use whatever you can find, because even an okay blueberry, when baked, is a pretty spectacular blueberry.

1 Preheat the oven to 375°F. Spray a 9-inch fluted tart pan or round cake pan with nonstick spray.

2 Whisk together the almond flour, all-purpose flour, baking powder, cinnamon, and salt in a medium bowl.

3 Using an electric mixer, in a medium bowl, beat the butter, brown sugar, and ¼ cup of the granulated sugar together on medium-high speed until the mixture is super light and fluffy, 3 to 4 minutes.

4 Scrape down the sides of the bowl and with the mixer on medium, add the eggs one at a time, beating until each one is incorporated, followed by the vanilla. Increase the speed to medium-high and beat until the mixture is pale and nearly doubled in volume, 4 to 5 minutes. Fold in the almond mixture until no dry spots remain. Gently add 1 ½ cups of the blueberries by hand, making sure you don’t totally smush them.

5 Transfer the batter to the prepared tart pan and, using a spatula or the back of a spoon, smooth the top. Sprinkle the remaining 3 tablespoons granulated sugar on top and bake until the cake is deeply golden brown and pulls away from the edges slightly, 30 to 35 minutes. It should start to crackle a bit on top (what you’re looking for).

6 Remove from the oven and let cool completely before slicing.

(one of the cakes won't see the middle rack, but that's okay). You'll know the cakes are done when they are golden brown, pulling away from the sides of the pans, and the tops spring back ever so slightly when you press them.

6 Remove the cakes from the oven and let sit for 5 minutes to cool slightly before inverting them onto a wire rack to cool completely. (If you don't have a wire rack, let them cool in the cake pans on the counter.) I avoid using a sharp knife to run around the edges (that's how you ruin a cake pan), but if you notice the cake sticking at all, use something a little duller, like a butter knife, to coax it out of the pan.

7 MAKE THE FROSTING: Place the chocolate either in a bowl in the microwave, heating it in 30-second intervals until melted, or in a double boiler—or a makeshift double boiler (a bowl set over a saucepan of barely simmering water, but not touching the water)—stirring occasionally until it's melted. The melted chocolate should be warm but never hot, with no visible chunks left.

8 Add about one-third of the sour cream to the melted chocolate and, using a spatula, combine them until no white streaks remain. Repeat with another third, and finally the last third. The chocolate will stiffen a bit as you add the sour cream, and this is okay.

9 In a large bowl, combine the butter, confectioners' sugar, and salt. Using an electric mixer or a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat everything together on high speed until it's fluffy and almost pure white, about 5 minutes. With the mixer on low, slowly add the chocolate mixture and blend. Increase the speed to high and beat until everything is combined and the frosting looks super fluffy and delicious, as if it came from a can (but it didn't), about 2 minutes.

10 ASSEMBLE THE CAKE: Once the cakes are cooled, transfer one layer, top-side up, to a large parchment-lined plate. Use an offset or regular spatula to spread frosting on the first layer of cake. Place a second layer on top, bottom-side up (layering the rest with the flat bottoms on top makes a cake with a straight rather than domed shape) and frost. Repeat with the remaining layer.

11 Once all the layers are assembled, apply a thin layer of frosting all over, making sure to cover the whole cake. This is a "crumb coat," and it's just the base layer, so don't worry about making it perfect. Chill the cake for 30 minutes to 2 hours, but keep the remaining frosting at room temperature.

12 Remove the cake from the fridge and, using either an offset spatula or a butter knife, give it another coat of frosting, doing whatever decorative patterns or swirls your heart desires. Super smooth, peaks and valleys—your cake, your call.

13 Finish and decorate with sprinkles however you please!

NOTE: To get the sprinkles onto the sides of the cake, you can put some in your hand and kind of simultaneously toss and pat them onto the sides. Do this on a rimmed baking sheet to contain the sprinkles.

How to Casually Frost a Cake

The great thing about frosting a cake is that by the time you're ready to do it, all the hard work has been done. You already know the cakes survived their trip to the oven, because you're about to frost them, and you've just made the frosting, which I'm assuming tastes amazing. If you don't own an offset spatula or other fancy cake-decorating tools, that's fine, because I know from experience that you can definitely use a butter knife to do this job.

Before you do anything, take a deep breath. You're about to frost a cake, not perform oral surgery. Remember, this is supposed to be fun. Isn't this fun? Then clear off your countertop so you have plenty of space to work and won't get frosting everywhere.

Okay, so start by placing one of the cakes on a large plate lined with parchment (even if you did have a cake stand, chances are it wouldn't fit in the refrigerator, so use a plate). Dip your offset spatula or butter knife into that glorious bowl of frosting and dollop about a cup of the frosting right in the middle of the cake. Spread it evenly all over the top of the cake, just like you're spreading peanut butter onto toast.

Place your second cake on top and repeat just like the first layer with the flatter, bottom side up. Press the third cake on top and press lightly. Doesn't it look great already? Stand back a second and admire it. Make sure it's (mostly) straight, adjusting a little to the left or a little to the right if it's looking a tad crooked.

Using the offset spatula or butter knife, spread a really thin layer all around the sides of the cake, making sure to get the frosting into every nook and cranny, patching up any gaps in the cake layers, as if you're caulking tile or something (this is the crumb coat, but this is a casual frosting job, so let's not get technical). This is just to trap any crumbs in the frosting.

Put this cake in the fridge and let it chill out there for 30 minutes to 2 hours. All this is doing is creating a firm, smooth, crumb-free surface for you to frost upon. Pat yourself on the back, maybe have a glass of wine. Don't think about what the cake is doing in there, because the answer is nothing; it's just hanging out, so you don't need to check on it.

After the cake is as chilled and relaxed as you are, take the frosting and, using the offset spatula or butter knife, just kind of smear it all over the sides of the cake from top to bottom. Smear and swoosh until you can't see any cake left.

Now for the final act: Dump any remaining frosting on top of the cake and spread it, swoosh it, smear it, smooth it. This is the top of your cake and the thing everyone will ooh and ahh over, so make it count. Congratulations! You just frosted a cake casually, as if it was no big deal.