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A splash of vinegar

 BY MARI SCHUH QUAM
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Love the zing of flavor that vinegar gives your culinary creations, but aren't quite sure which kind to use? Fear not.



Mary Radigan



Pino Cerchiara

Three local experts tell us when to reach for the red wine, balsamic or sherry vinegar.

Good quality

Choosing the right vinegar for your homemade dishes begins at the grocery store. With tight budgets, it might be tempting to buy the cheapest bottle.

But Chef Mary Radigan of Ray Radigan's supper club in Pleasant Prairie says not to skimp when buying vinegar. Go for the good stuff. After all, if your dish has only five ingredients, those ingredients need to be perfect. Luckily, good quality vinegar

doesn't need to break the bank to pack a punch. "Vinegar is used in such a small amount, but it does make a big difference," she said.

Pino Cerchiara, general manager of Bristol Oaks Golf Club and Banquet Center in Bristol, agrees.

"It's not worth it to buy cheap vinegar," he said. "Look for vinegar that is not cloudy and does not have sediment."



Several types of vinegar are shown at Ray Radigan's supper club in Pleasant Prairie. PHOTO BY MARI SCHUH QUAM

Think outside the bottle

Vinegar is more than just an ingredient in salad dressing. Tony and Cathy Mantuano, partners of Mangia Trattoria in Kenosha and authors of "Wine Bar Food," prefer to utilize it in other ways, too.

"Try it to give the kick of acid to sauces, marinades for meats before you grill them, and in pickling," Mantuano said.

Don't overdo it

Exercise restraint when enhancing your food with vinegar. More is not better. "When using vinegars, go lightly," Mantuano advised.

And to ensure you're getting the dish you desire, taste your creations as you cook. Tasting allows cooks to observe how the acidity, saltiness, sweetness and bitterness of the foods are playing with one another, Radigan explained. It's all about balance of flavor.

"Everything needs a little bit of something," she said. "Experiment with it to find what you like the best."

Types of vinegar

■ **Sherry vinegar:** It's a good option for marinades. Also add it to salads made with vegetables and legumes, says Tony Mantuano, and you will enjoy a flavorful meal.

◀ **Apple cider vinegar:** Mary Radigan approaches vinegars with the seasons. As such, she finds that apple cider vinegar is perfect for fall. "It's versatile and it also goes great with pork," she said. On a cool fall day, add a splash of apple cider vinegar to butternut squash soup. The flavors will balance each other in an appealing way.

■ **Champagne vinegar:** If you make your own hollandaise sauce, then add champagne vinegar to your grocery list. Its fresh and light flavor is perfectly suited for fish and salads, such as cucumber salad. But don't be too fooled by its name. "Champagne vinegar is not any more special than other vinegar," according to Pino Cerchiara. "It's not bubbly vinegar."

■ **Red wine vinegar:** This fresh-tasting vinegar pairs well with rich foods. Enjoy it with goat cheese. It's also popular on salads and on meats while grilling since it's more flavorful than its white wine counterpart, Cerchiara said.

Also add a splash of this great, "old-school vinegar" to your tomato sauce, suggests Mantuano. "It's a terrific variation of tomato sauce because it gives it a kick of acidity."

■ **Balsamic vinegar:** Its flavor goes well with tomatoes and lamb preparations. It also serves as a flavorful stand-alone salad dressing. Try it on its own without mixing it with olive oil. Use it when steak is on the menu, too. "Balsamic vinegar is the best steak sauce in the world," says Mantuano.

No matter the use, look for true balsamic vinegar, which comes from Modena or Reggio Emilia, where it is aged to perfection and the only ingredient is grape must. "The rest are imposters," says Mantuano.

— Mari Schuh Quam



AP PHOTO

Speedy and Light Chicken Curry

This chicken curry is easy and delicious

 BY J.M. HIRSCH
 AP FOOD EDITOR

It didn't seem too much to ask for. I wanted a coconut chicken curry that is fast, delicious and not loaded with fat. Turned out to be easier than I expected.

Let's start with the sauce. The key is to make it rich and flavorful without resorting to the usual culprit — full-fat coconut milk. I considered using light coconut milk, but generally have found curries made with it to be thin and uninspiring. Fat, after all, is mighty yummy.

My solution was to start with a small amount of light coconut milk, but then doctor it up. Pureeing into it a jar of roasted red peppers and a small onion was just the trick. This provided the sauce with body, as well as both sweet and savory flavors. A hefty dose of curry powder and some lemon grass added during cooking rounded it all out.

To cook, all I did was bring my sauce to a simmer in a large saute pan, then add my chicken. To bulk out the recipe with good lean protein, I also added a can of chickpeas. I tasted it as it cooked and felt it was missing something... sweet. But I wanted to avoid the obvious — sugar, honey, etc. — if I could. So I tried adding grated carrots. Perfect! More healthy veggies and just the right amount of natural sweetness.

While you could use boneless, skinless chicken breasts in this recipe, I prefer thighs. They have a richer flavor and don't get tough the way breasts can.

SPEEDY AND LIGHT CHICKEN CURRY

Start to finish: 30 minutes

Servings: 6

12-ounce jar roasted red peppers, drained
1 small yellow onion, chopped
1 cup chicken broth
1/2 cup light coconut milk
2 teaspoons curry powder
Three 3-inch lengths fresh lemon grass
15-ounce can chickpeas, drained
1 cup grated carrots
1 3/4 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs

In a blender or food processor, combine the red peppers, onion, broth, coconut milk and curry powder. Process or puree until completely smooth.

Pour the sauce into a large, deep saute pan over medium-high heat. Bring to a simmer. Use a rolling pin or meat mallet to lightly crush the lemon grass, then add to the sauce. Stir in the chickpeas and carrots. Nestle the chicken thighs into the sauce, being sure the tops are covered. Reduce the heat to maintain a simmer and cook, uncovered, for 20 minutes.

Remove and discard the lemon grass. Serve the chicken with chickpeas, carrots and sauce spooned over it.

Stretch meat budget by cutting pork loin into roast, chops, steaks

Making good use of the dollars you spend on food has become even more important in today's soft economy.

Today, I'm going to outline a way to make the best use of a large portion of meat by cutting it into different portions, and how each of those portions can be prepared for a family of three to four. The result is that you will pay about \$1.99 a pound for this meat with cuts that could individually cost as much as \$3.49 to \$3.99 a pound.

To begin with, look for pork loin to go on sale for \$1.99 a pound. I wouldn't pay more per pound than that — it's a good price, and you will see it eventually. I would buy a loin that is 7 pounds to 14 pounds.

Once you have the loin, lay it out on a cutting board. One end — about a third — will have "marbled" fat, or fat within the meat, while the other end will only have the fat on one side of the pork.



Gateway Gourmet

Susanna Elrod

Take these steps next:

■ Cut off the one-third of the loin that has the meat with the fat marbled in it. You will prepare that as a pork roast.

■ On the very opposite end of the marbled fat end, cut the pork loin in 1-inch thick pork chops for the first half of the remaining cut of meat. These will be prepared as boneless pork chops.

■ The remaining cut of meat is considered the center pork steak cuts. Cut those into a 2-inch thickness.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The one-third of the pork loin that has marbled fat, at left, is cut from the loin to make a pork roast. The other end of the loin will be cut into 1-inch pork chops, and the remaining portion from the center of the loin will be cut into 2-inch pork steaks.

Purchased alone, these cuts would cost you about \$3.49 to \$3.99 a pound. These will be prepared as pork steaks.

Now, prepare whichever pork recipe you wish to. The cuts you don't use immediately can be frozen and used up to six months later. I prefer to freeze the pork — and all

meats — in vacuum plastic bags.

Here are a few suggestions on how to prepare your pork cuts.

■ **Pork roast.** Cut up fresh vegetables — onions, carrots, celery — and put in the bottom of the roasting pan with a sprig of rosemary.

Coat the roast with olive oil, then season with salt, pepper and garlic. Cover and cook at 325 degrees; cooking time depends on the size of the roast. Make sure the internal temperature reaches 165 degrees. A 2-pound roast will take about 1 1/2 to 2 hours to reach this temperature.

■ **Pork chops.** I prefer to pan fry or grill pork chops. You can also bake them covered with cream of mushroom soup in a glass pan, 350 degrees until the internal temperature reaches 165 degrees, about 45 minutes to an hour to reach this temperature.

■ **Pork steaks.** A great way to prepare these is to stuff and bake them. To do so, prepare your favorite stuffing mix. Cut a small slit in the middle of the 2-inch side of the steak, creating a small envelope in it — fill that area with your stuffing. Put in a glass baking dish, season the outside of the meat with your

favorite herbs or spices — I like salt, pepper and garlic, and have heard others say they prefer rosemary and basil — and cook at 350 degrees until the internal temperature of the meat reaches 165 degrees, about 1 to 1 1/2 hours to reach this temperature. When you take the temperature with the probe, make sure the probe is in the meat, not the stuffing.

Again, buying the larger piece of pork and cutting it into separate cuts represents a versatile and affordable way to make your food budget stretch even further.

Enjoy!

The Gateway Gourmet, Susanna Elrod, is lead instructor in the culinary arts program at Gateway Technical College. If you have a food question for her or you want her to cover a certain topic or dish in her column, send an e-mail to colony@gtc.edu.

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