

SPIRITED DISHES

Cooking grows up with the addition of a little alcohol.

BY SERENA BASS

Chicken fingers and PBJs can hit the spot, but every now and then, it is exhilarating to act like a grownup and start splashing some alcohol around in the kitchen. Whether you turn to wine, beer, or spirits, any form of alcohol can improve a dish's depth of flavor and lend a shot of sophistication.

These recipes include a variety of alcohol, from Belgian white beer used straight in a vinaigrette to powerful French Armagnac flambéed then soothed with cream and apple cider. When you're sautéing with rich fats like duck fat, goose fat, or butter, wine or spirits lend some acidic balance. Hard liquor, like bourbon and rum, have a wonderful lingering perfume even when the alcohol content is mostly cooked away.

When cooking with a red wine, use something full-bodied, like a Shiraz or Zinfandel; dry red wine can often be too harsh. For a white wine, choose something fragrant, like a Sauvignon Blanc. If you've never used alcohol in your cooking, now is the time to start.



PASTA WITH SPICY SAUSAGE,
VODKA, AND BABY PEAS

Pasta with Spicy Sausage, Vodka, and Baby Peas

MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS

This is a wonderfully adaptable recipe. I occasionally up the pepper flakes and add a couple cups of chopped sweet red peppers with the onions. I've used all marinara sauce and no cream, or subbed in oregano and thyme for the rosemary. You can make it your own. Invest in high-quality vodka, as cheaper stuff can taste harsh. Use a stainless-steel saucepan with high sides; the sausage won't break up well in a nonstick pan and will just keep sliding around. This sauce freezes particularly well, so I always make more than needed and then have a great treat for a midweek dinner, ready in minutes.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 cup yellow onion, cut in ½-inch dice
- 3 tablespoons chopped garlic
- ½ teaspoon hot pepper flakes, or more to taste
- 2 tablespoons minced lemon zest, removed with a peeler
- 3 pounds spicy Italian sausage, casing removed
- 1 cup Absolut Peppar vodka
- 2 tablespoons minced rosemary
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 2 cups marinara sauce
- ¼ cup per person frozen baby green peas (see note for freezing)
- orecchiette or medium shell pasta

1. Melt butter, add onion, and cook over medium heat 8 minutes, until translucent. Add garlic, pepper flakes, and lemon zest, and gently sauté 1 minute. Crumble in sausage, breaking up against side of pan and chopping with a heavy wooden spoon until the sausage is broken up and there's hardly any pink left. This can take 10 minutes.
2. Add vodka and cook 3 minutes. Add rosemary, cream, and marinara. Stir to mix and bring to a simmer. Cover, adjust heat so sauce just simmers, and cook 45 minutes.
3. If not serving entire recipe immediately, remove excess to a sealed container and freeze.
4. Just before serving, add the uncooked, defrosted peas, and stir; they will cook quickly in the heat of the sauce and give a wonderful pop of sweetness. Ideally, serve with orecchiette or medium shells to capture the creamy sauce.

» **For freezing:** Peas are added just before serving so if you plan to freeze some of this dish, do not add peas and wait until serving. Calculate only the ¼ cup peas per person for what you plan to use right away.

IS THERE STILL ALCOHOL IN THAT DISH?

The addition of alcohol gives many dishes a wonderful, aromatic punch, but it may not be for everyone. I long assumed that virtually all the alcohol would cook out of a dish once it has been variously simmered, boiled, or flambéed. In fact this is far from true; different modes and lengths of cooking present different results.

In reality, the amount of alcohol remaining after cooking ranges from 5 to 85 percent, according to a study from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Nutrient Data Laboratory. And the variations aren't just dependent on how long you keep the temperature above 173°F, alcohol's boiling point. The size of the cooking vessel greatly affects the alcohol-retention rate; the smaller the vessel, the more alcohol is retained due to the reduced surface area for evaporation.

This study revealed that alcohol content diminishes with cooking time. After liquor has been poured on foods and then set alight—flambéed—approximately 75 percent of the alcohol remains after the flames have died down. After being added to food that is then baked or simmered for 15 minutes, 40 percent of the alcohol will be retained. After cooking for an hour, about 25 percent will remain. The lowest percentage of alcohol left after cooking—around 5 percent—is in stews that are cooked at least 2½ hours. The amount of alcohol in an individual serving will be quite low, but keep these highlights in mind if alcohol is a concern to you or your dinner guests.

For more information, visit nutrition-profiles.com and click on "Cooking with Alcohol."

CHICKEN BREAST WITH
CALVADOS AND APPLES



Chicken Breast with Calvados and Apples

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

This looks like a long recipe, but it just has a few specific parts. It is hardly a slimming dish, mainly because it is derived from an ancient French recipe from Normandy. That particular area of France is the epicenter of exquisite butter and cream, delicious tart yet sweet apples, and Calvados, a fortified apple brandy. The original recipe uses pheasant, and everything is braised for hours. I have modernized the method with no reduction in flavor using easily found ingredients. Use organic chicken and cream, and high-quality butter.

- 4 skinless boneless organic chicken breasts
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 4 teaspoons fresh lemon juice
- ¼ cup Calvados or cognac
- 4 Golden Delicious apples, peeled, cored, quartered,
and cut into 12 wedges
- 2 cups cloudy apple cider
- 2 cups organic heavy cream
- 2 cups homemade chicken stock (not reduced-sodium)

1. Fold each chicken breast in a paper towel and, using a heavy pan, smash thick end a few times to equalize thickness. Dust both sides well with salt and freshly ground black pepper.
2. Melt 4 tablespoons butter over medium heat in a heavy sauté pan that will hold chicken in an even layer. When butter stops sizzling, increase heat to medium-high and add chicken. Cook 8 to 10 minutes, turning every 2 minutes.
3. Halfway through, add lemon juice, which will sizzle and evaporate. The steam will help cook the chicken, and the flavor will balance the richness. When chicken is nearly done (cut the breast to check for a little bit of uncooked chicken), turn off heat.
4. In a small pan, warm Calvados over medium-low heat 1 minute to cook off some of the alcohol. Using a long taper or lighter, light Calvados in pan and pour over chicken with 1 circular movement. Shake pan and be brave; the flames will dissipate after several seconds. Using a heatproof rubber spatula, remove chicken and juices to a rimmed plate.
5. Melt remaining 2 tablespoons butter in sauté pan. Add apples, dust with salt and freshly ground black pepper, and sauté over medium-high heat 8 minutes, flipping occasionally, until they just start to caramelize. Reduce heat if they start to burn. Scrape apples onto plate with chicken.
6. Pour cider, cream, and stock into pan. Bring to a boil and cook 15 minutes, scraping edges occasionally, until sauce is slightly thickened. Turn off heat.
7. Add chicken, apples, and juices, and warm over low heat. If not serving immediately, transfer to an ovenproof serving dish and set aside unrefrigerated up to 4 hours. Reheat in a 300°F oven 20 to 25 minutes; sauce shouldn't come anywhere near boiling. Serve with celery-root mash and steamed haricots verts.



Marinade with Dark Sherry, Orange, and Chilies

MAKES 2 CUPS

This marinade is wonderful with steak, chicken breasts or thighs, or pork chops on the bone. Just marinate for 2 hours and grill or pan sear to your liking. It has an Asian influence and pairs well with a quick vegetable stir-fry and some chewy short-grain brown rice with a handful of chopped cilantro and mint. Be sure to use dark sweet sherry (Harveys Bristol Cream is my favorite).

- 3 tablespoons dark sherry
- 3 packed tablespoons dark brown sugar
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- ⅔ cup soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons fresh ginger, peeled and grated
- 2 teaspoons crushed garlic
- 1 tablespoon grated orange zest
- 1 teaspoon hot pepper flakes, or more to taste
- ¼ cup scallions, green and white parts finely minced

1. Whisk together all ingredients in a bowl. This will keep for 2 days, refrigerated.



» **Pepper Tip** I have a grinding trick! Try grinding 10 times on your mill and see how much of a teaspoon you have. Mine grinds ½ teaspoon; yours might deliver more or less. Then you'll never have to grind and measure again, you'll just do 10 grinds and know you have the ½, or ¼-teaspoon you need.



White Beer Dressing

MAKES 1¼ CUPS

You can use any pale beer here, such as Stella Artois, Amstel, or Heineken Light but the Hoegaarden has a little sweetness that I like. The amount of pepper might seem scary but as long as you use freshly ground pepper on a coarse grind, the balance is perfect. Do *not* use pre-ground or it will be much too strong and lack the instant flavor that only comes from your peppermill.

- 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- ¼ cup white beer, such as Hoegaarden
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup homemade mayonnaise (recipe right)

1. In a medium bowl, whisk together vinegar, garlic, beer, salt, and pepper. Whisk in cream and mayonnaise. This will keep for 2 days, refrigerated.

Homemade Mayonnaise

MAKES 1¼ CUPS

This is the best mayonnaise—and great to have on hand for sandwiches or dips.

- 1 extra large egg
- 1 tablespoon aged sherry vinegar
- 1½ tablespoons Dijon mustard
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 large clove garlic, peeled
- 1½ cups vegetable oil

1. Combine all ingredients except oil in bowl of a food processor and blend 30 seconds.
2. Slowly add oil through feed tube while processing. Mayonnaise should be very thick.
3. Transfer to a small sealed container and refrigerate up to 1 week.



CHOCOLATE FILLING AND
CHOCOLATE TART

Chocolate Tart

MAKES 8 SERVINGS

This is a great recipe for those among us who have pastry phobia or pastry impatience (I have yeast phobia, so I understand). The end result is so ridiculously delicious that you will feel vindicated in the effort you have made. If all the steps are making your eyes roll, skip the pastry and just make the filling (see recipe right).

Tart Shell

1¼ cups Heckers or King Arthur all-purpose flour
8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cold and
cut into ½-inch pieces
¾ teaspoon kosher salt
¼ cup iced water

1. Place flour, butter, and salt in bowl of a food processor and pulse 10 times. Pour in water and pulse 8 times.
2. Let damp crumbs sit 5 minutes, tip into a sealable plastic bag, and gently but firmly form a ¾-inch-thick disk. Refrigerate dough at least 2 hours or overnight.
3. Remove dough from refrigerator and leave at room temperature 15 minutes, until just pliable but still cool. Roll out to a 12-inch circle and, making sure it's centered, drape over a 9½-inch tart pan with removable base.
4. Lift up pastry and ease it down into corner of pan, pushing it in with a knuckle then pressing in gently but firmly with your thumb against the vertical side. This will give you a strong pastry wall to hold the filling.
5. Run a rolling pin over top of pan to cut off excess pastry. Dock the base several times with a fork. Place shell, uncovered, in freezer 30 minutes.
6. Position a rack in middle of oven and preheat to 425°F. Remove shell from freezer and line with aluminum foil, allowing 3 extra inches on each side. Tuck foil into corners well and fill ½ inch deep with pie weights or dried beans.
7. Bake 20 minutes, remove foil, and bake 10 minutes uncovered, until there are no uncooked patches and pastry is golden brown. When removing from oven, wait 10 seconds to let foil cool. You can then pick it up by the four corners with your bare hands; just avoid the beans as they will be hot.
8. Shell can be baked a day ahead, left in pan to cool, and filled and baked the next day. Just wrap with plastic wrap when shell is totally cold and store unrefrigerated.
9. For the tart filling: Reduce the oven heat to 350°F. Pour the filling into the shell and bake for 10 minutes if the shell is warm and 12 minutes if the shell is cool. Remove the tart from the oven (the center will still be jiggly), and allow to cool without refrigerating. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Chocolate Tart Filling

MAKES 6 SERVINGS IN COCOTTE DISHES
MAKES ENOUGH FILLING FOR 2 TARTS
FOR TART: JUST USE HALF AND FREEZE THE BALANCE; IT FREEZES
PERFECTLY FOR AT LEAST 2 MONTHS.

This is simplicity at its finest and creates a sensation! I used to make pastry, let it rest, roll it out, freeze it, fill it with beans, bake blind, and eventually pour in this fantastic, rich, chocolaty filling before bake the whole thing. Sometimes faux dieters would scrape the filling off, eat the chocolate part, and leave the hours-of-effort shell. Eventually I decided to make double the filling and just bake it in cocotte dishes like a chocolate pudding.

16 tablespoons (2 sticks), unsalted butter cut
into tablespoon slices
1 cup semisweet chocolate morsels
1 cup bittersweet chocolate morsels
2 tablespoons Medaglia d'Oro espresso powder
4 extra large eggs
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar
¼ cup whiskey, bourbon, or Myers's dark rum
2 tablespoons flour
2 tablespoons Droste Dutch process
or Ghirardelli cocoa
1½ teaspoons kosher salt

1. Butter 6, ½-cup, ovenproof cocotte dishes. Position a rack in middle of oven and preheat to 350°F.
2. Put butter, chocolate, and espresso powder in a medium saucepan over low heat and stir until just melted.
3. In a deep, medium bowl, whisk together eggs, sugar, and alcohol very well. Sift in flour, cocoa, and salt, and gently whisk together. Add chocolate mixture and stir to incorporate.
4. Using a ½ cup measuring cup, carefully fill each cocotte dish. Bake 15 minutes. Let cool 5 minutes before serving warm with whipped heavy cream or ice cream. ■

NUTRITION

PASTA W. SPICY SAUSAGE & VODKA :
PER SERVING: CALORIES 650 (450 from
fat); FAT 50g (sat. 23g); CHOL 129mg;
SODIUM 1575mg; CARB 20g; FIBER 3g;
PROTEIN 25g

**CHICKEN BREAST W.
CALVADOS & APPLES:**
PER SERVING: CALORIES 861 (531 from
fat); FAT 60g (sat. 36g); CHOL 280mg;
SODIUM 571mg; CARB 39g; FIBER 2g;
PROTEIN 41g

WHITE BEER DRESSING:
PER SERVING: CALORIES 88 (79 from
fat); FAT 9g (sat. 3g); CHOL 17mg;
SODIUM 564mg; CARB 1g; FIBER 0g;
PROTEIN 0g

CHOCOLATE TART:
PER SERVING: CALORIES 473 (285 from
fat); FAT 32g (sat. 20g); CHOL 114mg;
SODIUM 356mg; CARB 42g; FIBER 3g;
PROTEIN 6g