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HOW TO MAKE FABULOUS BACON

From Melanie Reese Senn

“Eat Food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” Michael Pollan, my food guru, wrote these words; you many have read them too. And I believe them. I try to live by them. I have a garden, a large compost pile. I shop at Farmers Market. I steam things. But the other day I ran across another quotation from Doug Larson that resonated even more deeply: “Life expectancy would grow by leaps and bounds if green vegetables smelled as good as bacon.”

I love bacon; I really love bacon. But I’ve also discovered that I love making it, and I’ve honed the process over the years. Once, in order to “simplify” my life, I bought pre-packaged, cooked bacon. My spouse laughed at me. It was awful. It was...soulless. No, you have to cook your own bacon; you have to earn it.

Let me start by saying I’ve sampled MANY types of bacon. My mother-in-law, knowing my love for it, bought me a one-year membership to the Bacon of the Month club, and so every month, premium bacon arrived on my doorstep from all over the United States: Dan Philips Special Brown Sugar Hickory Smoked Country Bacon; Nodine’s Apple Smoke Flavored Bacon; Ozark Trails Hickory Smoked Pepper Bacon.

But it turns out that the best bacon resides a mere two blocks from my house. Yes, folks, the best bacon in America can be found at the San Luis Obispo Albertsons on Foot-hill. And not the packaged stuff, but the nice thick slices from the butcher. (See, I used to have this thing for butchers, and I used to just stand there on the sidelines watching them cut and wrap meat; but one time the butcher caught my eye and asked what I needed and snapping out of my trance I quickly scanned the display case for the cheapest meat, and my eyes landed on bacon. I ordered a pound.)

Now married (alas, not to a butcher-sigh), I have two sons, who, from the moment they could eat solid food, have been eating bacon. On Sundays, I embark on the long

journey to Albertsons with the oldest. Yes, it's only two blocks from my house, but the round trip takes about an hour. He's two, you see, and stops every few feet to collect sticks and dandelions; if I'm really craving bacon, I have to remind myself, "It's not about the destination..."

Once home, he pulls out the lowest kitchen drawer next to the stove (his stepping stool) which gains him access to the counter top. Delighted, he unwraps the bacon as if it were some sacred gift, his dimple deep.

I pull down one of my cast-iron pans (either my #7 or 8), put it on the stove and turn on the flame to medium. What? You don't have a cast-iron pan? Of course you can make bacon in a Teflon or stainless-steel skillet, but for great bacon, obtaining a cast-iron pan should be the first order of business. Why? First of all, cast-iron cookware has been around for centuries. In fact, if you can get a hold of it, see if your great-great-great-great grandmother's is available; she undoubtedly cooked with one. And they are eco-friendly: unlike many of the disposable items we purchase, the pan you buy will last literally forever. And it will not scratch and flake off Teflon, or polytetrafluoroethylene coating. (Ma'am, would you like a side of PTFE with that?)

Oh sure, I still use a Teflon pan regularly, to fry a couple quick over-easy eggs, usually while cooking my bacon in my beautiful black skillet. The cast-iron surface is porous, and the grease-the butter, oil, or animal fat-seeps in to create a shiny non-stick sheen, au naturel. It heats and cooks evenly. And you can—you should—use those nice heavy-duty metal utensils you've stored away that you can't use on Teflon.

And please note: You don't need to buy a new cast-iron pan! For the price of a pound of bacon, you can find a perfectly seasoned one at a garage sale or the swap meet. If you find a rusty one, or one that isn't so shiny black and lovely, no problem. Numerous websites describe the seasoning technique, which essentially entails lathering the skillet with grease and baking it for an hour. You will have restored: something-something you can then cook with for years and pass down to your great-grand children.

Okay, back to the bacon. Here's a key step: the slices are thick and long, so I take a sharp knife and cut them in half, the lot of them. That way, they can be arranged in a pan like this:

Cutting the bacon allows you to maximize space in your pan. The two-year-old can then peel off piece by piece of raw bacon and hand them to you (this can feel torturously slow, especially since the pan is sizzling hot and bacon grease is beginning to rocket from it like random mortar fire). Arrange the slices the pan, on burner farthest from the two-year-old. The one-year-old should be corralled in the living room. Humor him with the first piece as soon as it cools.

Two items are essential for dealing with spattering hot bacon grease: long tongs and an apron. My apron, another gift from my mother-in-law, features an embroidered cow above the words "Je demande boeuf." (She gets me.)

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Flip these initial slices soon, before they are cooked on one side, and continue to flip them every couple minutes until they're done-not too soft and not too crisp. With your tongs, transfer these pieces to a ceramic bowl lined with paper towels. Restock the pan, which now has a shallow layer of bacon grease; these next slices will cook more quickly and evenly. Nirvana comes about half-way through, when the layer of grease in the pan is so deep that you hardly have to flip the bacon.

Repeat until you have cooked the whole pound. I don't see the point in cooking only a few slices of bacon. Most likely, unless you're feeding several people or severely hung over you won't be eating the whole pound. Once the bacon has cooled, store it in the fridge and all week you can enjoy BLTs, Cobb salad, scrambled eggs with bacon, bacon smoothies, or just a slice of bacon!

What to do with that hot sizzling bacon grease? Well, the two-year-old has long since abandoned his post with bacon in hand (you'll find a discarded piece in the toy box next week or next year). I usually let the grease cool a bit, pour it into a used tin can, set it aside to congeal, and then toss it. Blasphemy, says my friend Jake, a true connoisseur of bacon and cast-iron. Using a fine strainer, he pours his bacon grease into a mason jar, thus ridding of it of any detritus, and stores it in the fridge. Then he cooks with it. Pretty much anything that would require butter or oil. ANYTHING.

Incidentally, Jake was present for the debut of my very first cast-iron skillet. Under his surveillance, I cooked a pound of bacon in it, and afterwards, I attempted to clean the skillet by applying a soapy sponge. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? he shouted, stopping me in the nick of time. As a novice, I hadn't yet learned that the last thing you want to do is clean away that natural greasy sheen. You know those dish washing soaps that claim to cut the grease? Well, you want the grease. In fact, after cooking something like bacon, some people will just wipe their cast-iron pan out with a paper towel and be done with it. But if you're Jake, you own a special steel wool scouring pad, one that you purchased specifically for your cast-iron cookware, and you'll scrub the pan under warm water-while the pan's still hot. And then you'll dip a finger in that transferred bacon fat and lightly grease the pan with it before storing it, lovingly. But then, Jake's a Virgo. God love him.

Happy bacon makin'. ☺