

CLOSE TO THE
BONE

FORGET FILLETS. THE MOST FLAVORFUL MEAT AND
FISH ARE RIGHT AT THE CORE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER BAKER TEXT BY JIM HARRISON



Lacquered short ribs

There is perhaps no purer beef flavor than that of a short rib. Once disdained by chefs as a poor man's food, this modestly priced cut can easily be coaxed to superlative tenderness and complexity with a basic braise, the bone imparting a silken richness to both meat and sauce. This version's judicious balance of heat, spice, and sweet is tempered by a tart salad of celery and pear and a luxuriously creamy celery-root purée.



Steak frites

Only a few steaks can be classified as perfect. The porterhouse is one of them. A peerless cut consisting of a supple, ample-size filet and a robust strip joined by the T-bone, it compromises nothing in taste or presentation. Just season with salt and pepper and cook it to your notion of perfection. The earthy sweetness in a side of crunchy shoestring potatoes completes this indulgent yet unpretentious feast.

A

number of years ago I found myself sitting on the back steps of a centuries-old church in Aix-en-Provence watching dozens of workers setting up the daily farmers' market. It was shortly after dawn, and I was enduring the usual jet lag, but with pleasure.

There is nothing like the sight of tons of food to divert one from banal complaints. Plus, there was the astounding experience of witnessing a young woman as she deftly climbed into the church's organ loft and began to play Bach at a volume that caused the stone beneath me to hum.

But of particular interest, despite the early hour, was an immense rotisserie loaded with rows of chickens and ducks. Juices from the fowl were gently dripping downward, bathing the lower tiers and the capacious bottom bin filled with sausages as well as roughly chopped leeks, fennel, and peppers. Even with the resonant and somewhat mathematical beauty of Bach surrounding me, I felt the call of the wild. Naturally, I bought a chicken—thinking that duck might be a little heavy for breakfast—and some of everything else. Growing up in the Midwest, I was taught by wise souls that breakfast lays the foundation for the day, and mine, made complete by a bottle of *Domaine Tempier Bandol*, left me surging with the kind of energy you don't get from the French custom of a baguette and coffee.

The primal urge to cook and consume meat on the bone has been with us since we figured out how to put food to flame two million years ago. Of course, a roast chicken is, in a sense, utterly ordinary, but then, if we're not careful, so are most of our everyday lives—and also what we tend to eat. But there is something about the presence of bones and the flavor they add that's not to be found in the relatively sterile and ubiquitous skinless, boneless chicken breast. With proper cooking, even a plain hen can rise to the level of what theologians like to call "the divine ordinary." The same may be said of porterhouses, all manner of ribs, whole fish, and just about anything else cooked on the bone. You absolutely must pick up the bone that remains and chew on it as your ancient forefathers did around the fire while listening to the trumpeting of mastodons in the distance.

Perhaps my fascination with this topic is partly genetic, as my father regularly masterminded the roasting of a couple of hundred chickens for church picnics. (A good oven is only an enclosed version of an open fire.

Either will work admirably.) It may also be due in part to the technique's nearly inexhaustible applications, commonplace and otherwise. Beyond the everyday hen—something so simple as to not require a recipe—I have roasted half a prime Hereford steer (with help), whole lambs pierced with 60 cloves of garlic, small wild piglets of 20 pounds and domestic porkers of 100, a beaver (unsuccessfully), hundreds of grouse and woodcock, an immense pig's head from a recipe I seem to recall reading in one of the early editions of *Joy of Cooking*, and untold whitefish and lake trout in a basket over an oak fire at our cabin. And more, to be sure.

Only a few weeks ago we grilled a cabrito, a young goat, over a very hot fire. Both goat and lamb find true companionship in a basting of olive oil, garlic, and thyme. The 10-year-old daughter of a friend chewed on a bone until it was white, which shows that all of us—even elegant little girls—can be primitive sometimes.

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Moroccan lamb shanks

A frequently overlooked part of the lamb that's intensely meaty yet exceptionally mild, the shank is an unassuming cut that takes well to any number of ingredients. Here, dates lend it sweetness; chickpeas, sustenance; and a blend of spices, an undercurrent of warmth. With its almost-falling-off-the-bone tenderness and its ability to permeate the house with aroma, this meal transcends an ordinary Sunday dinner.



Asian-style baby back ribs

There are hundreds of versions of these sweet, sticky ribs. Too often they're preposterously cloying, with little pork flavor. This recipe suffers none of that, its nuanced character derived from the melding of ginger, lemongrass, and chile in the braising liquid and the subtly spiced hoisin glaze. Despite the ribs' refined taste, they're properly messy, perfect with beer—and invariably met with demands for more.

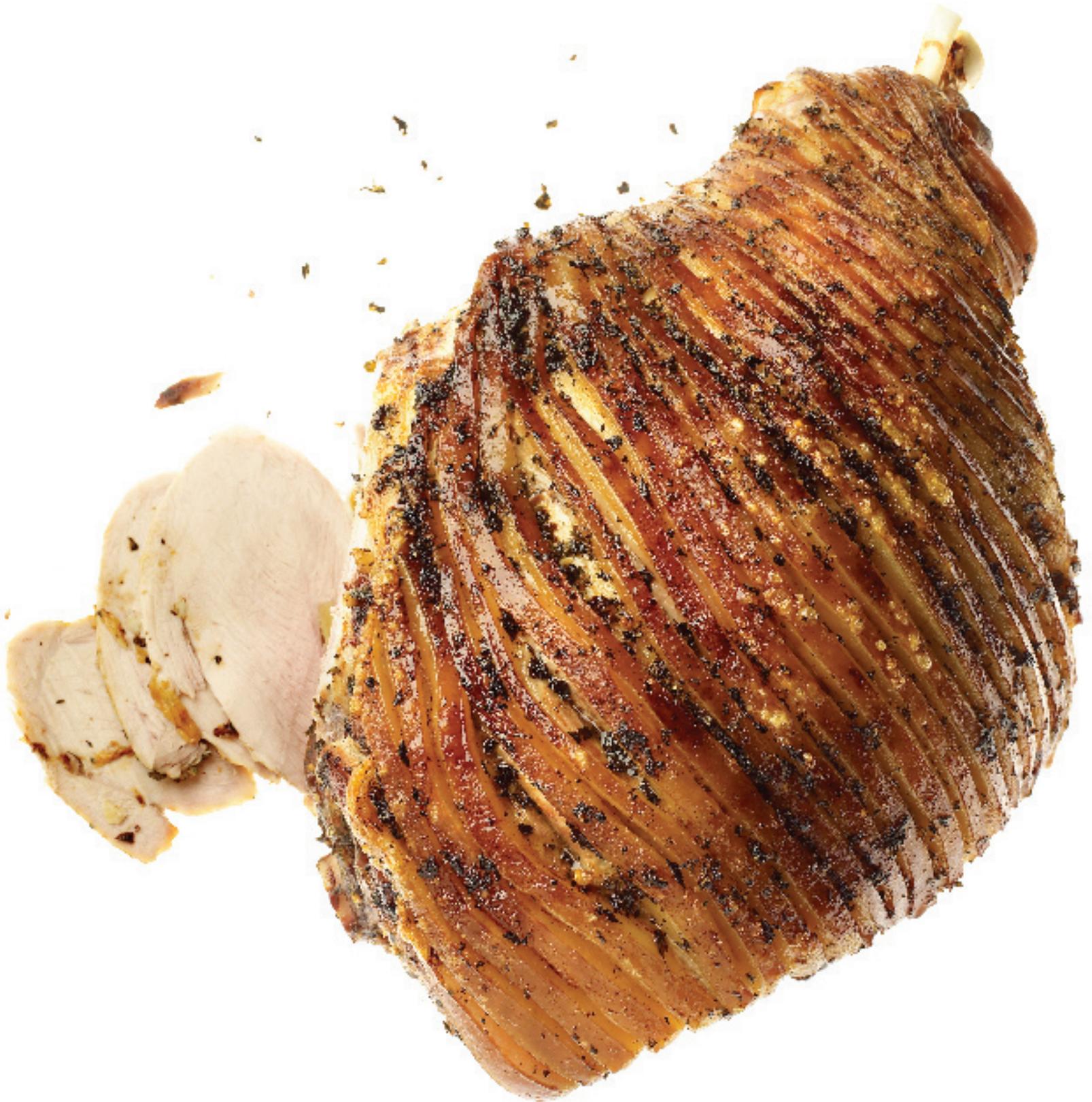
Red Snapper en papillote

So many of us were warned as children that fish bones could kill. Yet what a memorable, if not altogether safe, impression an entire fish makes at the table before being skillfully boned (for a step-by-step how-to, see the Recipes section). Slipping citrus into the cavity and wrapping the fish in parchment before roasting ensures that its delicate flesh attains a level of succulence and gently infused flavor that it simply cannot achieve any other way.



Leg of pork with cracklings

Not to be confused with ham, a fresh leg of pork is relatively uncommon today, despite its sumptuous God-given layer of excess fat and accompanying flavor. This natural cushioning is rendered during roasting, enveloping the meat in goodness and allowing the skin above to crisp into the best cracklings you'll ever encounter. The traditional Cuban way with pork is to dress it with oregano and lemon, an approach that couldn't be easier—or better.





Roasted bone marrow

Long recognized as a restorative, roasted bone marrow takes on an almost indescribably soothing, sophisticated, meaty taste and gratifyingly unctuous texture when it meets a hot oven—hence its enduring appeal. The result, spread on a baguette, finds a fitting partner in a sprinkling of horseradish and parsley. A deeply satisfying first course.

Created by Christine Albano and James Dunlinson

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